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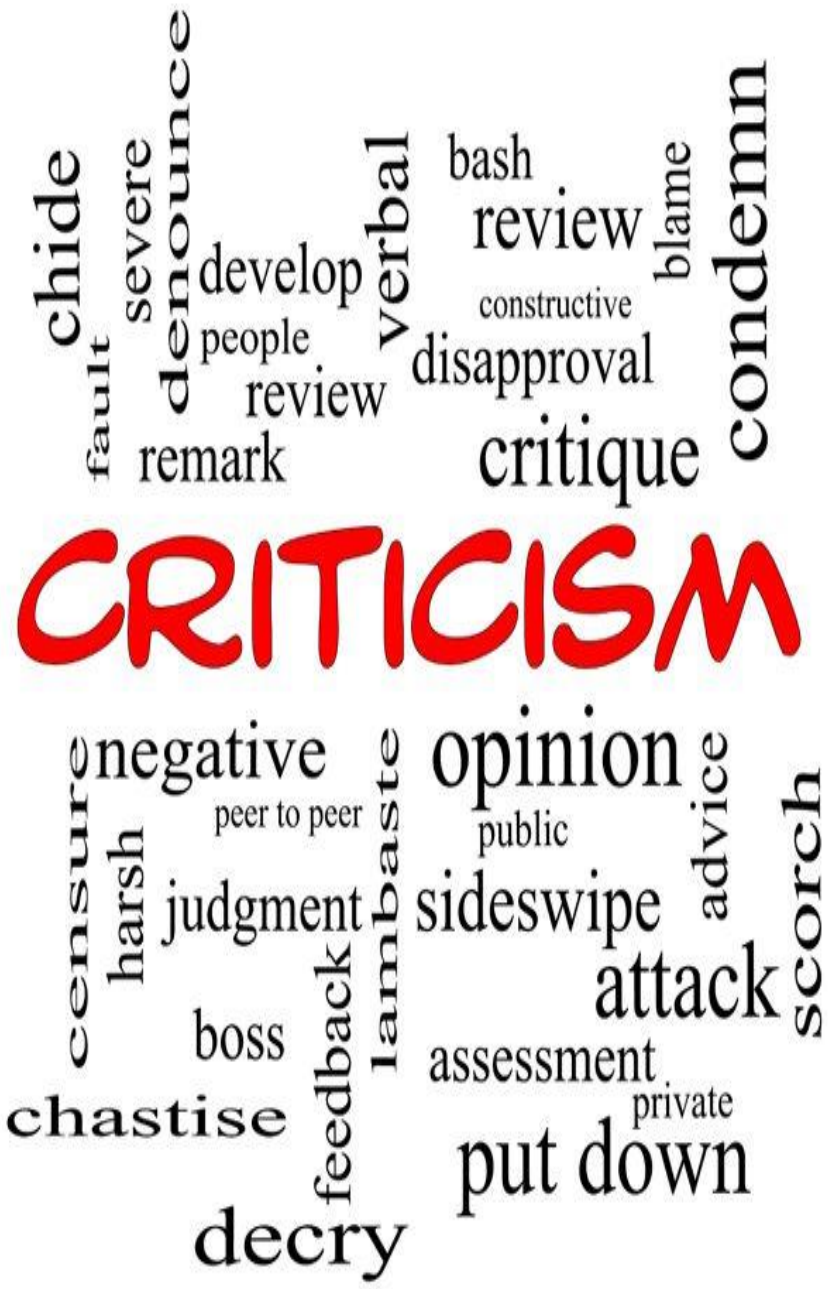
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➔ *What is Criticism?*

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

New Classical Criticism and Dryden's Influence

New Classical Criticism is a literary approach that emphasizes the importance of a work's aesthetic and formal qualities, focusing on elements like structure, language, and thematic consistency. *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy* aligns with this approach as it carefully examines the technical aspects of drama—such as structure, plot, and language—while considering the balance between innovation and classical form. Dryden's work reflects an appreciation for classical principles but also an openness to new ideas and experimentation, which laid the groundwork for the development of English literary criticism.

Dryden's analysis of English and French drama highlights the evolving nature of theater and the role of criticism in shaping artistic standards. His nuanced perspective, which both respects tradition and values innovation, has made *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy* a lasting influence in the study of drama and literary criticism.

