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Compiled and prepared by

Dr. Yasmeen Darwish

English Department

Faculty of Arts

South Valley University

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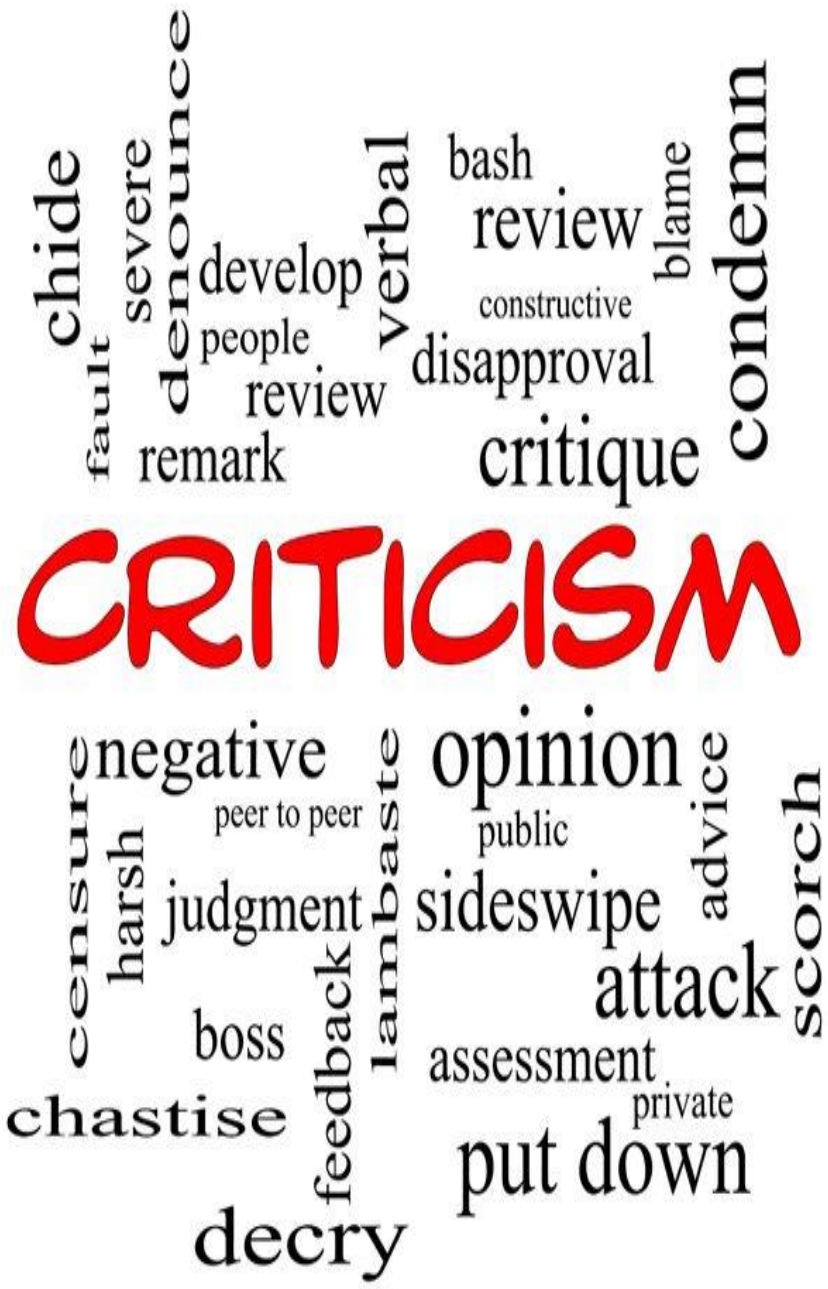
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➔ *What is Criticism?*

Sometimes the word **Criticism** puts people off, because in everyday use it has negative connotations. The word means more than that, however. In its original sense, a critic is simply a person who expresses an informed judgment or opinion about the meaning, value, truth, beauty, or artistry of something.

The word critical comes from the Greek word ***kritikos*** from which the English word critic is derived. It means to judge, to make sense of, to recognize and comprehend. It is through the process of questioning what is read, heard, seen, and experienced that you can come to the best possible conclusion about a matter in order to make wise decisions.

Criticism is the art of interpreting, judging, and evaluating the works of literature. It aims to enlighten and

stimulate the reader so that he may have a deeper and clearer appreciation of the literary work.

➔ *What is Literary Criticism?*

When reading, the reader typically forms an interpretation of the work. A person's interpretation of a work is often based on life experience, culture, and influences. Some readers and critics take these interpretations and write a literary criticism. The definition of ***literary criticism*** is the analysis, comparison, evaluation, and interpretation of a work of literature. Often engaging in debates with other critics to help prove their points and make value judgments, literary critics hope to provide a reader with meaningful connections.

While most written literary criticism dates from the twentieth century, questions about the social value of literature date back to the time of **Plato** and **Aristotle**. In

his ***Poetics***, Aristotle stressed the importance of literary art. He was able to provide universal insights for an audience that critics today have adapted when writing literary criticism.

➔ *The purpose of Literary criticism*

Literary criticism is not necessarily negative; "criticism" means a thoughtful critique of an author's work or an author's style in order to better understand the meaning, symbolism or influences of a particular piece or a body of literature. The **purpose of criticism** is to break down a literary work and craft a judgment regarding its positive and negative qualities.

Literary criticism aims to broaden a reader's understanding of an author's work by summarizing, interpreting, and exploring its value. After giving the text a close reading, a critic formulates a comprehensive literary analysis that can inform or challenge another reader's understanding of the text. The practice of literary criticism

creates space for readers to better understand the beauty and complexity of the world through literature.

➔ *What Is Literary Theory?*

Literary theory is a school of thought that provides readers with the logical means to critique the concepts, ideas, and principles of a certain piece of literature. A basic way of looking at literary theories is that each of them is a specific lens through which you can view a piece of literature. This allows you to focus on particular aspects of a work that the literary theory thinks is important.

Let’s say you’re reading a novel set during World War II. If you chose a Marxist approach, you’ll probably look at how the characters interact based on their economic and social standing. But if you view it through a feminist lens, the experience of being female during the war becomes your focus.

➔ *Literary Criticism vs. Literary Theory*

Literary theory and literary criticism are two terms that are often used interchangeably, but while they have a close relationship, they are not the same.

Literary theory is a framework of ideas that guide you in understanding a particular work of literature. On the other hand, literary criticism is the study, evaluation, and interpretation of literature. The former is theoretical, the latter practical. Thus, literary theory provides the methods for how you look at the meaning of literature, while literary criticism is how you use those methods to understand the work's meaning.

Literary criticism, the study of a literary text, can begin with a particular literary theory. Literary theory is the idea that guides literary criticism. Theory helps to differentiate literary texts from the others; it works to classify literary texts into categories and schools of thought. One way to think of

literary theory is that it acts as a critical lens, or a way to view a particular work. A critical lens allows a critic to analyze a text within a specific theory. Using a critical lens, the critic evaluates the literary text based on assumptions within a specific literary theory and then develops a literary criticism.

Literary theory provides a broader philosophical framework for how to analyze literature, while literary criticism offers readers new ways to understand an author’s work.

Neoclassical Literary Criticism

Neoclassic period in England covers nearly 180 years of art history, beginning with the restoration of Charles II in 1660. It is worthwhile to remember that the term “neoclassical” has several connotations, based on the context in which it is discussed. For example, neoclassicism in Germany refers to cultivation of Greek culture in opposition to Roman values. Generally speaking, Neoclassicists were traditionalist who believed that literature was an art to be perfected by study, discipline and practice.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, the Neoclassical Age revered and imitated the principles of ancient Greek and Roman art and literature. In addition, new ideas about nature permeated writing. Critics and writers valued restraint in expression and the idea of reason. Well-known neoclassical writers include Moliere, Racine, Dryden, Pope, Swift and Samuel Johnson.

Literary criticism developed in the early eighteenth century as part of a broader cultural discourse that included moral philosophy, politics, aesthetics, science, and economics. For critics the study of literature offered a means to promote the moral education of its readers; however, what that education entailed varied from critic to critic.

Although the first half of the eighteenth century is often termed the “neoclassical” or “Augustan” age for its fascination with championing the moral and literary models of ancient Greece and Rome, the criticism of the period was ultimately less concerned with establishing rules of literary composition based on classical precedent than with promoting literature as a standard of civilized taste to which all educated men and women could look for guidance. In this respect, criticism from the time of John Dryden to the death of Pope was concerned primarily with moral—and sociopolitical— issues rather than with establishing

methodological procedures or analyzing individual texts. Hence, the word, neo, which literary translates to ‘revival’, in neo-classicism. In their approaches to art, the neo-classicists focused on technique and worked by the rule book.

Imitation and Nature were two major concepts through which the neo-classical writers approached the production of art. Imitation has its roots in Aristotle, meant to be suggesting that art, which would be imitative in nature, will be objective and impersonal.

Nature here refers to the human nature and when neo-classical writers concern themselves with it, they wish to guide humans about what is permissible and not because, in their view, the human nature has already been understood by the great old bees like Homer and Virgil.

Therefore, just following the classics by imitating them would help modern writers to understand and best express

the external world and human nature. However, they were not blind followers of the classics. All of them have different ways of approaching the classics. They were basically thinking around the concepts articulated by Aristotle.

➔ *Classical Influences*

Looking back to classical ideals resulted in conservatism in literature as well as politics. This led to writing that emphasized order and rational control. Literary works sought to model masterpieces of the classical Roman and Greek world. Writers followed literary “rules” set by classical critics such as Aristotle and Horace, resulting in a respect for and acute awareness of conventions and genre. Alexander Pope, neoclassical poet, satirist and critic, for example, set out to correct what he saw as deviations of previous English poets from classical modes of pastoral poetry by writing pastorals with classical models in mind. Classical genres

such as epic, tragedy, comedy, pastoral, ode and satire dominated neoclassical writing.

➔ *Representing Human Nature*

Following the rules of genre -- using the right language, style, tone and rhetorical figures -- was considered a means to discovering nature. The past could be used as a model for neoclassical writing because human nature was viewed as constant. To neoclassical sensibilities, humanity was inherently imperfect, sinful and limited. This idea, however, began to soften later in the era, giving rise to more optimistic and sentimental trends in literature as seen in the works of Oliver Goldsmith and George Crabbe.

➔ *Restraint in Expression*

In neoclassicism, the complexity and metaphorical nature of Renaissance writing shifted to precision in grammar and vocabulary. The imagination let loose unrestrained was

thought to result in extravagant or unruly works -- unless reined in by judgment, using nature as a guide. Alexander Pope wrote in "An Essay on Criticism": "First follow nature, and your judgment frame / By her standard, which is still the same." This, however, did not seek to limit passion or originality. Judgment was to make writing more effective. Thus, neoclassicism seeks a sense of “decorum” in writing.

➔ *The Guidance of Reason*

The Neoclassical Age is often referred to as the Age of Reason. During this period, the concept of reason penetrated all aspects of society, including religion, politics and art. Reason was viewed as the highest mental ability. In literature, this meant works needed to be logical and to advocate for rational norms in society. According to “Introduction to Neoclassicism,” critics judged characters in literature based on their use of reason.

➔ *Literature as Criticism*

Writers during this era frequently employed satire to critique excessive power or other social injustices. The concept of social justice and helping those less fortunate was developed strongly during this period when people lost confidence in divine intervention and providence. Alexander Pope, Jonathan Swift and Voltaire all wrote widely read satirical essays, sometimes in the form of pamphlets -- loosely put together pages typically containing political criticism or ideas -- which became a widespread genre of literature during the 1700s. Political parties paid writers such as Jonathan Swift, Joseph Addison, Richard Steele and Matthew Prior to write pamphlets promoting party platforms and philosophies, disseminating many political and social ideologies this way.

Neoclassicism – as a Literary Movement

- **Neoclassicism (c. 1660–1798):** A literary movement, inspired by the rediscovery of classical works of ancient Greece and Rome that emphasized balance, restraint, and order.
- Neoclassicism roughly coincided with the Enlightenment, which espoused reason over passion.
- **Notable** neoclassical **writers** include Edmund Burke, John Dryden, Samuel Johnson, Alexander Pope, and Jonathan Swift.

Neoclassicism dominated English literature from the Restoration in 1660 until the end of the 18th century, when the publication of Lyrical Ballads (1798) by **Wordsworth** and **Coleridge** marked the full emergence of **Romanticism**.

Neoclassicism comprised a return to the classical models, literary styles, and values of ancient Greek and Roman authors.

Two of the concepts central to neoclassical literary theory and practice were **imitation** and **nature**, which were intimately related.

- **Imitation** The imitation of classical models, especially Homer and Vergil.
- **Nature** the harmonious and hierarchical order of the universe, including the various social and political hierarchies within the world.

Neoclassical

- The neoclassical writers generally saw the ancients such as **Homer** and **Vergil** as having already discovered and expressed the fundamental laws of nature.
- Hence, the external world, including the world of human action, could best be expressed by modern writers if they followed the path of imitation already paved by the ancients.
- **Invention** was of course allowed, but only as a modification of past models, not in the form of a rupture.

The Three Parts of Neoclassical Period

- The Neoclassical Period can be divided into three relatively coherent parts:
- **the Restoration Age** (1660-1700), in which Milton, Bunyan, and Dryden were the dominant influences;
- **the Augustan Age** (1700-1750), in which Pope was the central poetic figure, while Defoe, Richardson, Fielding, and Smollett were presiding over the sophistication of the novel; and
- **the Age of Johnson** (1750-1798), which, was dominated and characterized by the mind and personality of the inimitable Dr. Samuel Johnson

John Dryden

The Essay of Dramatic Poesy

John Dryden(1631 – 1700) is rightly considered as “the father of English Criticism”. He was the first to teach the English people to determine the merit of composition upon principles. With Dryden, a new era of criticism began. Before, Dryden, there were only occasional utterances on the critical art. (Eg. Ben Jonson and Philip Sidney) Except An Essay of Dramatic Poesy, Dryden wrote no formal treatise on criticism. His critical views are found mostly in the prefaces to his poetical works or to those of others.

Along with his wide-ranging criticism of epic, poetry, plays, etc., he also wrote plays, prefaces, prologues. And he is mostly famous for his poetic works like “Mac Flecknoe”, Absalom and Achitophel, etc., and his dramatic works like All for Love and Marriage a la Mode.

Samuel Johnson called him "**the father of English criticism**," and affirmed of his **Essay of Dramatic Poesy** (1668) that "modern English prose begins here." Dryden's critical work was extensive, treating of various genres such as epic, tragedy, comedy and dramatic theory, satire, the relative virtues of ancient and modern writers, as well as the nature of poetry and translation. In addition to the Essay, he wrote numerous prefaces, reviews, and prologues, which together set the stage for later poetic and critical developments embodied in writers such as Pope, Johnson, Matthew Arnold, and T. S. Eliot.