John Dryden (1631-1700) was a leading English poet, playwright, and literary critic during the Restoration period. He is often regarded as the father of English literary criticism, as he was among the first English writers to develop a systematic approach to the critical evaluation of literature. His essay, *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy* (1668), is one of his most influential works and stands as a foundational text in the development of English literary criticism.

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.

In *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy*, Dryden explores the art of drama through a structured dialogue among four characters, each representing different critical perspectives of drama: Crites, Eugenius, Lisideius, and Neander. Through these characters, Dryden debates various aspects of dramatic poetry, focusing on themes like the comparison of ancient and modern drama, the differences between French and English drama, the significance of poetic justice, and the role of audience response. His work reflects the intellectual spirit of his time, as it combines respect for classical principles with an openness to new ideas, making it a vital work for understanding both the Restoration period and New Classical Criticism.

Through these characters, Dryden explores issues of classical versus modern drama, the merits of English drama compared to French drama, and the role of poetic justice, unities, and audience expectations in shaping a successful play. His balanced argument highlights the strengths and weaknesses of each perspective, which makes *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy* a foundational text in New Classical Criticism.

The Structure and Format of *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy*

Unlike typical essays, *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy* is written in the form of a dialogue. This dialogue takes place among four characters:

1. **Crites** – Advocates for the ancients (Greek and Roman dramatists) and their strict adherence to classical forms.
2. **Eugenius** – Defends the modern playwrights, highlighting their creativity and flexibility.
3. **Lisideius** – Praises the French dramatists for their structured approach and strict adherence to the unities.

4. **Neander** – Represents Dryden’s own views, appreciating the unique qualities of English drama, even if it sometimes breaks the classical rules.

The choice of a dialogue format allows Dryden to present multiple perspectives, fostering a balanced and comprehensive discussion. This method also mirrors the structure of ancient philosophical debates, thereby paying homage to the classical ideals he discusses.

Key Themes Explored in the Essay

1. **Classical vs. Modern Drama**

A major focus in Dryden's essay is the debate between classical (ancient) and modern drama. Crites argues that the ancient Greek and Roman dramatists, such as Sophocles and Seneca, established a perfect model for drama by adhering strictly to Aristotle's three unities:

- **Unity of Time** – The events of a play should occur within a single day.
- **Unity of Place** – The action should take place in a single location.

- **Unity of Action** – The play should follow one main plot without subplots.

Crites believes that these rules create a more natural and cohesive narrative. Eugenius, however, counters this view by defending the moderns, arguing that contemporary playwrights bring fresh perspectives and have advanced the art of drama by introducing innovations that resonate with modern audiences. This debate represents Dryden's broader engagement with the question of whether art should adhere to established rules or seek new forms of expression.

2. **Comparison of French and English Drama**

Dryden's *Essay* also examines the differences between French and English dramatic traditions. Lisideius praises French drama for its elegance and adherence to structure, emphasizing the French dramatists' consistent use of the unities and their preference for reason and decorum. He views this disciplined approach as a sign of artistic maturity.

However, Neander, Dryden's spokesperson in the dialogue, argues that while the French style may be refined, it lacks the emotional depth and energy of English drama. He

commends English dramatists like Shakespeare and Ben Jonson for their ability to engage the audience's emotions and create vivid characters, even if their works sometimes violate the unities. Neander suggests that English plays, by focusing on the human experience, are more relatable and emotionally powerful.

3. **The Role of Poetic Justice**

Another significant theme in *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy* is the concept of poetic justice. This term refers to the idea that characters should get what they deserve at the end of a play: good characters are rewarded, while bad characters are punished. Dryden’s characters discuss whether this principle is essential for drama.

Neander argues that while poetic justice is desirable, it should not override the need for a realistic portrayal of life. He believes that the purpose of drama is to reflect human nature, and real life does not always reward virtue or punish vice. For Neander, forcing poetic justice can lead to a contrived and artificial storyline that detracts from the play’s emotional impact.