Dr. Johnson was very correct in giving Dryden this honor because before him there was no consistent critic in England. Sidney and Ben Jonson were, of course, there but they only made occasional observations without producing any consistent critical work or establishing any critical theory. Dryden's principal critic work is his **Essay of Dramatic**

Poesy, though his critical observations are also found in the prefaces to several of his works, especially in the Preface to the Fables. **The Essay of Dramatic Poesy** establishes him as the first historical critic, first comparative critic, first descriptive critic, and the Independent English critic.

The Essay of Dramatic Poesy is developed in the form of dialogues amongst four interlocutors representing four different literatures or literary ages. They are:

1. *CRITES* speakers for the ancient dramatists.
2. *EUGENIUS* speaks for the modern dramatists.
3. *LISIDEIUS* speaks for the French.
4. *NEANDER* speaks for England and liberty.

Dryden's **Essay of Dramatic Poesy** is written as a debate on drama conducted by four speakers, Eugenius, Crites, Lisideius, and Neander. These personae have conventionally been identified with four of

Dryden's contemporaries. Eugenius (meaning "well-born") may be Charles Sackville, who was Lord Buckhurst, a patron of Dryden and a poet himself. Crites (Greek for "judge" or "critic") perhaps represents Sir Robert Howard, Dryden's brother-in-law. Lisideius refers to Sir Charles Sedley, and Neander ("new man") is Dryden himself.

The beginning of the narrative An Essay of Dramatic Poesy or Of Dramatic Poesy is as follows. A battle is going on between England and the Netherlands. Four gentlemen namely Crites, Eugenius, Lisideius and Neander are travelling by boat to see the battle and start a discussion on modern literature.

The first of these debates is that between ancients and moderns, a debate that had intermittently surfaced for centuries in literature and criticism, and which acquired a new and topical intensity in European letters after the Renaissance, in the late seventeenth century.

Crites favors classical drama i.e. the drama of Aristotle who believed that drama is “imitation of life”. Crites holds that drama of such ancients is successful because it depicts life. He says that both classical and neoclassical favor rules and unities (time, place and action). Crites argues that everything / every rule that we know about drama is told to us by Aristotle, Horace and others. He believes that we have nothing new to offer except calling our wit to be superior. In his opinion, modern plays are failures.

According to Crites, modern dramatists are shadows of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Seneca and Terence. E.g. Elizabethan dramatist Ben Jonson borrowed from Classics and felt proud to call himself modern Horace. The classical is more skillful in language than their successors. At this, he ends up his conversation.

Eugenius favors modern dramatists. However, instead of telling about the virtues of moderns, he criticizes the faults of

Classical playwrights. According to him, the Classical drama is not divided into acts and also lacks originality.

Classical playwright disregard poetic justice. Instead of punishing the vice and rewarding the virtue, they have often shown prosperous wickedness and an unhappy devotion. The classical drama also lacks affection.

Eugenius becomes the first to defend the moderns. Modern do not follow ancients in order to create something, they have nature and humans to draw inspirations from. He believes that with the wisdom of the ancients, we also have our own experiences of the world to understand it.

The next point of debate is the relative quality of French and English writers; it is Lisideius who extols the virtues of the French while Neander (Dryden himself) undertakes to defend his compatriots.

Lisideius favors French drama of earlier 17th century. French drama led by Pierre Corneille strictly followed unities of time, pace and action. The French dramatists never mix tragedy and comedy. They adhere to the poetic justice i.e. reward the virtue and punishment the vice. For this, they even alter the original situation.

The French dramatists interweave truth with fiction to make it interesting bringing elements that lead to fate and borrow from history to reward the virtuous which he was earlier deprived of. They prefer emotions over plots. Violent actions take place off stage and are told by messengers rather than showing them in real.

Lisideius argues that French drama follows all the unities, provides a variety of emotions, He argues that French has the right way of dividing the time among narration, action, dialogue.

On the point of French versus English, Lisideius prefers French and **Neander** (Dryden) defend the English. Dryden, in his support of English drama, doesn't refute any claim made by Lisideius in favour of the French; on the other hand, argues that all that is considered erroneous in the English drama is actually a virtue that surpasses traditional techniques.

Neander contradicts Lisideius' arguments favoring the superiority of French drama. He talks about the greatness of Elizabethans. For him, Elizabethans fulfill the drama's requirement i.e. imitation of life. French drama raises perfection but has no soul or emotions as it primarily focuses on the plot. For Neander, tragicomedy is the best form of drama. Both sadness as well as joy are heightened and are set side by side. Hence it is closest to life.

He believes that subplots enrich the drama. This French drama having a single plot lacks this vividness. Further

Samuel Johnson (who defended Shakespeare's disregard of unities), he believes that adherence to unities prevents depth.

According to him, deviation from set rules and unities gives diverse themes to drama. Neander rejects the argument that change of place and time diminishes dramatic credibility in drama. For him, human actions will seem more natural if they get enough time to develop.

Neander argues that Shakespeare is "the man who of all the modern and perhaps ancient poets, and largest and most comprehensive soul". He says, "I am apt to believe the English language in them arrived at its highest perfection". If Ben Jonson is a genius for correctness, Shakespeare excels him in wit. His arguments end with the familiar comparison, "Shakespeare was the Homer, or father of our dramatic poets; Jonson was the Virgil, the pattern of elaborate writing; I admire him, but I love

Shakespeare." Thus for him, Elizabethans are superior because they have a variety of themes, emotions, deviations, wit. They do not adhere to rules as well. Thus their drama is really an imitation of life.

In this way he (**Dryden**) develops historical, comparative, and descriptive forms of criticism, and finally gives his own independent views through the replies of Neander. He respects the ancient Greek and Roman principles but he refuses to adhere to them slavishly, especially in respect of Tragi-comedy and observance of the three Dramatic Unities. Thus Dryden began a great regular era of criticism, and showed the way to his countrymen how to be great as creative authors as well as critical evaluators and what makes great literature. Thus he is indeed the **"Father of English Criticism."**

➔ *Criticism*

According to Dryden, a critic has to understand that a writer writes to his own age and people of which he himself is a product. He advocates a close study of the ancient models not to imitate them blindly as a thorough going neo-classicist would do but to recapture their magic to treat them as a torch to enlighten our own passage. It is the spirit of the classics that matters more than their rules.

➔ *Historical method of criticism:*

Dryden was also the first critic to make use of the historical method of criticism. He believed that every literary work bears the stamp of the age in which it is produced. A literary work can be best evaluated by placing it in the socio – historical background in which it is produced. Many plays of Shakespeare or Spenser's faerie queene, or Ben Jonson's comedies of Humours, or Bacan's essays cannot

be correctly evaluated without placing them in the background of the Elizabethan age. Chaucer's prologue to the Canterbury tales or Langland's the vision of piers the Plowman cannot be rightly appreciated without placing them in the socio – historical background of medieval England. Dryden was the first critic to apply this historical method of criticism.

➔ *CONCLUSION*

In general, John Dryden is always in favor of complete freedom for the artists. He gives a definition of drama, which is a mixture of Aristotle and Horace. But he emphasizes more on the lively aspect in drama. His views on the plot, the three dramatic unities, clearly display his liberalism. It is his aesthetic conviction that every artist works for his own age and every age has its own genius, exclusive taste and responses. John Dryden asserts that William Shakespeare is the supreme artist and adds that nature speaks through him.

Ben Jonson is definitely more erudite, and more correct in technique, and Shakespeare fell short in both. Though John Dryden respects and admires Ben Jonson, he loves William Shakespeare. It means that Dryden does not insist on correctness as the main criterion.

Similarly, John Dryden defends the mixture of gaiety and seriousness. Even his views on English dramatists as against the French dramatists, clearly indicate that an artist must be allowed to have his freedom. This is a great contribution to English literary criticism.

The second distinctive quality of John Dryden as a critic is his "historic sense". Actually his conception of historic sense is the off-shoot of his liberalism. John Dryden asserts that each age has its own context. Each age caters to the needs of its own public. Each age has the artistic conventions which are made by the social and literary conditions and contexts. The French do not present violence

on the stage, while the English enjoy it on the stage. This is their special aesthetic and the temperamental quality. John Dryden tries to discover such reason, that would establish the individual identity of each age. This particular historic sense has become dominant critical concept, which was later developed by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Hazlitt, and Thomas Stearns Eliot.

Thirdly, John Dryden has paved the way for the analytical and comparative methods of criticism. Before Dryden criticism was mere theory as in Sir Philip Sidney. But Dryden takes a play like "The Silent Woman" and analyses it to show its hidden beauties. Here the critic probes deep into the work of art and brings out the hidden beauties. This method has become the most dominant one in the field of comparative criticism. The ancients are compared with the moderns, the French are compared with the English, and the Elizabethan are compared with the Restoration writers.

All these critics do not indulge in mere theorizing, they come to the conclusions after advancing proofs. John Dryden's comparative estimates of Homer and Virgil in his "Preface to the Fables", is a beautiful analysis of a great critic. The comparative study is now a major field of study and research.

John Dryden's view on rhyme or heroic couplet in drama may be considered to be a classic manifestation of his catholic critical intelligence. The discussion comprehends all the possibilities of a medium as such. Before Dryden defends couplet in tragedy, he does not deny the effective use of blank verse. Then, he logically argues that the points raised in favor of blank verse can also be used in favor of couplet too. This is also true because the effective use of any medium depends on the author's skill and ability. He correctly points out that a medium is never fit or unfit. It is the use of the medium that makes it either fit or unfit.

The main objective of any medium is the apt arrangement of words and right disposition of them. This can be done in blank verse as well as in heroic couplet. In this discussion, John Dryden really comes out as one of the greatest critics. Similarly, with his experience and insight, he points out the limitations of the heroic couplet, and even suggests the necessary solutions. Here also John Dryden does not lay down any rules but allows freedom and discretion to the artist.

Lastly, John Dryden has attributed the quality of noble humility to the profession of a critic. His tone is of gentlemanliness and humility. The process of criticism is visualized as a kind of friendly conversation which intends to enlighten the speaker himself and the readers as well. In addition to this, John Dryden is also apologetic for something. At the end of his dramatic career, he clearly

points out that he is not satisfied in the use of heroic couplet in tragedy. He even started writing in blank verse.

This indicates John Dryden's readiness to change from conviction to conviction. As a critic, John Dryden has brought a super rational mind and rare catholicity and understanding, and a gentlemanly heart and soul to the profession of literary criticism.

Dryden evolved and articulated an impressive body of critical principles for practical literary appreciation and offered good examples of descriptive criticism himself. It was said of Augustus that he found Rome brick and left it marble. Dryden's contribution to English poetry was the same as Augustus' contribution to Rome. With still more justice we could say that Dryden found English literary criticism "brick" and left it "marble."

Alexander Pope
An Essay on Criticism

Alexander Pope (1688- 1744) was one of the most popular and influential writers of his time. He was writing during the Enlightenment era (1660-1800). Enlightenment thinkers emphasized the importance of science and reason and claimed that the world is knowable and testable. This context and the excitement that surrounded the changes brought to culture through the Enlightenment are central to 'An Essay on Criticism.' In addition to An Essay on Criticism, Pope also wrote other critical works such as:

1. Imitations of the Epistles of Horace to Augustus
2. His Letters
3. His Preface to his edition of Shakespeare's Plays

It is made of 744 lines. The work's brilliantly polished epigrams (e.g., "*A little learning is a dang'rous thing*," "*To err*

is human; to forgive, divine," and "*Fools rush in where angels fear to tread*"), while not original, have become part of the proverbial heritage of the English language.

An Essay on Criticism is originally a poem written in heroic couplets first published anonymously in 1711 when Pope was only 22 years old. Essay on Criticism is an attempt to balance theology and aesthetics. Pope in his essay follows the tradition of Horace's *Ars Poetica*. His essay concerns with good literary criticism and poetry, and how they stay in harmony.

To harmonize them, he shows a relation between the classical notion of nature and wit, both being essential to poetry as well as criticism. He is of the view that both poetry and criticism are linked to nature and wit, and the best of both are divinely inspired.

Pope regards not only poetry but also criticism as an art. To him, both are based on the same literary principles.

Though, there are some specific rules that he ascribes to criticism. The critic, he says, must examine an author as not being familiar with his own capacities but being aware of all aspects of the author.

In addition, he says that a critic has the advantage of knowing work in its totality; therefore, his criticism should not be based on few parts such as author's use of devices, and ornamental language. The critics must be biased because of the author's reputation in critiquing his works. He further suggests that criticism must have a moral sensibility, modesty and caution. Pope warns critics that they avoid bookish knowledge as it results in extravagant language.

Pope's idea of criticism is one not only to be applied to pieces of art but also it itself is an art. Poetry and criticism, he suggests, are two branches of art. He keeps them in moral and theological domain too. He also suggests that a poet ought to have critical faculties too so that the creative

process is carried out in a balanced and controlled way. His emphasis is on the following nature, the act that relates to wit and judgment which has an overlapping relation as do poetry and criticism.

His advice is that nature should be the standard to be followed before one makes a judgment. However, his idea of the following nature doesn't connect with Romanticism (the physical appearance of nature) but with the medieval idea of order, and harmony.

He suggests, like all neo-classical critics and writers that nature should become the inspiration to create art. Pope further sets forth the tasks of a poet that's to convey natural insight and universal truth. It is pride that causes subjectivity, leads to individualism, and mass balance of wit and judgment.

He advises both critic and poet to refrain from any biases and to follow ancient rules. Pope praises Horace as a supreme critic in the literary tradition. Others who are praiseworthy to Pope are Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Petronius, Quintilian, and Longinus. He considers them true representatives of the classical tradition.

Referring to the historical processes that shaped art, Pope regards Renaissance as the “Golden Days” that helped the arts and criticism bloom in Europe. He himself sets forth his ideas as a descendant of Renaissance thinkers who looked back to the classical writers as their ideals.

What Pope, as a critic and poet, endeavors in his essay is to trace the background of true criticism, to show its overlapping relation with poetry, while both being based on the standard of nature and wit.

➔ ***The poem is originally divided into THREE PARTS:***

PART ONE opens with the argument that good taste derives from Nature and that critics should imitate the ancient rules established by classical writers.

He first cites **the problem**: "'Tis with our judgments as our watches, none/ Go just alike, yet each believes his own." Judgments are partial, and true taste is as rare as true genius (9-35). Some critics go astray through false learning, others through envy of wit (19- 45). Self-awareness is therefore a crucial quality for a critic (46-67): "Be sure yourself and your own reach you know."

He then offers **solutions for this problem:**

• **The first solution**: "First follow Nature" (68-87). (Nature here means something like "the universe as God created it" or "that which is permanently true.")

• **The second solution**: learn the "rules of old," i.e. the precepts of poetry and criticism set down by the classical Greek and Roman authors or deducible from their literature (88-140). Take care, however, not to follow the rules slavishly, but rather "know well each ancient's proper character," especially Homer.

• One reason to be flexible in applying the rules: there are "beauties yet no precepts can declare." Great writers can break the rules successfully (141- 180). Modern poets should take care, however, that if they break a rule they should "ne'er transgress its end" (161-169).

PART TWO lists the many ways in which critics have deviated from these ancient rules established by classical writers. This section identifies the main flaws a critic is exposed to, and therefore the greatest obstacles to good criticism.

- **The first and biggest flaw**, in criticism as in just about everything else: pride (201-214).

- **The second flaw** is "little learning" (215-232). A little learning makes critics susceptible to pride, by making them think they know more than they do. (Pope is not praising ignorance here; the cure for the pride of little learning is more learning, which teaches the scholar how little he or she knows.)

- **The third flaw** is "a love to parts"--i.e. emphasizing one aspect of a poem at the expense of all others (233-383). A critic SHOULD, instead, "read each work of wit/With the same spirit that its author writ"; "Survey the whole" and "regard the writer's end" (233-252).

- **The fourth flaw** is the love of extremes (384-393)

- **The fifth law** is liking only "one small sect," e.g. foreign writers, British authors, ancients, or moderns, as opposed to approving of merit wherever it is found (394-407).

- **The sixth flaw** is judging authors according to the opinions of others rather than the merit of the work (408-424). E.g.: judging the name rather than the work (412-413). worst case: judging the work on the basis of social rank (414-424).

- **The seventh flaw** is prizing novelty above everything else (424-451).

- **The eighth flaw** is valuing only those works which agree with one's views or written by friends or members of one's party, etc. (452-473). Envy plays a big part here, says Pope.

PART THREE discusses the characteristics of a good critic, concludes with a short history of literary criticism and a catalog of famous critics.

• A critic has to be moral. As a judge, you do not have to create enemies but friends. (560-565)

• If you are not sure, do not speak. No one is right all the time and no one is wrong all the time. (566-569)

• Back to self-knowledge. Pope suggests the importance of self-knowledge. (570-571)

• Know when to speak even if your analysis is beneficial. It is always best to teach people, who are educated, in a way that doesn't show them they are being educated. Nicely express your thoughts. (572-574)

• If you are going to teach people, criticize them, but you should leave dangerous truth to satire and you should leave flattery to dedication. (592- 593)

• Too much reading may lead a critic to have a blockhead. If you read too much, you'll start to see similarities

everywhere. A good critic should also avoid mentioning his relationship with authors even if it is true. (612-627)

• Finally, Pope asks a question about the man who can embody all the qualities of a good critic: “But where's the man, who counsel can bestow,/ Still pleas'd to teach, and yet not proud to know?” (631-632). In what follows, Pope does not give a specific answer, instead, he mentions classical figures that are used as examples.

Samuel Johnson as a Literary Critic

(Lives of the Poets & Preface to Shakespeare)

Samuel Johnson (1709–1784) is generally regarded as a pillar of the new-classical school, although he sometimes seems to challenge some of its basic theories and turns quite imaginative and impressionistic. So far as his ways of expression are concerned he is a true new-classicist, but regarding his views we must not blindly stamp him as a neo-classicist. Johnson as a critic, is unmistakable a moralist, but he does not seem incapable of enjoying and valuing works of pure literary qualities. As a critic and prose-writer and also as an editor of Shakespeare's plays his influence on the later critics was deep and enduring.

Of his numerous achievements, Samuel Johnson is perhaps best remembered for his two-volume *Dictionary of the English Language*, first published in 1755. Of almost equal renown are his *Lives of the English Poets* (1783) and

his eight-volume edition of Shakespeare (1765). His most famous poem is The Vanity of Human Wishes (1749), a speculation on the emptiness of worldly pursuits. He also wrote drama and a fictional work, *The History of Rasselas* (1759), as well as numerous essays in periodicals such as the *Rambler*, the *Adventurer*, and the *Idler*. Johnson's own biography was recorded by his friend James Boswell, who published his celebrated *Life of Samuel Johnson* in 1791.

➔ ***Lives of the Poets***

Johnson's literature, especially his ***Lives of the Poets*** series, is marked by various opinions on what would make a poetic work excellent. He believed that the best poetry relied on contemporary language, and he disliked the use of decorative or purposefully archaic language. In particular, he was suspicious of John Milton's language, whose blank verse would mislead later poets, and could not

stand the poetic language of Thomas Gray. On Gray, Johnson wrote, "Gray thought his language more poetical as it was more remote from common use". Johnson would sometimes write parodies of poetry that he felt was poorly done; one such example is his translation of Euripides's play, Medea in a parody of one poet's style alongside of his version of how the play should be translated. His greatest complaint was the overuse of obscure allusion found in works like Milton's Lycidas, and he preferred poetry that could be easily read. In addition to his views on language, Johnson believed that a good poem would incorporate new and unique imagery.

In his shorter works, Johnson preferred shorter lines and to fill his work with a feeling of empathy, which possibly influenced Alfred Edward Housman's poetry.[5] In London, his first imitation of Juvenal, Johnson uses the form to express his political opinion. It is a poem of his youth and

deals with the topic in a playful and almost joyous manner. As Donald Greene claims, "its charm comes from youthful exuberance and violence with which the witty invective comes tumbling out" in lines like:

Here malice, rapine, accident conspire,
And now a rabble rages, now a fire;
Their ambush here relentless ruffians lay,
And here the fell attorney prowls for prey;
Here falling houses thunder on your head,
And here a female atheist talks you dead.

However, his second imitation, The Vanity of Human Wishes, is completely different; the language remains simple, but the poem is more complicated and difficult to read because Johnson is trying to describe Christian ethics. These Christian values are not unique to the poem, but are part of Johnson's works as a whole. In particular, Johnson emphasizes God's infinite love and that happiness can be attained through virtuous action.

➔ ***Dictionary of the English Language***

Johnson's thoughts on biography and on poetry found their union in his understanding of what would make a good critic. His works were dominated with his intent to use them for literary criticism, including his Dictionary to which he wrote: "*I lately published a Dictionary like those compiled by the academies of Italy and France, for the use of such as aspire to exactness of criticism, or elegance of style*".

Although the smaller dictionary was written for the masses and became the common household dictionary, Johnson's original dictionary was an academic tool that examined how words were used, especially those uses that were found in literary works. To achieve this purpose, Johnson included quotations from Bacon, Hooker, Milton, Shakespeare, Spenser, and many others from the literary fields that Johnson thought were most important: natural science, philosophy, poetry, and theology. These quotes

and usages were all compared and carefully studied, so that others could understand what words meant in literature.

Johnson felt that words, in and of themselves, were meaningless, but that meaning comes from context. The only way to understand the word is to examine its usage, and a critic must understand lexicography before they can understand what people are saying. Later critics would attempt to create theories to analyze the aesthetics of literature, but Johnson was not a theorist and he used his ideas only for the practical purpose to better read the works.

When it came to Shakespeare's plays, Johnson emphasized the role of a reader in understanding language when he wrote, "If Shakespeare has difficulties above other writers, it is to be imputed to the nature of his work, which required the use of common colloquial language, and consequently admitted many phrases allusive, elliptical, and

proverbial, such as we speak and hear every hour without observing them".

➔ ***Preface to Shakespeare***

His works on Shakespeare were not devoted just to Shakespeare, but to critical theory as a whole, and, in his ***Preface to Shakespeare***, Johnson rejects the previous belief of the classical unities and establishes a more natural theory on what makes drama work: drama should be faithful to life. In particular, Johnson claimed that

"Among [Shakespeare's] other excellences it ought to be remarked, because it has hitherto been unnoticed, that his heroes are men, that the love and hatred, the hopes and fears, of his chief personages are such as common to other human beings... Shakespeare's excellence is not the fiction of a tale, but the representation of life: and his reputation is therefore safe, till human nature shall be changed."

Besides defending Shakespeare, Johnson was willing to discuss Shakespeare's faults, especially his lacking of morality, his vulgarity, and carelessness in crafting plots.[19]

Besides direct literary criticism, Johnson emphasized the need to establish a text that accurately reflects what an author wrote.

In his Preface, Johnson analyzed the various versions of Shakespeare's plays and argued how an editor should work on them. Shakespeare's plays, in particular, had multiple editions that each contained errors from the printing process. This problem was compounded by careless editors deeming difficult words as incorrect and changing them in later editions. Johnson believed that an editor should not alter the text in such a way, and, when creating his own edition of Shakespeare's plays, he relied on the thousands of quotations and notes that he used in crafting

his Dictionary to restore, to the best of his knowledge, the original text

➔ ***Johnson and Shakespeare as a poet of nature.***

Dr. Johnson is one of the greatest critics. An integral dimension of Johnson's literary output and personality was his literary criticism, which was to have a huge impact on English letters. His famous *Preface* to Shakespeare's plays played a large part in establishing Shakespeare's reputation; his account of the lives of numerous English poets contributed to the forming of the English literary canon and the defining of qualities such as metaphysical wit; his remarks on criticism itself were also to have an enduring impact. His critical insights were witty, provocative, sometimes radical, and always grounded on his enormous range of reading. His judgment of Shakespeare marks the date in the history of criticism.

In his preface to Shakespeare's plays, Johnson picks three major issues: how a poet's reputation is established; the poet's relation to nature; and the relative virtues of nature and experience of life as against a reliance on principles established by criticism and convention. He appreciates Shakespeare that he (Shakespeare) "*the poet of nature*: *the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life*". In other Johnson argues that Shakespeare reflects the truth of his times to society.

According to Johnson, a poet that constructs a mirror in the form of art to reflect the social conditions of that times is a poet of superior status. Johnson thinks that other poets write the character as individual beings but Shakespeare's characters are 'commonly a species'. In other words, Shakespeare is a writer who concerns himself with universal issues than individual ones; hence, he holds higher status. The other point he makes in favor of Shakespeare is that his

characters are not superheroes but common men and Shakespeare writes in common language about common events and people. So, literary artists who depict common life, people and events are, in Johnson’s opinion, better artists than others.

Johnson has praised Shakespeare's realism. He says that his depiction of the truth of human nature and human psychology is praiseworthy. He portrayed human characters in a realistic manner. He does not depict love as the major human motive and emotion. He knew that love is only one of many passions. It has no great influence upon the totality of life. Thus it has little operation in the drama of Shakespeare. Johnson discusses the realistic quality of Shakespeare's dialogues too.

Johnson now defends Shakespeare against charges brought by critics and writers such as John Dennis, Thomas Rymer, and Voltaire. These critics argue that Shakespeare’s

characters insufficiently reflect their time period and status, that his Romans, for example, are not sufficiently Roman, and his kings not sufficiently royal. Johnson retorts that Shakespeare "always makes nature predominate over accident; and . . . he preserves the essential character," extricated from accidental conventions and the "casual distinction of country and condition" (65–66).

➔ *Definition and function of criticism.*

Johnson has, at more than one place, endeavored to define criticism. The definition of a ***critic*** in his dictionary runs as '*a man skilled in the art of judging in literature*'. He also passes his approval on Dryden's opinion that by criticism, as it was first instituted by Aristotle was meant a "standard of judging well." Johnson calls ***Aristotle*** *the father of criticism* and ***Dryden*** *the father of English criticism*. He admires Dryden's contribution to English criticism and

maintains that it was he who first taught Englishmen “to determine upon principle the merits of composition”.

Criticism, for Johnson, was both an art and a science. It can immortalize a work of art and illuminate it as well as unveil its hidden truths and values. Johnson believed that the task of criticism is to establish principles and improve opinion into knowledge. It demands a disciplined approach because it is a vocation rather than a profession or even a career. According to Johnson criticism is not merely the art of appreciation, nor are its principles to be grounded in fancy or imagination; instead, it is to be built on the solid ground of reason and intelligence. He never goes about telling how a given work of art has been appealing to his heart unless it is equally appealing to the majority of readers. In this sense we see him opposed to the ‘impressionistic’ school of criticism.

Johnson relied much upon experience and experimental investigation and considered the faculty of memory crucial since it is the faculty in which experience is stored. This is

put in the following passage that comes in the early part of his ***Preface to Shakespeare***: “To works of which the excellence is not absolute and definite, but gradual and comparative; to works not raised upon principles demonstrative and scientific, but appealing wholly to observation and experience, no other test can be applied than length of duration and continuance of esteem what mankind have long possessed they have often examined and compared and if they persist to value the possession it is because frequent comparisons have confirmed opinions in their favour….in the productions of genius, nothing can be styled excellent till it has been compared with other works of the same kind. Demonstration immediately displays its power, and has nothing to hope or fear from the flux of years; but works tentative and experimental must be estimated by their proportion to the general and collective in a long succession of endeavors.”

➔ *Johnson's temperament as a critic.*

Johnson's literary doctrines involve some prominent features. **First** and foremost Johnson relied upon reason (opposed to imagination) and hence the rationality in his approach. He was, in a sense, experimental and logical rather than sticking to a particular point of view which is established and unquestioned for a long period.

Secondly, his conservative tendencies played a crucial role in the making of his critical I perspective. The **third** point is that Johnson's views are often tinged with his personal judgment. They are based on sturdy common sense', his experience and wide knowledge acquired from reading literary works and the classics. The **fourth** important factor is his own moral and religious outlook developed from an austere philosophy of life. The nucleus of Johnson's critical tenets is a combined product of all the above factors.

Johnson is not, in the least, a romantic, yet a certain amount of emotion can be seen to have influenced his rationalism. But, at the same time, he was against sentimentalism. He was a man of dictatorial views, yet he showed no reluctance to accept all that was verified, basically sound and tested. Johnson's approach an author is not as a critic who sets out fully armed and prepared to tear him down—but as a man of mature intellect, an open mind and sound standards of judgment. Thus, his approach towards Shakespeare is intimate and judicious. But his own code in turn attained a dogmatic character, and became hardened against all threat of a change. He showed an utter distrust of any innovation in literature. He looked upon the heroic couplet as the best form of verse. He thought that rhyme was indispensable to poetry. He discarded all the proposals of imitating the Spenserian stanza. Thus classicism now became a dogma kept alive through its connection with the moral and social needs of authority,

orderliness, and tradition, rather than through the direct and simple demands of aesthetic tastes.

➔ *The aim of poetry.*

Although Johnson follows the classical concept that the chief objective of a work of art is to please and instruct, he gives it a new coloring. For him the main end of art is to instruct by pleasing. To put it in a different way, great art stirs an awareness, ushers in a process of enlightenment in those who experience it, which is inseparable from the action of providing delight. When Johnson maintains that literature instructs us by Pleasing, we may have a sense of emphasis being laid on the aspect of moral instruction. But Johnson clearly assents that pleasure should be the medium of instruction. There can be literature which merely pleases, but according to him, there can be no literature which merely instructs.

➔ *Johnson and the traditional creeds.*

Generally, Dr. Johnson is regarded as one of the advocates of neo-classicism. This is true in a certain sense, yet, from another perspective he seems to oppose the neo classical principles. However, he clearly believes in the neo classical concept of 'generality' or universality. He also conforms **to** the new-classical preference for 'types' in character, but he is not prepared to take this doctrine to the extreme; he firmly disregards the objection that Shakespeare's Romans are not sufficiently Roman. It is enough for Johnson that they are sufficiently human.

Johnson opposes the neo-classical insistence on purity of genres. He does not accept the view that the tragic and the comic must never be mixed. The exponents of this rule advance two justifications in support of their argument. **Firstly**, they maintain that a tragedy must never admit a comic scene because it may spoil the purity of lie genre and

hinder the even flow. **Secondly**, they consider tragedy and comedy to be separate genres, distinct and exclusive in their effect and hence alternate comic and tragic scenes may prove to be mutually cancelling in effect. Johnson established how both these arguments are untenable.

According **to** him the basic thing in art is truth, and the mingling of the comic elements with the tragic is acceptable because it is true to life. What is true can hardly be inartistic. Again, the mingled drama provides us with pleasure through its variety. If the basic function of art is to instruct by pleasing, mingled drama, due to its variety of pleasure, should be in a better position to discharge this function than pure drama (i.e., pure comedy or pure tragedy). Thus he proves that a mingling of the serious and light elements is not merely permissible but, in fact, effective in fulfilling the function of literature.

➔ *Johnson and the unities.*

The period of neo-classicism is a period of rules. There was a tendency to bring art inside the framework of orderliness and discipline. Thus, the champions of this literary movement accepted the classics as their models. Proper word at proper place was the guideline for their style.

In drama too they had certain pre-determined notions about structure, plot and characterization. One of these was their insistence on the three unites. Neo-classical critics criticized Shakespeare because of his disregard of the unities. Shakespeare has been charged for his neglect of the unities of time and place. But Johnson defends him in this matter. According to him this neglect is not really a fault. He argues that if an audience in a theatre can accept the stage as a locality in the city of Rome, they will also accept the change from Rome to Alexandria. The unity of time may likewise be violated on the same principle. He concludes this

discussion by saying that the unities of time and place are not essential to a good play. Johnson is more open-minded and he appeals to reason and common sense rather than rigid rules in judging a play. Change of scene and passage of time do not spoil the dramatic illusion. The proof of this argument lies in the fact that a spectator, who thinks that by entering a theater he has moved from the London of his own times to the Rome of Antony, can equally take it for granted that in another act he has moved from Rome to Alexandria. In fact the spectators are conscious that the theater is only a theater and the players are only players. It is the power of human imagination that leads them to compare the enacted incidents to real life and evaluate the worth and significance of the dramatic performance.

The attempt of neo-classicism was to build on order, arrangement, unity and uniformity. Its aim was to transform

the purely subjective content of experience into a highly stylized, general product.

Aristotle holds that art is an imitation of nature. Unity of impact is the ultimate ideal of classicism. But this unity of impact is not the least hurt by either the shifting of place or by the duration of the action being more than a day. Nor is it affected by the mingling of the tragic and the comic within the same work—if done artistically.

➔ *Johnson and poetic fidelity.*

Johnson's inherent bias for a moral conclusion in a work of art might have made him sympathetic to the idea of rewarding the good and chastising the bad. Thus the death of innocent Cordelia in *King Lear* was unbearable to him. However, he does not approve of the validity of poetic justice as an artistic device or critical principle. Johnson rules out Dennis's criticism of Addison's *Cato* on the ground that it

violates the principle of poetic justice. His contention is that dramatic poetry is nothing but an emulation of reality and so its rules are not broken by displaying the world in its true nature. Johnson might have been aware of the fact that the works of writers who rigidly observe Poetic justice are poor whereas Shakespeare's plays are exceptionally powerful in spite of their violation of the so-called poetic justice. It may be on account of this inward awareness that he defends the plays by stating that they show the real state of sublunary things.

➔ *Johnson's sound common sense.*

In the present age Johnson is remembered most of all for his critical studies and his novel *Rasselas.* As a critic Johnson has established his position and his two works, The *Preface* and the *Lives of the Poets***,** are the most popular of all that he has written. The value of his opinions as a critic, especially in his Preface, rests on the massive

strength and keen penetration into the heart of Shakespeare's art. But this perception, admirably accurate on the whole, is not devoid of certain fallacies when it comes to details. Johnson's critical analyses of Shakespeare's plays are based on his preconceived opinions. That is why he is shocked at Shakespeare's indifference to morality and craze for word play and quibbles. Actually, Johnson's emphasis is on the points in which Shakespeare's aesthetics differed from his own. Even if most of his remarks are justified and even if his positive appreciation is wholly animated by a warm sympathy, it be said that his judgment remains essentially dogmatic.

➔ *Johnson the renovator of 'Rules'.*

Although Johnson is a follower neo-classical rules, he has done much to improve them and make them sensible and relevant in their application to all works. He renovates the classical doctrine with an appeal to inner observation

and to the resources of literary psychology. He compares reality if life with that of art and defends the tragic-comedies of Shakespeare. Life is enriched by various experiences, he seems to argue, a work but this is**,** undoubtedly, enriched by various elements of sorrow and pleasure. Shakespeare was thus right in inserting comic scenes among tragic ones. It may not be according to the rules, but it conforms to the realities of human life.

Dryden had already advanced a similar argument but Johnson's daring intellect broadened it further. He attacks the unities boldly and promotes, quite adventurously, the idea of experimentation in the field of drama. He acknowledges only the unity of action and holds the unites of place and time to have been the outcome of an abstract notion of theatrical illusion. The fictitious change from one place to another or from one period to another does not demand more credulity from the audience than that

general goodwill without which no dramatic performance is possible. In this matter, again, Dryden's wavering intuition is improved upon, and the Romantic theory of freedom is advocated. It has already been averred that in many instances Johnson rises above the limits of neo-classicism and shows his independent intellect with its mature insight and perception. We even feel a hint of irony in his praise of a 'regular and correct' writer. He admires Shakespeare in colorful words, speaks highly of the ages of youthful freshness and vigor when literature relied upon pure observation and natural intuition, borrowed nothing from books. It shows that in his subconscious mind he too shared the change which was in the process of asserting itself among his contemporaries.

➔ *Johnson and Lives of the English Poets.*

Another area in which Johnson exerted great influence on his successors was that of biography and comparative

estimation of the poets in the English canon. His accounts of the lives and works of numerous English poets were first produced as a series of prefaces to a large edition of the works of the English poets. These prefaces, fifty-two in all, were published separately as *Lives of the English Poets* in 1781. In general, Johnson raises biography to an art: far from being slavishly adherent to facts, Johnson's text is replete with all the apparatus of imaginative texts: figures of speech, imaginative insights, hypothetical argumentation, vivid descriptions, and speculative judgments; he appeals not only to the intellects of his readers but also to their emotions, backgrounds, and moral sensibilities. His most fundamental appeal, throughout these prefaces, is to the notion of "nature," as encompassing reason, truth, and moral propriety. He considers various genres and styles of poetry, the nature of imitation, the problems of translation, the classical rules of art, and the duties of literary criticism.

➔ *Conclusion.*

Most often, Dr. Johnson is regarded merely as a judicial critic of the “indispensable eighteenth century” of English literature. He attached great significance to construction, structure, harmony of tone and various other literary techniques. He was one who recognized the charm, the evocative force, the music, the sublime beauty and the superb rhythm of a verse or image. He was also a critic or a writer of creative intuition.

But in spite of all these healthy virtues, he was a man of limitations and reservations. He was not prepared to accept new movements that were too new for him. He criticized Gray and Collins who were the fore-runners of the Romantic Revival and who differed from the traditional literary standards and notions. He was not able to foresee the advent of Romanticism: instead, his attempt was to consolidate classicism in the field of literature. Johnson’s

wide scholarship, his reliance on psychological principles and his refusal to be cowed down by any prescriptive authority are the significant aspects of his literary criticism. But, after all, one cannot help admitting that his arguments are intellectually stimulating and thought-provoking.

His whole critical career is as notable for what it attacked as for what it attempted to. establish. From its beginning to its end, both in the earlier topical essays on such matters as the pastorals, versification, cordial verses, romances, and letter-writing and in the later consideration of specific literary works one by one, as they had appeared chronologically in the production of an author's life-time, he waged relentless war upon authority, prescription, and outworn tradition. He attempted to cut away the overlaying and obscuring growth of pseudo-statement and to substitute only such determinations as were capable of verification by first-hand experience. Johnson's reader is asked to accept whatever

general principle seems to arise from an inductive and empirical process of specific examination, sometimes line by line and stanza by stanza and sometimes work by work through the entire career of an author. Often the treatment is too brief and summary, and the steps of. the reasoning are lost in a sudden conclusion. But more often than not such evaluations are intended as vigorous challenge to the reader to make an examination himself. As Professor Tinker has said, the opinions of Johnson make us review the evidence, restate the case, and criticize the critic. The highest praise of his critical endeavors is that they are empirically lively in themselves and the cause of empirical liveliness in others.

Romantic Literary Criticism

Romanticism (also the Romantic era or the Romantic period) was an artistic, literary, and intellectual movement that originated in Europe toward the end of the 18th century and in most areas was at its peak in the approximate period from 1800 to 1850. Partly a reaction to the Industrial Revolution, it was also a revolt against the aristocratic social and political norms of the Age of Enlightenment and a reaction against the scientific rationalization of nature. It was embodied most strongly in the visual arts, music, and literature, but had a major impact on historiography, education and the natural sciences. Its effect on politics was considerable and complex; while for much of the peak Romantic period it was associated with liberalism and radicalism, its long-term effect on the growth of nationalism was probably more significant. The end of the Romantic era is marked in some areas by a new style of Realism, which

affected literature, especially the novel and drama, painting, and even music.

The Romantic Age in England was not only an age of glorious poetry but also of glorious literary criticism. In fact, most of the eminent men of letters of the age were critics as well as creative writers. Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, and Hazlitt all contributed to critical literature. But the main critics who gave a direction to the current of literary criticism were Coleridge, Lamb, and Hazlitt. All of them have often been categorized as **“Romantic Critics.”**

Romanticism first originated in Germany and then spread to the rest of the Europe. Romanticism as a literary movement emerged during the final decades of the 18th century in England. The trends that dominated the literary works from around 1800 to 1850 came to constitute this movement. Though the movement is not limited to this time period alone, these decades saw the rise of the

romantic ideas. On the literary timeline, it is the year 1798 that marks the official beginnings of Romanticism as this year saw the publication of *Lyrical Ballads*.

Romantic poets established new theories about the function and form of poetry. These arguments are demonstrated in Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* and Percy Bysshe Shelley's *A Defence of Poetry*. Romantic poets presented a theory of poetry in direct opposition to representative eighteenth-century theories of poetry as imitative of human life and nature by suggesting that poetic inspiration was located not outside in nature, but inside the poet's mind, in a "spontaneous" emotional response. This new theory of poetry also posited new possible subjects of poetic expression in a revaluation of the outcast and the supernatural. Indeed, it often reveled in representations that made the ordinary appear miraculous. This wonder at the ordinary was often achieved in making the natural appear

supernatural. Such representations often exemplify the interest of much Romantic poetry in describing and depicting alternate states of consciousness.

➔ *The Characteristics of the Romantic Theory*

- ***Imagination***:

The imagination was elevated to a position as the supreme faculty of the mind. This contrasted distinctly with the traditional arguments for the supremacy of reason. The Romantics tended to define and to present the imagination as our ultimate "shaping" or creative power, the approximate human equivalent of the creative powers of nature or even deity. It is dynamic, an active, rather than passive power, with many functions. Imagination is the primary faculty for creating all art.

On a broader scale, it is also the faculty that helps humans to constitute reality, for (as Wordsworth suggested),

we not only perceive the world around us, but also in part create it. Uniting both reason and feeling (Coleridge described it with the paradoxical phrase, "intellectual intuition"), imagination is extolled as the ultimate synthesizing faculty, enabling humans to reconcile differences and opposites in the world of appearance. The reconciliation of opposites is a central ideal for the Romantics. Finally, imagination is inextricably bound up with the other two major concepts, for it is presumed to be the faculty which enables us to "read" nature as a system of symbols.

• Nature:

"Nature" meant many things to the Romantics. As suggested above, it was often presented as itself a work of art, constructed by a divine imagination, in emblematic language. While particular perspectives with regard to nature varied considerably-- nature as a healing power, nature as a

source of subject and image, nature as a refuge from the artificial constructs of civilization, including artificial language--the prevailing views accorded nature the status of an organically unified whole. At the same time, Romantics gave greater attention both to describing natural phenomena accurately and to capturing as true of Romantic landscape painting as of Romantic nature poetry. Accuracy of observation, however, was not sought for its own sake. Romantic nature poetry is essentially a poetry of meditation.

➔ *Notes on Romantic Criticism*

- Romantic criticism came as a response to the neoclassical movement in literature.
- It began as a continental or European movement.
- The French Revolution had a great impact on the Romantics.
- There was more importance given to individual responsibility than adherence to customs and traditions.

- Concepts regarding morality, nature, God etc. were redefined. God was conceived as present in nature.
- The romantics drew inspiration from the beauty that they found in nature.
- Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* is considered as the manifesto of Romanticism.
- The French Revolution gave so much of importance to the ordinary man.
- In literature and literary criticism also a similar pattern set in, giving more importance to the common man, his language and his life.
- The lives of kings, noblemen and warriors were no longer fit subject for poetry. The romantics represented the common man's life in literature and brought out the beauty of rustic life through their poetic power and imagination.

- Romantics also argued for freedom in poetic creation. It was no longer necessary to follow the masters. The poet had the freedom to choose his own poetic devices, meters and diction (choice of words). Neoclassical rules regarding poetry were open to be flouted in Romanticism.

➔***Wordsworth***

- According to Wordsworth, poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings and emotions recollected in tranquility. Wordsworth believed that poetry should not be merely intellectual. He advocated that meter added charm to poetry.
- Wordsworth disliked almost all poetic devices including personification, allusions, hyperbole, inversions etc.
- Wordsworth believed that neoclassical forms of poetic expression were artificial and their emotions were not spontaneous.

- Wordsworth was influenced by the folk song and ballad tradition.
- For Wordsworth poetry was an expression of personal emotions. The emotions are tempered and restrained to suit poetic expression.
- He believed that poetry aroused sympathy for fellow beings and creatures. It revealed the mystery of nature. Poetry was no just a tool for moralizing. It gave religious insights into what we see around us.
- Wordsworth's theory of meter is not very popular. Writers before Wordsworth used meter in such a way that it was organic and added to the meaning of the poem.

➔ ***Coleridge***

- Coleridge refuted Wordsworth's theory of rustic diction. He argued that there is nothing special about the speech of people living close to nature. His major work was

Biographia Literaria. He proposed an organic view of poetry which was later on taken up by the New critics.

- Coleridge borrowed many of his theories from German philosophers without acknowledging their contribution.
- The **three main ideas of Coleridge** include the reconciliation of opposites, fancy and imagination and organic wholeness of poetic creation.
- Coleridge believed that in poetry the reconcilement of opposite or discordant qualities happened as a result of the fusing power of imagination.
- The opposite qualities included sameness and difference, the general and the concrete, the idea and the image, the individual and the representative, novelty and familiarity, emotion and order, self-possession and enthusiasm.

➔***Fancy***

- Fancy is a memory which is freed from the order of time and space which is associated with other memories. It is

controlled by the will or the choice of the person exercising fancy. Fancy brings together and juxtaposes images but does not transform them. They are as they were in the person's memory. Fancy concerns itself with the external details of a memory.

➔ ***Imagination***

- Coleridge defines imagination as the unifying or 'esemplastic' power. It not only recollects memories and reproduces them in the mind but recreates them after transformation or modification. Imagination concerns itself with the inner nature of things rather than concentrate on the outer detail as fancy does.

➔ ***Primary and Secondary Imagination***

- Primary imagination is the act of perception involved in imagination. The individual perceives in his finite mind the

infinite and eternal act of creation. It is an unconscious process.

- Secondary imagination is a continuation of primary imagination. But it is a conscious process.
- Secondary imagination is the unifying element. Unlike fancy it is not fixed and definite. It is secondary imagination that makes possible the reconciliation of opposite and discordant qualities.

➔ ***Organic formalism***

- According to Coleridge's theory of organic formalism, the form of art is derived from the content. Form is not imposed on the content rather the form is a product of the content. Mechanical formalism advocates that form of poetry is the element that makes it beautiful and it has to be added to the content to create poetry.
- Coleridge's argument is that form and content are fused together inseparably in poetry. There is an element of

unity in poetry which combines all the constituents in such a manner that they cannot be distinguished from each other. The sum of all the parts do not make the whole. According to Coleridge nothing can be taken away from a poem without affecting the whole poem.

- Coleridge's definition of imagination: "To become all things and yet remain the same, to make the changeful God be felt in the river, the lion and the flame – this is, that is true imagination." Only a poet who has such a philosophical mind can create good poetry.
- A poet who has genius uses imagination to unify and reconcile opposing elements.
- Certain poets only have talent and they use fancy to combine elements in a mechanical manner where unity is not achieved in the poem and the individual elements are not fused together in the poem. Coleridge says that these poets do not have fundamental unity in their mind. They

cannot understand that all things are the manifestations of one and the same thing.

➔ ***Meter***

- Unlike Wordsworth, Coleridge believed that meter is inseparable from the content of the poem and not merely an ornament. Meter distanced emotion in poetry from emotion in ordinary life.
- Coleridge is concerned about the act of creation of poetry. He doesn't talk about the value of poetry or its effect on readers.
- He prefers the universal and the general in literature to the particular and the individual. In all these he differs from Wordsworth and the Romantics. Three units of Coleridge's criticism:
- 1. Coleridge's Shakespeare criticism
- 2. Coleridge's criticism of Wordsworth
- 3. Comments on various other poets.

William Wordsworth

Lyrical Ballads

The poet William Wordsworth was born in 1770 in the famous Lake District in England. He launched the Romantic movement in English Literature with the publication of his *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798. The *Preface* that he added to the subsequent 1800 edition of this work became the manifesto of a new era called the Romantic Age. With this landmark publication, the turn of the century witnessed a radical change in the way poetry was read and perceived.

➔ *Lyrical Ballads and The Preface*

Wordsworth's collaborative work with his friend and fellow-poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge proved to be a landmark in the history of English Literature. The majority of this work comprised Wordsworth's poems. These poems departed in style and subject from the poetry of

the Neoclassical poets. Since the poems contained in *Lyrical Ballads* were not in accordance with the conventions of poetry, they were received with skepticism initially. To make his poetry better understood, Wordsworth added a preface in order to explain his choice of language and subjects.

➔ *Wordsworth's Romantic Ideas*

Wordsworth believed that the subject of poetry should be the '**humble and rustic life**'. This seemed like a radical view to the readers who had been accustomed to reading poetry about larger than life heroes or other such archaic subjects. According to Wordsworth, poetry that dealt with the higher subjects was superficial and lacked depth. The subject of poetry, for Wordsworth, had to be something common, familiar, and rustic.

What is important to understand is that by saying that poetry should deal with ordinary subjects, Wordsworth did not intend to make poetry dull. Rather, he emphasized that such common subjects should be treated in poetry with a '**coloring of imagination**'. This romantic obsession with the faculty of imagination was also reiterated by the fellow Romantic poet ST Coleridge in his *Biographia Literaria* published in 1817.

Wordsworth had attempted an experiment in the *Lyrical Ballads*. He had abandoned the conventional rule-governed poetic style that was considered best-suited for poetry. Instead, he chose to write in what he called '**the real language of men'**. Unlike the earlier poets for whom form had remained the primary concern, Wordsworth chose to write in the common language. This was very close to the kind of language real men used to converse with each other.

By declaring that poetry is **'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings**' , Wordsworth became the first significant voice of literary romanticism in England. His definition of poetry stressed on the idea that poetry was born out of human emotions. This focus on emotional or the affective aspects became central to Romanticism. Unlike the preceding age of Neoclassical poets whose poetry sought to communicate with the intellect, Wordsworth's poetry was intended to communicate to the human emotions.

Wordsworth's poetic theory is also significant in the fact that it believed that poetry flowed spontaneously from the poet. Unlike the Neoclassical poets who had been obsessively concerned about the rules and diction of poetry, Wordsworth favored poetry that flowed naturally. This is similar to the idea of another Romantic poet, John Keats, who wrote that "If poetry comes not as naturally as leaves to a tree, it had better not come at all."

➔ *The Lyrical Ballads and Wordsworth's Poetic Theory*

Wordsworth's aim in writing the '***Preface'*** was not to give an elaborate account of his theory of poetry or to make a systematic defense of his point-of view. He wanted to introduce his poems with an argument He added the 'Preface' because he felt that his poems were different in theme and style, and therefore, he should not present them without an introduction. It is a well observed phenomenon that every new poet struggles to carve a niche. That is what Wordsworth tried to do with the help of the '***Preface'***.

It has been generally supposed that Wordsworth's theory of poetic language is merely a reaction against, and a criticism of, 'the Pseudo Classical' theory of poetic diction. But such a view is partially true. His first impulse was less a revolt against Pseudo-classical diction, "than a desire to find a suitable language for the new territory of human life which

he was conquering for poetic treatment". His aim was to deal in his poetry with rustic and humble life and to advocate simplicity of theme. Moreover, he believed that the poet is essentially a man speaking to men and so he must use such a language as is used by men. The pseudo classical advocated that the language of poetry is different form the language of prose while Wordsworth believes that there is no essential difference between them. The poet can communicate best in the language which is really used by men. He condemns the artificial language. Thus William Wordsworth prefers the language really used by common men.

Wordsworth's purpose, as he tells in the '***Preface'*** was, "to choose incidents and situations from common life", and quite naturally, he also intended to use, "a selection of language, really used by men". He was to deal with humble and rustic life and so he should also use the language of the

rustics, farmers, shepherds who were to be the subjects of his poetry. The language of these men was to be used but it was to be purified of all that is painful or disgusting, vulgar and coarse in that language. He was to use the language of real men because the aim of a poet is to give pleasure and such language without selection will cause disgust.

The use of such a simple language has a number of advantages. The rustic language in its simplicity is highly emotional and passionate. This is more so the case when these humble people are in a state of emotional excitement. It is charged with the emotions of the human heart. Such a language is the natural language of the passions. It comes from the heart, and thus goes direct to the heart. In other words, through the use of such a language essential truths about human life and nature can be more easily and clearly communicated.

Wordsworth was going to write about simple life so he writes in simple language and for this he adds meter. In his opinion, the language of poetry must not be separated from the language of men in real life. Figures, metaphors and similes and other such decorations must not be used unnecessarily. In a state of emotional excitement, men naturally use a metaphorical language to express themselves forcefully. The earliest poets used only such metaphors and images as result naturally from powerful emotions. Later on, poets used a figurative language which was not the result of genuine passion. They merely imitated the manner of the earlier poets, and thus arose the artificial language and diction of Pseudo-classics. A stereotyped and mechanical phraseology thus became current. The poet must avoid the use of such artificial diction both when he speaks in his own person, or through his characters.

Wordsworth's theory of poetic diction is of immense value when considered as a corrective to the artificial, inane, and unnatural phraseology current at the time. But considered in itself it is full of a number of contradictions and suffers from a number of imitations. For one thing, Wordsworth does not state what he means by language. Language is a matter of words, as well as of arrangement of those words. It is the matter of the use of imagery, frequency of its use, and its nature, Wordsworth does not clarify what he exactly means by ‘language’.

Coleridge was the first critic to pounce upon Wordsworth's theory of language and to expose its weaknesses. He pointed out, **first**, that a language so selected and purified, as Wordsworth suggests, would differ in no way from the language of any other men of commonsense. After such a selection there would be no

difference between the rustic language and the language used by men in other walks of life.

Secondly, Wordsworth permits the use of meter, and this implies a particular order and arrangement of words. If meter is to be used, the order of words in poetry is bound to differ from that of prose. It does so differ in the poetry of Wordsworth himself. So Coleridge concludes that there is, and there ought to be, an essential difference between the language of prose and metrical composition.

Thirdly, the use of meter is as artificial as the use of poetic diction, and if one is allowed, it is absurd to forbid the use of the other. Both are equally good sources of poetic pleasure.

Fourthly, Coleridge objected to the use of the word real. He writes: “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. Every man's language has, first, its individualities; secondly, the common properties of the class to which he belongs; and thirdly, words and phrases of universal use. For, 'real', therefore, we must substitute, 'ordinary' or lingua communis."

Fifthly, Coleridge pointed out that it is not correct that the best parts of our language are derived from Nature. Language is letter-molded. The best words are abstract nouns and concepts. It the poet wants to use the rustic language, he must think like the rustics whose language is curiously inexpressive. It would be putting the clock back. Instead of progression it would be retrogression.

Wordsworth's theory of language has strong weaknesses, but its significance is also far-reaching. O. Elton concludes

his discussion of the subject with the following admirable words:

"Wordsworth, led by his dislike of, 'glossy and unfeeling diction' … was led to proclaim that speech as the medium desired; that he guarded this chosen medium not indeed from his own misapplication of it, but … proved its nobility in practice; that he did not clearly say what he meant by, 'language', or see the full effect upon the diction by the employment of meter; that he did not rule out other styles … he did not touch on their theoretic basis; and that in many of his actual triumphs, won within that sphere of diction which he does vindicate."

➔ *Wordsworth's Conception of Poetry: Passion and Reflection*

Wordsworth propounded his views on poetry, its nature and functions and the qualification of a true poet in his

'***Preface'***. So far as the nature of poetry is concerned, Wordsworth is of the opinion that "poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings." Poetry has its origin in the internal feelings of the poet. It is a matter of passion, mood and temperament. Poetry cannot be produced by adhering to the rules laid down by the Classicists. It must flow out naturally and smoothly from the soul of the poet.

But it must be noted that good poetry, according to Wordsworth, is never an immediate expression of such powerful emotions. A good poet must ponder over them long and deeply. In the words of Wordsworth, "poetry has its origin in emotions recollected in tranquility."

➔ *Process of Poetic Composition*

There are **four** stages which play a very crucial role in converting an experience into a pleasing composition.

- ***Stage One: Observation***

  First comes observation or perception of some object, character or incident which sets up powerful emotions in the mind of the poet.

- ***Stage Two: Recollection***

  Next comes the contemplation or recollection of that emotion in tranquility. It must be noted that at this stage memory comes into play and brings out what had been lying in the unconscious for days, months or years. A similar kind of incident triggers the poet to visit the past experiences stored in the unexplored regions of his mind.

- ***Stage Three: Filtering***

  The third stage is that of filtering wherein the poet is purged of nonessential elements and thus makes his experience communicable to all men.

- ***Stage Four: Composition***

  The fourth stage is when the actual composition begins. The poet seeks to convey his emotions through print and turns into a communicator. In the words of Wordsworth he becomes a man speaking to men. What is important to him is not just expressing his joy but sharing it with his readers.

  The Solitary Reaper by Wordsworth demonstrates this poetic process:

  Behold her, single in the field,
  You solitary Highland Lass!
  Reaping and singing by herself;
  Stop here, or gently pass!
  Alone she cuts and binds the grain,
  And sings a melancholy strain;
  O listen! for the Vale profound
  Is overflowing with the sound.
  No Nightingale did ever chaunt

More welcome notes to weary bands
Of travellers in some shady haunt,
Among Arabian sands:
A voice so thrilling ne'er was heard
In spring-time from the Cuckoo-bird,
Breaking the silence of the seas
Among the farthest Hebrides.
Will no one tell me what she sings?--
Perhaps the plaintive numbers flow
For old, unhappy, far-off things,
And battles long ago:
Or is it some more humble lay,
Familiar matter of to-day?
Some natural sorrow, loss, or pain,
That has been, and may be again?
Whate'er the theme, the Maiden sang
As if her song could have no ending;
I saw her singing at her work,
And o'er the sickle bending;--
I listened, motionless and still;
And, as I mounted up the hill,
The music in my heart I bore,
Long after it was heard no more.

Feelings started overflowing spontaneously as the poet listened to the song of the Highland girl: “the Vale profound / Is overflowing with the sound.” Removed from the scene he started recollecting his experiences in tranquility and exhuming theme of the song and causes its joyousness. Slowly but gradually this state of mind disappears, and an emotion which is quite similar to the original is generated. It soon turns into feeling and starts resonating and he begins composing his poem with “the music” he feels in his heart “Long after it was heard no more” causes its joyousness.

➔ *Wordsworth as a Literary Critic:*

Wordsworth was primarily a poet and not a critic. The bulk of his literary criticism is small yet “*the core of his literary criticism is as inspired as his poetry*”. There is the same utter sincerity, earnestness, passion and truth in both. He knew about poetry in the real sense, and he has not said

even a single word about poetry, says Chapman, “which is not valuable, and worth thinking over”.

Wordsworth’s criticism is of far-reaching historical significance. When Wordsworth started, it was the Neo-classical criticism, which held the day. Critics were pre-occupied with poetic genres, poetry was judged on the basis of rules devised by Aristotle and other ancients, and interpreted by the Italian and French critics. They cared for rules, for methods, for outward form, and had nothing to say about the substance, the soul of poetry. Wordsworth is the first critic to turn from the poetry to its substance; builds a theory of poetry, and gives an account of the nature of the creative process. His emphasis is on novelty, experiment, liberty, spontaneity, inspiration and imagination, as contrasted with the classical emphasis on authority, tradition, and restraint. His ‘Preface’ is an unofficial manifesto of the English Romantic Movement giving it a

new direction, consciousness and program. After Wordsworth had written, literary criticism could never be the same as before.

Wordsworth through his literary criticism demolishes the old and the faulty and opens out new vistas and avenues. He discards the artificial and restricted forms of approved 18th century poetry. Disgusted by the, “gaudiness and inane phraseology”, of many modern writers, he criticizes poets who: ”*… separate themselves from the sympathies of men, and indulge in arbitrary and capricious habits of expression, in order to furnish food for fickle tastes, and fickle appetites, of their own creation.”*

Discarding formal finish and perfection, he stresses vivid sensation and spontaneous feelings. He says: *All good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.*

Scott James says: *He discards Aristotelian doctrine. For him, the plot, or situation, is not the first thing. It is the feeling that matters.*

Reacting against the artificiality of 18th century poetry, he advocates simplicity both in theme and treatment. He advocates a deliberate choice of subject from “humble and rustic life”. Instead of being pre-occupied with nymphs and goddesses, he portrays the emotions of collage girls and peasants. There is a healthy realism in his demand that the poet should use, “the language of common men”, and that he should aim at keeping, “the reader in the company of flesh and blood.”

There is, no doubt, his views in this respect are open to criticism. Scott James points out, the flesh and blood and emotions of a townsman are not more profound. Besides, by confining himself wholly to rustic life, he excluded many

essential elements in human experience. Thus, he narrowed down his range.

His insistence on the use of a selection of language really used by men is always in danger of becoming trivial and mean.

All the same, the historical significance of his criticism is very great. It served as a corrective to the artificial and inane phraseology and emphasized the value of a simpler and more natural language. By advocating simplicity in theme, he succeeded in enlarging the range of English poetry. He attacked the old, outdated and trivial and created a taste of the new and the significant. He emphasized the true nature of poetry as an expression of emotion and passion, and so dealt a death blow to the dry intellectuality of contemporary poetry. In this way, he brought about a revolution in the theory of poetry, and made popular acceptance of the new poetry, the romantic poetry, possible.

Unlike other romantics, Wordsworth also lays stress on the element of thought in poetry. He has a high conception of his own calling and so knows that great poetry cannot be produced by a careless or thoughtless person. He says:

Poems to which any value can be attached were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man who, being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply.

Poetic process is a complex one. Great poetry is not produced on the spur of the moment. It is produced only when the original emotion is contemplated in tranquility, and the poet passions anew.

Wordsworth goes against the neo-classic view that poetry should both instruct and delight, when he stresses that the function of poetry is to give pleasure, a noble and exalted kind of pleasure which results from increased

understanding and sympathy. If at all it teaches, it does so only indirectly, by purifying the emotions, uplifting the soul, and bringing it nearer to nature.

The credit for democratizing the conception of the poet must go to Wordsworth. According to him, the poet is essentially a man who differs from other men not in kind, but only in degree. He has a more lively sensibility, a more comprehensive soul, greater powers of observation, imagination and communication. He is also a man who has thought long and deep. Wordsworth emphasizes his organic oneness as also the need for his emotional identification with other men.

We can do no better than conclude this account of the achievement of Wordsworth as a critic with the words of Rene Wellek:

Wordsworth thus holds a position in the history of criticism which must be called ambiguous or transitional. He inherited from neo-classicism a theory of the imitation of nature to which he gives, however, a specific social twist: he inherited from the 18th century a view of poetry as passion and emotion which he again modified as … "recollection in tranquility". He takes up rhetorical ideas about the effect of poetry but extends and amplifies them into a theory of the social effects of literature … he also adopts a theory of poetry in which imagination holds the central place as a power of unification and ultimate insight into the unity of the world. Though Wordsworth left only a small body of criticism, it is rich in survivals, suggestions, anticipations and personal insights.

➔ *Evaluation:*

William Wordsworth was the central figure in the English Romantic revolution in poetry. His contribution to it was

threefold. **First**, he formulated in his poems and his essays a new attitude toward nature. This was more than a matter of introducing nature imagery into his verse; it amounted to a fresh view of the organic relation between man and the natural world, and it culminated in metaphors of a wedding between nature and the human mind, and beyond that, in the sweeping metaphor of nature as emblematic of the mind of God, a mind that “feeds upon infinity” and “broods over the dark abyss.” **Second**, Wordsworth probed deeply into his own sensibility as he traced, in his finest poem, The Prelude, the “growth of a poet’s mind.” The Prelude was in fact the first long autobiographical poem. Writing it in a drawn-out process of self-exploration, Wordsworth worked his way toward a modern psychological understanding of his own nature, and thus more broadly of human nature. **Third**, Wordsworth placed poetry at the center of human experience; in impassioned rhetoric he pronounced poetry to be nothing less than “the first and last of all knowledge—it

is as immortal as the heart of man," and he then went on to create some of the greatest English poetry of his century. It is probably safe to say that by the late 20th century he stood in critical estimation where Coleridge and Arnold had originally placed him, next to John Milton—who stands, of course, next to William Shakespeare.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge: On the Imagination

Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772- 1834) was a great poet, but he is also a great critic. He is one of the greatest of poet critics that England has ever produced. He was a genius and when he inspired, and when the mood was upon him, he could create works of the highest order but he was incapable of sustained and persistent labor. Coleridge is one of the greatest of literary critics, and his greatness has been almost universally recognized. He occupies without doubt, the first place among English literary critics. Bulk of Coleridge literary criticism is contained in his: *BIOGRAPHIA LITERARIA* and *LECTURES ON SHAKESPEARE AND OTHER POETS*.

➔ *Coleridge's Romantic Ideas*

Like a true romantic, Coleridge sought **inspiration from Nature.** But he believed that Nature can only inspire poetry in a poet. For it to be effective, this inspiration needs the imagination that is supplied by the poet's mind. So it was not nature alone but how the poet chose to portray it using his imagination that made poetry worthy. Thus, Coleridge was of the opinion that outward world can only inspire poetry but to shape it well, the poet needs to seek help of his own imaginative faculties. This idea of Coleridge is echoed in "*Dejection: An Ode*" as:

I may not hope from outward forms to win

The passion and the life, whose fountains are within.

Coleridge's romanticism is best observed in his stress on the faculty of **Imagination**. Coleridge elaborately distinguished Imagination from Fancy. He believed that Imagination was the living power and prime agent of all

human perception. Coleridge's obsession with imagination is observable in many of his poems. Bothered by the loss of imagination, the speaker of "Dejection: An Ode" laments the loss of his 'genial spirits' as he says, "I see, not feel".

In keeping with the Romanticist emphasis on pleasure, Coleridge believed that to have the desired effect of poetry on the reader, the readers should be willing to overlook or neglect consideration of the rational or logical aspects for the sake of 'poetic faith'. This priority of emotion and feeling over reason and logic was central to the Romantic movement.

Coleridge was of the opinion that the ability to perceive nature and beauty are central in the understanding of art. He believed that no work of art can have an existence until perceived actively by the human mind. This idea found an expression in the poet's famous lines:

O Lady! We receive but what we give,
And in our life alone does Nature live.

In further stressing on the **role of the mind to actively create and perceive things**, Coleridge proposed the idea of the unifying power of imagination. For him, it is the **primary imagination** that holds the ability to perceive. The **secondary imagination** merely works as an agent to organize what has been perceived by the primary imagination into a unified whole. Also, **imagination** is different from **Fancy** because imagination is active and Fancy is passive. While imagination is a creative faculty, Fancy is merely a repository.

➔ *Coleridge's Conception of Nature*

Coleridge's love of nature was also in accordance with every romantic poet's fondness for Nature. While Keats admired Nature for its beauty and Wordsworth praised it for the memory it evoked in the observer, Coleridge considered

nature to be full of mysteries. Nature is fused with the supernatural in his poetry.

For him, elements of Nature were manifestations of some deeper truths. Thus, the albatross wasn't only a bird but a symbol of guilt. Similarly, Coleridge believed that the nightingale's song was not dull as he remarked in "The Nightingale: A Conversation Poem" that, "In nature there is nothing melancholy". His "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" reveals the unmerciful face of nature. His depiction of Nature is different from that by other Romantic poets. His famous lines, "*Water, water, everywhere, nor any drop to drink*" shows Nature in crisis despite such seeming abundance.

Thus, Coleridge saw Nature not merely as a source of beautiful landscapes and melodious birds, but also full of risks and dangers. He sought inspiration from Nature for his poetry. Imagination and the ability to actively perceive the world was central to his ideas of romanticism. He advocated

a **willing suspension of disbelief** for the sake of pleasure, which was also the key concern for the Romantics.

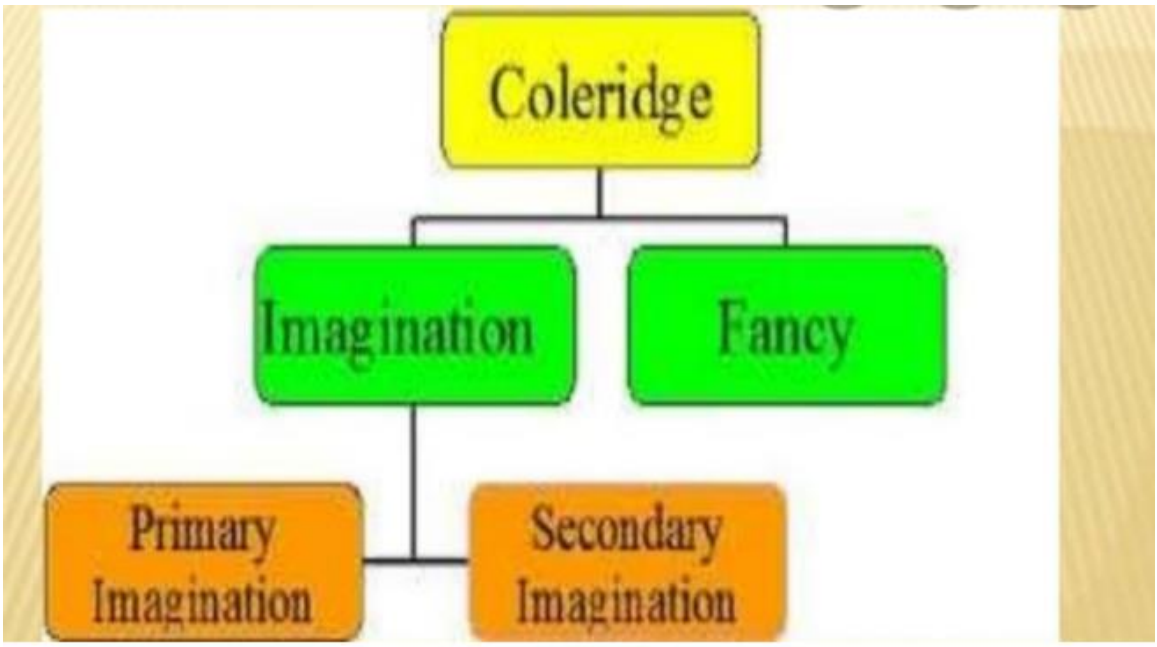
➔ *Coleridge and the Theory of Imagination:*

The ***Biographia Literaria*** was one of Coleridge's main critical studies. In this work, he discussed the elements of writing and what writing should be to be considered genius. Although the work is not written from Coleridge's poetic mind, it is still written with the qualities and rhythm of the poetic. Not only does he discuss literature itself he discusses the many variables that influence and inspire writers. Through this discussion, he makes many value judgments, leaving his audience with a clear understand of his stance on certain issues. Some of the issues he tackles include politics, religion, social values, and human identity. His treatment of these issues tends to be conservative in its foundation, yet also blatant and original. He does not cater to one certain audience; rather he expresses his own

thoughts from a personal viewpoint. Coleridge delivers the *Biographia Literaria* without a second thought of whether or not there will be any disagreement from his audience.

➔ *"Imagination" and "Fancy"*

Coleridge divided the "mind" into two distinct faculties. He labeled these the "Imagination" and "Fancy."



Imagination in its real sense denotes the working of poetic minds upon external objects or objects visible to the eyes. Imaginative process sometimes adds additional

properties to an object or sometimes abstracts from it some of its properties. Therefore imagination thus transforms the object into something new. It modifies and even creates new objects. According to coleridge imagination has two types: PRIMARY and SECONDARY IMAGINATION.

According to him the **primary imagination** is 'the living power and prime agent of all human perception'. Primary is perceiving the impression of the outer world through the senses. It is a spontaneous act of the human mind, the image so formed of the outside world unconsciously and involuntarily. It is universal and is possessed by all.

According to him the **secondary imagination** is the poetic vision, the faculty that the poet has " to idealize and unify". It is an echo of the former , co- existing with the conscious will. It works upon the raw materials that are sensations and impressions supplied the primary

imagination. It is the secondary imagination which makes any artistic creation possible and root of all poetic activity. It is considered as shaping and modifying power and is called **ESSEMPLASTIC IMAGINATION**.

Coleridge calls Secondary imagination a magical power, it fuses various faculties of human soul, will, emotion, intellect, perception. It fuses internal and external, the subjective and objective. The primary and secondary imaginations do not differ from each other in kind. The difference between them is one of degree. The secondary imagination is more active, more conscious than the primary one. The primary imagination is universal while secondary is a peculiar privilege enjoyed by the artist. The significance of the imagination for Coleridge was that it represented the sole faculty within man that was able to achieve the romantic ambition of reuniting the subject and the object, the world of the self and the world of the nature. For him, the most

important aspect of the imagination was that it was active to the highest degree.

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

Fancy: Coleridge regards fancy to be the inferior of imagination. It is according to him a creative power. It only combines different things into different shapes, not like

imagination to fuse them into one. According to him, it is the process of ” bringing together images dissimilar in the main, by source”. It has no other countries to play with, but fixities and definities. Fancy in Coleridge’s eyes was employed for tasks that were ” passive” and mechanical.

***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.*

"Fancy," in Coleridge's eyes was employed for tasks that were "passive" and "mechanical", the accumulation of fact and documentation of what is seen. "Always the ape,"

Fancy, Coleridge argued, was "too often the adulterator and counterfeiter of memory." The Imagination on the other hand was "vital" and transformative, "a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation." For Coleridge, it was the Imagination that was responsible for acts that were truly creative and inventive and, in turn, that identified true instances of fine or noble art.

- ***The distinction between Fancy and the Imagination :***

The distinction made by Coleridge between **Fancy** and the **Imagination** rested on the fact that Fancy was concerned with the mechanical operations of the mind, those which are responsible for the passive accumulation of data and the storage of such data in the memory. Imagination, on the other hand, described the "mysterious power," which extracted from such data, "hidden ideas and meaning." It also determined "the various operations of constructive and inventive genius."

Engell has demonstrated that Coleridge's division of the imagination into the "primary" and "secondary" draws a distinction between creative acts that are unconscious and those that are intentional and deliberate. "**The Primary Imagination**" was for Coleridge, the "necessary imagination" as it "automatically balances and fuses the innate capacities and powers of the mind with the external presence of the objective world that the mind receives through the senses." It represents man's ability to learn from nature. The overarching property of the primary imagination was that it was common to all people. **The Secondary imagination**, on the other hand, represents a superior faculty which could only be associated with artistic genius. It was this aspect of the imagination, one which could break down what was perceived in order to recreate by an autonomous willful act of the mind that has no analog in the natural world—which Coleridge associated with art and poetry. A key and defining attribute of the secondary

imagination was a free and deliberate will; "superior voluntary control. . .coexisting with the conscious will." The secondary imagination, once activated by the will, "dissolves, dissipates in order to recreate." Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*.

- ***Significance of the Imagination :***

The significance of the Imagination for Coleridge was that it represented the sole faculty within man that was able to achieve the romantic ambition of reuniting the subject and the object; the world of the self and the world of nature. By establishing the creative act as mimicking the "organic principle" or "one"—a divine principle believed to underlie all reality—the romantic theorist sought to establish a harmonious relationship between the ideal world of the subject and the real world of the object. Baker has demonstrated that Coleridge was convinced that the

Imagination acted as "a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM," and that it not only reinforced the notion that perception was active and creative, it established the cosmos as an organic entity.

- ***"Imagination" as "ESEMPLASTIC," :***

Coleridge explained this property of the "Imagination" as "ESEMPLASTIC," to "shape into one" and to "convey a new sense." Coleridge in the tenth chapter of *Biographia Literaria* described this ability of the imagination as "Esemplastic." Noting that **esemplastic** was a word he borrowed from the Greek "**to shape**," Coleridge explained that it referred to the imagination's ability to "shape into one, having to convey a new sense." He felt such a term was necessary as "it would aid the recollection of my meaning and prevent it being confounded with the usual import of the word imagination." *Biographia Literaria*, vol. 1, p. 86.

If you really want to use a pretentious-sounding term, try esemplastic. Derived from Greek words meaning "into" and "one" and "mold," and coined by Coleridge in 1817, the word means "having the function of molding into unity; unifying." The picture derived from the word is of someone, probably a poet, taking images and words and feelings from a number of realms of human endeavor and thought and bringing them all together into a poem s/he writes. This requires a huge effort of the imagination, which we might call the "esemplastic power of the poetic imagination." A decade after its first appearance a writer could remark, "Nor I trust will Coleridge's favorite word esemplastic..ever become current."

Not only did the subject subsume the object it can also be argued that Imagination subsumed the role of Fancy within the creative work. Thus while Coleridge argued that the poet relied on both Fancy and Imagination when

inventing a poem, and that the poet should seek a balance of these two faculties, the "active" and "transformative" powers of the Imagination negated the contribution of, and representation of Fancy. In Coleridge's system, the Imagination is ultimately the only faculty which contributed to the creative process.

➔ *Coleridge as a Literary Critic:*

Coleridge is one of the greatest of literary critics, and his greatness has been almost universally recognized. He occupies, without doubt, the first place among English literary critics. After eliminating one after another the possible contenders for the title of the greatest critic,

Saintsbury concludes: *"So, then there abide these three – Aristotle, Longinus and Coleridge."*

According to Arthur Symons, Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* is, *"… the greatest book of criticism in English."*

Herbert Read concludes Coleridge as: *“ … head and shoulders above every other English critic.”*

A man of stupendous learning, both in philosophy and literature, ancient as well as modern, and refined sensibility and penetration intellect, Coleridge was eminently fitted to the task of a critic. His practical criticism consists of his evaluations of Shakespeare and other English dramatists, and of Milton and Wordsworth. Despite the fact there are so many digressions and repetitions, his practical criticism is always illuminating and highly original. It is rich in suggestions of far reaching value and significance, and flashes of insight rarely to be met with in any other critic. His greatness is well brought out, if we keep in mind the state of practical criticism in England before him.

The Neo-classic critics judged on the basis of fixed rules. They were neither legislative nor judicial, nor were carried away by their prejudices. Coleridge does not judge

on the basis of any rules. He does not pass any judgment, but gives his responses and reactions to a work of art. His criticism is impressionistic-romantic, a new kind of criticism. He could discover new beauties in Shakespeare and could bring about re-valuations of a number of old English masters. His criticism of Wordsworth and his theories enable us to judge him in the correct perspective.

In the field of **theoretical inquiry**, Coleridge was the first to introduce psychology and philosophy into literary criticism. He was interested in the study of the process of poetic creation, the very principles of creative activity, and for this purposes freely drew upon philosophy and psychology. He thus made philosophy the basis of literary inquiry, and thus brought about a union of philosophy, psychology and literary criticism. His literary theories have their bases in philosophy; he imparted to criticism the dignity which belongs to philosophy. He philosophized literary

criticism and thus brought about a better and truer understanding of the process of creation and the nature and function of poetry.

His greatest and most original contribution to literary criticism is his theory of imagination. Addison had examined the nature and function of imagination, and Wordsworth, too, had developed his own theory on the subject. But all previous discussions of imagination look superficial and childish when compared with Coleridge's treatment of the subject. He is the first critic to differentiate between Imagination and Fancy, and to differentiate between primary and secondary Imagination. Through his theory of imagination he revolutionized the concept of artistic imitation. Poetic imitation is neither a servile copy of nature, not is it the creation of something entirely new and different from Nature. Poetry is not imitation, but creation, but it is creation based on the sensations and impressions received

from the external world. Such impressions are shaped, ordered, modified and opposites are reconciled and harmonized, by the imagination of the poet, and in this way poetic creation takes place.

Further, as David Daiches points out: *“It was Coleridge who finally, for the first time, resolved the age old problem of the relation between the form and content of poetry.”*

Through his **philosophical inquiry** into the nature and value of poetry, he established that a poem is an organic whole, and that its form is determined by its content, and is essential to that content. Thus meter and rhyme, he showed, are not merely, “pleasure super-added”, not something superfluous which can be dispensed with, not mere decoration, but essential to that pleasure which is the true poetic pleasure. This demonstration of the organic

wholeness of a poem is one of his major contributions to literary theory.

Similarly, his theory of “Willing Suspension of Disbelief” marks a significant advance over earlier theories on the subject. His view that during the perusal of a poem or the witnessing of a play, there is neither belief nor disbelief, but a mere suspension of disbelief, is not universally accepted as correct, and the controversy on the subject has been finally set at rest.

However, it may be mentioned in the end that as Coleridge’s views are too philosophical, he is a critic no easy to understand. Often it is fragmentary and unsystematic. Victorians, in general, could not appreciate him and his appeal was confined to the few.

It is only in the 20th century that his literary criticism has been truly understood and recognition and appreciation have followed. Today his reputation stands very high, and

many go to him for inspiration and illumination. Despite the fragmentary nature of his work, he is now regarded as the most original critic of England.

➔ *Evaluation*

Coleridge's achievement has been given more widely varying assessments than that of any other English literary artist, though there is broad agreement that his enormous potential was never fully realized in his works. His stature as a poet has never been in doubt; in "Kubla Khan" and "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" he wrote two of the greatest poems in English literature and perfected a mode of sensuous lyricism that is often echoed by later poets. But he also has a reputation as one of the most important of all English literary critics, largely on the basis of his *Biographia Literaria*.

In Coleridge's view, the essential element of literature was a union of emotion and thought that he described as

imagination. He especially stressed poetry's capacity for integrating the universal and the particular, the objective and the subjective, the generic and the individual. The function of criticism for Coleridge was to discern these elements and to lift them into conscious awareness, rather than merely to prescribe or to describe rules or forms.

Biographia Literaria:

Biographia Literaria, or in full *Biographia Literaria*; or *Biographical Sketches of MY LITERARY LIFE and OPINIONS*, is an autobiography in discourse by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, which he published in 1817, in two volumes. The work is long and seemingly loosely structured, and although there are autobiographical elements, it is not a straightforward or linear autobiography. Instead, it is meditative. The work was originally intended as a mere preface to a collected volume of his poems, explaining and justifying his own style and practice in poetry. The work

grew to a literary autobiography, including, together with many facts concerning his education and studies and his early literary adventures, an extended criticism of William Wordsworth's theory of poetry as given in the preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* (a work on which Coleridge collaborated), and a statement of Coleridge's philosophical views.

In the **first part** of the work Coleridge is mainly concerned with showing the evolution of his philosophic creed. At first an adherent of the associational psychology of David Hartley, he came to discard this mechanical system for the belief that the mind is not a passive but an active agency in the apprehension of reality. The author believed in the "self-sufficing power of absolute Genius" and distinguished between genius and talent as between "an egg and an egg-shell". The discussion involves his definition of the imagination or “esemplastic power,” the faculty by which the soul perceives the spiritual unity of the universe,

as distinguished from the fancy or merely associative function.

The book has numerous essays on philosophy. In particular, it discusses and engages the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, and Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling. Being fluent in German, Coleridge was one of the first major English literary figures to translate and discuss Schelling, in particular.

The **later chapters** of the book deal with the nature of poetry and with the question of diction raised by Wordsworth. While maintaining a general agreement with Wordsworth's point of view, Coleridge elaborately refutes his principle that the language of poetry should be one taken with due exceptions from the mouths of men in real life, and that there can be no essential difference between the language of prose and of metrical composition. A

critique on the qualities of Wordsworth's poetry concludes the volume.

Coleridge is best known for his ***Biographia Literaria***, or *Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions* that was published in 1817. Besides being autobiographical in nature, this work also set forth the poet's literary theory. Since Coleridge composed most of his work under the influence of opium, it is loosely structured and contains much philosophy. Besides refuting some of the literary opinions of Wordsworth as put forth in his *Preface*, Coleridge gave many new ideas of literary importance.

➔ *Coleridge and the Definition of a Poem*

"A poem is that species of composition which is opposed to works of science by proposing for its immediate object pleasure not truth." A poem according to Coleridge contains the same elements as a prose composition because both using the words. The difference between a poem and a

prose composition cannot then lay in the medium for each employs the same medium i.e. words.

Coleridge believes that rhyme and meter are essential in order to memorize what is written and to develop a certain kind of attachment to it by getting the feeling of the words through a particular rhyme or rhythm.

“Thirty days hath September,
April June and November.”

➔ *Difference between poem and poetry:*

Poem is different than prose. It gives pleasure. It is merely a form of verbal expression of poets mind. It is the result of abstract process.

Poetry could be a part of prose. It gives an aesthetic delight. It is an activity of poets mind. It is a process of imagination which makes poem.

➔ *Conclusion*

Fact and fiction both are very important part of literature thus, Coleridge is the first English critic based his literary criticism on philosophical principles. For him art is more important than any other thing. It can be said that Coleridge's theory of imagination is the chief contribution in literary criticism. This theory modifies traditional view of art as a mere imitation. It opens new vista in the field of literary criticism.

Thomas Love Peacock
The Four Ages of Poetry

Thomas Love Peacock (1785-1866) was an English poet and novelist whose work was mostly of a satirical nature. He used satire to attack the attitudes of well-known people of his time. The poet and novelist Peacock was one of the most distinctive satirical writers of the Romantic period. He was a friend of Percy Bysshe Shelley and his poetry won praise from John Keats, Lord Byron and Edgar Allan Poe. Alongside his literary career, Peacock was employed as an official of the East India Company and supervised the construction of the first ships to sail to India powered exclusively by steam.

Peacock wrote satirical novels on which his reputation rests. The first group includes *Headlong Hall* (1815), *Melincourt* (1817), and *Nightmare Abbey* (1818). *Melincourt's* main interest lies in its satirical

portraits of William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Robert Southey, Thomas Malthus, and Lord Monboddo. *Nightmare Abbey* continues the satire of poets and philosophers of the day, including Coleridge, Lord Byron, and Shelley.

➔ *The Four Ages of Poetry: Satire of History*

> ***POETRY**, like the world, may be said to have four ages, but in a different order: the first age of poetry being the age of iron; the second, of gold; the third, of silver; and the fourth, of brass.*

First published in the journal *Literary Miscellany* in 1820, “The Four Ages of Poetry” is poet and novelist Thomas Love Peacock’s satirical perspective on the history and societal role of poetry.

Peacock sympathizes neoclassical critical principles and parodies Wordsworth's romantic ideas. The essay "The

Four Ages of Poetry" deserves to be esteemed for its own witty insights and because Shelley was impelled to write “Defense of Poetry” in reply to it. Peacock says everything that is artificial is anti-poetical. Peacock goes on to declare that poetry declined as the age of gold that made way to silver and then to brass.

Where the Greeks and Romans saw the order of ages as gold, silver, bronze, and finally iron, Peacock’s order begins with the iron age, then gold, silver, and finally brass. Peacock explains the first of poetry’s four ages as the time before written literature, “in which rude bards celebrate in rough numbers the exploits of ruder chiefs.” He describes the golden age as the age of Homer, the silver age as “the poetry of civilized life,” with two kinds of poetry, “imitative and original.” Peacock holds Virgil as an example of a strong imitator, and casts the original poetry of the silver age as the emergence of comic and satirical forms, and

notes of the age the “labored polish of versification” as a new obstacle to poetry’s previously unencumbered music of sound and sense. The current, brass era is marked, according to Peacock, by poems of “verbose and minutely-detailed description of thoughts, passions, actions, persons, and things.”

Peacock says that English poetry has passed through the ***Iron Age*** of chivalry and romance literature, the ***Golden Age*** of Shakespeare, the ***silver Age*** of Dryden and Pope, and has reached the ***Age of Brass***, in which contemporary romantic poets have retreated into solitude and private meditation, distancing themselves from the most important aspects of the life of their time. Peacock attacks on the individual Romantic poets and by emphasizing that the Lake poets in general “*wrote verses on a new principle*” by remaining ignorant of history, society, and human nature, by cultivating” the fancy at the expense of memory and reason,

and by "*seeing Nature*" not " *as she was*," as they professed to do, but "*only as she was not, converting the land they lived in into a sort of fairy-land, which they peopled with mysticisms and chimaeras*" (513), consequently isolating themselves from the majority of readers and rendering their poetry an adornment to, rather than an influence on their society. He complains that the poetry of the Romantic era had divorced itself from praxis, and so become self-conscious and essentially useless.

The development of poetry passed through four ages according to Peacock. (i) ***Iron*** or Bardic Age in which society was in its infancy and poets were "*the sole depositories of all the knowledge of their age*" (509). (ii) ***Golden*** or Homeric Age in which poetry achieved perfection by synthesizing the primitive vitality and power of the Iron Age with new knowledge and technical skill. With the emergences of history, philosophy, or science the stature of

poetry declined leading to (iii) ***Silver*** or Virgilian Age, when poetry was no longer supreme but derivative, consisting of good sense and learning conveyed in "*a labored and somewhat monotonous harmony of expression …*" (510). Finally, there is the (iv) ***Brass*** or Nonnic Age and ends in "*the second childhood of poetry'* as poetry becomes self-conscious and pseudo archaic (511). This age refers to the romantic age, which he calls "*semibarbarian*" in a civilized community. The poet, in this age, lives in the days that are past. His ideas, thoughts, feelings, associations, are all with barbarous manners, absolute customs, and exploded superstitions. Peacock hold that there is a linear progress in the development of rational knowledge. This make unlikely to return to a golden age of poetry, for poetry has less and less of real experience to be concerned with.

The Four Ages of Poetry written by Thomas Love Peacock is a satirical essay that is as long-winded as the

poetry he is making fun of. Peacock believes that poetry is no position to be taken seriously. The only real use of poetry derives from a place of pleasure and expression. Peacock argues that in order to advance as a society, we have to collectively move away from this art form. He does this by pointing out the different ages of poetry throughout history and what each one brought to the culture.

Starting with the ***Iron Age,*** Peacock alludes that this age is the reason poetry is even held in high regards in the first place. Introducing this new practice, the poets of the time were seen as gifted. However, Peacock cites their 'gifts' as only habits of the time. Letter writing had not yet been introduced so people relied on poetry to convey messages. Poetry also served useful to those who wanted to keep records of what was going on historically and culturally, in turn, lending a hand to the first records of historical content. Peacock argues that this age was for the

barbarians of civilization, those who had no advanced means of education but were interested in developing them.

Next comes the ***Golden Age***, which Peacock describes as the age where *"poetry has now attained perfection."* This is where poetry becomes retrospective and civilizations learn how to establish kingdoms and social institutions. Great focus is put on remembering ancestors and the times of the Iron Age, while at the same time deeming those of the current age worthy. It was not enough for poets to simply praise those in power but to praise them through their ancestors. Those who were in power needed their worthiness to be in direct correlation with the greats from the past, allowing a solid establishment of their own power. Peacock points out that the Golden Age is the beginning of moving away from poetry as an art, stating, *"…with the progress of reason and civilization, facts become more interesting than fiction."* In this age poetry is

still important, and will continue to be until it overstays its welcome once other literature, history, and sciences come along.

The ***Silver Age*** is the start of poetry's extinction. This is the poetry of civilized life with poems being divided into two categories: *imitative* and *original.* Imitative is all about re-polishing the poetry of the Golden Age. Original is comic or satirical poetry. With the developments in now forthcoming sciences, there is a call for poetry to be perfect. It is less about variety and more about refinement. It is because of these requests and standards of this age that poetry is no longer the sole tool of knowledge. Poetry has become monotonous in its new form. Although there are tireless efforts, poetry cannot keep up with following the straightforwardness of science and still being interesting to read. Peacock describes the need for change if poetry is going to survive, saying, *"It is now*

evident that poetry must either cease to be cultivated, or strike into a new path."

The ***Brass Age*** is the final era and an attempt for poetry to get back to the Golden Age, in what Peacock refers as, *"the second childhood of poetry."* Part of this new turn in direction was the changes happening in civilization. With the Roman Empire being overrun, the days of barbarism were brought back. The nations emerging in Europe developed a spirit for adventure. New superstitions and fables arose, playing a role in the poetry that came forth. Different practices, such as the semi-deification of woman, made way for the romance of the middle ages and chivalry to be at the forefront of this kind of poetry. Charlemagne and his Paladins along with Arthur and the Knights of the roundtable were held in the same regard of excitement as the heroes of poetry told in the Iron Age. The poetry of the Brass Age was a mixing of

originality that sprung in the Golden Age and rawness the Iron Age brought, producing unlimited range that allowed poets to explore their imaginations.

➔ Peacock's intentions with this essay was to point out the ridiculousness sometimes in poetry. He was calling out all the poets who held their poetry in higher regards than Peacock deemed necessary. He was not taking a stand for poetry's complete end but more of an acknowledgment that the practice is mainly rooted in expression, so it should not be held as fact.

The ***Iron Age*** of poetry would be that of a pre-literate society, "in which rude bards celebrate in rough numbers the exploits of ruder chiefs." It's all about how many enemies have been slaughtered and how many cows stolen. But soon this poetry develops into a ***Golden Age***: from Homer down to Euripides, poetry has "attained perfection" and seeks out new forms.

As these are exhausted, so begins the ***Silver Age***, "or the poetry of civilized life. ... The imitative consists in recasting, and giving an exquisite polish to, the poetry of the age of gold: of this Virgil is the most obvious and striking example. The original is chiefly comic, didactic, or satiric: as in Menander, Aristophanes, Horace, and Juvenal. The poetry of this age is characterized by an exquisite and fastidious selection of words, and a labored and somewhat monotonous harmony of expression..." As reason progresses, however, so poetry regresses and loses originality. A ***Brass Age*** starts.

Percy Bysshe Shelley

A Defence of Poetry

'*A Defence of Poetry*' is an essay written by the Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822). One of the most important prose works of the Romantic era, and a valuable document concerning Shelley's own poetic approach, the essay is deserving of closer analysis and engagement.

Shelley wrote '*A Defence of Poetry*' in 1821 in response to an essay written by his friend, Thomas Love Peacock. In '*The Four Ages of Poetry*', Peacock – now best-remembered for novels like *Nightmare Abbey* – wittily argued that poetry was surplus to requirements in the modern age, because scientific and technological discoveries had rendered it unnecessary.

Shelley intended his essay to be published in the follow-up issue of the *Literary Miscellany*, which had published Peacock's essay that had prompted Shelley's rebuttal. However, the *Miscellany* folded after its first issue, so Shelley's essay was never printed in his lifetime – and it only appeared in print in 1840, eighteen years after Shelley's death, when his widow, Mary Shelley, published it.

Shelley argues that poetry is mimetic: that is, it reflects the real world. In the early days of civilization, men 'imitate[d] natural objects', observing the order and rhythm of these things, and from this impulse was poetry born. Reason and imagination are both important faculties in the poet.

Reason, he tells us, is logical thought, whereas imagination is *perceiving* things, and noticing the similarities between things (here, we might think of the poet's stock-in-trade, the metaphor and simile, which liken one thing to

another). It is through reason but also through imagination that we can identify beauty in the world, and from such a perception or realization are great civilizations made. Poets, then, are the makers of civilization itself, as Shelley argues:

But poets, or those who imagine and express this indestructible order, are not only the authors of language and of music, of the dance, and architecture, and statuary, and painting: they are the institutors of laws, and the founders of civil society, and the inventors of the arts of life, and the teachers, who draw into a certain propinquity with the beautiful and the true that partial apprehension of the agencies of the invisible world which is called religion.

The poet throughout history has been both legislator (law-maker) and prophet (religious messenger). And because poets work within the medium of *language* (unlike the sculptor or painter, who works in the visual medium),

they have attained a greater degree of fame than other artists.

Shelley distinguishes between ‘measured’ and ‘unmeasured’ language, the former being poetry (which uses *meter*, i.e., you measure out the syllables per line) and the latter being prose. Poetry is superior to prose, even though both use language, because poetry also taps into the possibilities of sounds: ‘the language of poets has ever affected a certain uniform and harmonious recurrence of sound, without which it were not poetry, and which is scarcely less indispensable to the communication of its influence, than the words themselves, without reference to that peculiar order.’

Shelley also makes a distinction between storytelling (and, indeed, history) and poetry, arguing, ‘A story of particular facts is as a mirror which obscures and distorts that which should be beautiful; poetry is a mirror which

makes beautiful that which is distorted.' Poetry thus reflects the world, like a mirror, but does so in a way that renders the distorted image beautiful.

Indeed, poetry can make us see the world in a new light, making it richer and more beautiful:

Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar; it reproduces all that it represents, and the impersonations clothed in its Elysian light stand thenceforward in the minds of those who have once contemplated them, as memorials of that gentle and exalted content which extends itself over all thoughts and actions with which it coexists.

Shelley devotes the next portion of 'A Defence of Poetry' to a sort of critical history of poetry from the days of ancient Greece up to the present, considering how, throughout the ages, poets have had a moral influence upon the world.

He argues that, following the Fall of Rome and the establishment of Christianity, it was poets who saved the world from ruin and anarchy: ‘the world would have fallen into utter anarchy and darkness, but that there were found poets among the authors of the Christian and chivalric systems of manners and religion, who created forms of opinion and action never before conceived; which, copied into the imaginations of men, became as generals to the bewildered armies of their thoughts.’

He sees the medieval poet Dante (1265-1321) as the ‘bridge’ between the ancient and modern world. Responding to Peacock, Shelley argues that the poet’s purpose *is* utilitarian, since poetry ‘lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world’, and has a moral purpose. Shelley concludes his essay with the famous words:

Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehend inspiration; the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the

present; the words which express what they understand not; the trumpets which sing to battle, and feel not what they inspire; the influence which is moved not, but moves. Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.

Shelley's was not the first great defense of poetry as an art form, and probably the most notable precursor in English literature is Sir Philip Sidney's 'An Apology for Poetry', from the 1580s. But Shelley's argument is more closely keyed into his own time, and emphasizes some key aspects of Romanticism as a literary movement, and the importance of the poet as a figure in that movement.

Shelley's central argument in 'A Defence of Poetry' is, at bottom, a moral one: poets enhance our sympathetic imaginations and thus poetry is a force for moral good. This is why, in that often-quoted final line, 'poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world': because poets have both the moral purpose and the imaginative faculties

which help to make our world and its moral systems what they are.

As M. H. Abrams observed in his analysis of ‘A Defence of Poetry’, in his brilliant The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition (Galaxy Books), Shelley’s argument in ‘A Defence of Poetry’ is in some ways a Platonic one, concerned with ‘eternal Forms’; but crucially, whereas Plato had written of poets as the rivals of philosophers and statesmen as imitators of the natural world, Shelley collapses this rivalry and argues that great lawmakers and philosophers *are* poets.

Critics have often noticed that ‘A Defence of Poetry’ is a great essay on poetry in spite of what it leaves out: there is no detailed history of the development of poetry (Shelley’s whistle-stop tour of classical and medieval poets notwithstanding), nor is there any list of rules which good poets should follow.

Instead, Shelley's argument is one which reflects many of the tenets of the Romantic movement: the idea of the poet as a visionary or prophet, the primacy of the imagination, and the ways in which the poet can change the world, becoming lawmaker, statesman, and philosopher all in one.

➔ *Defence of Poetry: an overview*

Shelley's "Defence of Poetry" is unusual compared with similarly titled "defenses" of poetry. Shelley's essay contains no rules for poetry, or aesthetic judgments of his contemporaries. Instead, Shelley's philosophical assumptions about poets and poetry can be read as a sort of primer for the Romantic movement in general. In this essay, written a year before his death, Shelley addresses "The Four Ages of Poetry," a witty magazine piece by his friend, Thomas Love Peacock. Peacock's work teases and jokes through its definitions and conclusions, specifically that the poetry has become valueless in an age of science and

technology, and that intelligent people should give up their literary pursuits and put their intelligence to good use. Shelley takes this treatise and extends it, turning his essay into more of a rebuttal than a reply.

To begin, Shelley turns to reason and imagination, defining **reason** as logical thought and **imagination** as perception, adding, “reason respects the differences, and imagination the similitudes of things.” From reason and imagination, man may recognize beauty, and it is through beauty that civilization comes. **Language**, Shelley contends, shows humanity’s impulse toward order and harmony, which leads to an appreciation of unity and beauty. Those in “excess” of language are the poets, whose task it is to impart the pleasures of their experience and observations into poems. Shelley argues, that **civilization** advances and thrives with the help of poetry. This assumption then, through Shelley’s own understanding, marks the poet as a

prophet, not a man dispensing forecasts but a person who "participates in the eternal, the infinite, and the one." He goes on to place poetry in the column of divine and organic process: "A poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth . . . the creation of actions according to the unchangeable forms of human nature, as existing in the mind of the Creator." The task of poets then is to interpret and present the poem; Shelley's metaphor here explicates: "Poetry is a mirror which makes beautiful that which is distorted."

The next portion of Shelley's argument approaches the question of **morality in poetry**. To Shelley, poetry is utilitarian, as it brings civilization by "awaken[ing] and enlarg[ing] the mind itself by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unapprehend combinations of thought. Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world." Shelley also addresses drama and the critical history of poetry through

the ages, beginning with the classical period, moving through the Christian era, and into the middle ages until he arrives back in his present day, pronouncing the worth of poets and poetry as “indeed divine,” and the significant role that poets play, concluding with his famous last line: “Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.”

➔ *Conclusion*

In “**The Four Ages of Poetry**,” Peacock satirically argues that poetry is no longer needed amid the great technological and scientific advancements of the Industrial Age. He adds that poetry was once useful for awakening the intellect of society, but now humanity has advanced beyond it. Peacock also said the poets of his era were derivative, which showed the downfall of poetry.

Responding to Peacock’s critiques in “**A Defence of Poetry**,” Shelley argues that poetry is imperative to society.

He does this by first differentiating between reason and imagination, and then he claims that reason serves imagination: “Reason is to imagination as the instrument to the agent, as the body to the spirit, as the shadow to the substance”.

Having established that reason is second to imagination, Shelley defines poetry as “the expression of the imagination”. He claims that all works of the imagination are poetry. Poets are critical to society because their works encapsulate universal truths and forecast a vision of the future for generations to come.

In the second half of the essay, Shelley explains the progression of poetry throughout history. From the beginning, poetry was a divine gift. Although they did not realize the magnitude of the gift, ancient poets had advantages over later poets because all the images and

forms were fresh. They created the forms that later poets copied.

Because of the great gift poets have been given, Shelley says that poets should not argue for their own values of right and wrong because they are tied to the poets' culture, time, and place. Instead, poets should strive to put forth universal truths.

In describing the history of poets, Shelley also repeatedly says that poets are not recognized as great in their own time, because they are for the future and not exclusively the present. Poets must submit to the sands of time to be recognized for their greatness.

Finally, poets must transcend their own time and place and work to be the legislators of mankind. By this, he means that poets' influence extends beyond the realm of art and emotion. Through language, poets shape the social and linguistic order, thus paving the way for civil society. They

must be a guide for the future because this is the true importance of poetry. To do that, poets must work on the harmony of language and the beauty of their poetry so that future generations will appreciate their work.

Without poetry, humanity would not have advanced, according to Shelley. While poetry is still around, humanity will advance into the future and not fall to corruption because “[p]oets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world” .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