4. **The Role of Audience in Drama**

Dryden recognizes the importance of audience engagement, arguing that a play should captivate and entertain its viewers. Neander suggests that strict adherence to classical rules can alienate the audience, as such rules may not always align with contemporary tastes. This view reflects Dryden's belief that the success of a play lies in its ability to resonate with the audience emotionally and intellectually, even if it does not conform perfectly to classical standards.

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."**

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.

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 leading English poets of the early 18th century, renowned for his command of the heroic couplet and his biting satirical wit. His career was marked by sharp observations on society and culture, often challenging prevailing views and encouraging intellectual rigor. *An Essay on Criticism*, published in 1709 when Pope was just 21, remains one of his most influential works, providing a foundational framework for understanding literary criticism during the Neoclassical period.

In the early 18th century, literary criticism was still evolving as a discipline. Critics of Pope's time were grappling with questions about the role of criticism, the balance between tradition and innovation, and the application of classical rules to modern works. Pope's essay is particularly valuable because it addresses these debates through verse, combining his poetic skill with philosophical inquiry. *An Essay on Criticism* does not merely serve as a guide for critics but also explores the responsibilities and ethics of both critics and poets, making it a timeless contribution to the field of New Classical Criticism.

Pope's essay is primarily aimed at literary critics, providing advice on how to judge poetry and other literary works with fairness, depth, and insight. The poem is divided into three sections, each exploring a different aspect of criticism and poetic composition, emphasizing the importance of natural taste, balance between judgment and creativity, and humility in criticism.

Detailed Structure and Themes in *An Essay on Criticism*

An Essay on Criticism is structured into three parts, each exploring a different aspect of criticism. Pope moves from discussing the foundational qualities of good criticism to examining common pitfalls, and finally to offering guidance on maintaining humility and balance.

Part One: Foundations of Good Criticism

In the first part of *An Essay on Criticism*, Pope examines the qualities that distinguish good critics from poor ones. Here, he emphasizes two main ideas: **natural taste** and **learning**.

1. **Natural Taste and "Following Nature"**

Pope begins by asserting that good criticism relies on a harmonious "taste," which he describes as an intuitive sense

of beauty that must be refined through study and experience. Taste is an inherent quality that allows a person to appreciate art in a natural way, yet it requires discipline to develop fully. Pope's famous line, “First follow Nature,” encapsulates his belief that art and criticism should strive for a natural beauty and simplicity rather than being overly concerned with intricate rules.

By “following Nature,” Pope means that critics and poets alike should be attuned to the underlying principles of harmony, proportion, and order that make great art universally appealing. He suggests that these principles are rooted in nature itself, drawing on ideas from classical thinkers like Aristotle and Horace, who argued that art should mirror life.

2. **Balance of Rules and Creativity**

Pope acknowledges the value of classical rules, like the unities of time, place, and action, which are drawn from Aristotle’s *Poetics*. However, he cautions against rigid adherence to these rules, pointing out that blind imitation can restrict creativity. Rules, according to Pope, serve as guidelines rather than fixed laws. He contends that a truly skilled poet knows how to balance adherence to classical

forms with the freedom to innovate. Pope's position reflects the Neoclassical emphasis on order and balance, combined with an appreciation for originality.

3. **Importance of Learning and Humility in Criticism**

Pope insists that criticism requires study, experience, and humility. He warns that a little knowledge can be dangerous, and that critics must avoid arrogance. His famous line, "A little learning is a dangerous thing," suggests that superficial understanding can lead to misjudgments. Critics who lack deep understanding often base their judgments on limited knowledge, leading them to overlook a work's finer qualities.

Part Two: Common Faults of Critics

In the second part of his essay, Pope explores the pitfalls that often compromise criticism, reflecting on the human tendencies that lead critics astray. He focuses on four primary faults: **arrogance**, **envy**, **pettiness**, and **bias**.

1. **Arrogance and Overconfidence**

Pope argues that arrogance is one of the most dangerous flaws in criticism. Critics who consider themselves infallible

often fail to recognize the merits of innovative works. He satirizes these critics, noting that they tend to focus on their opinions rather than the actual work they are analyzing. Pope's message is that good criticism requires self-awareness and a willingness to acknowledge one's limitations.

2. **Envy and Jealousy**

Pope observes that envy can distort a critic's judgment, leading them to unfairly dismiss or undervalue a work. This flaw, he argues, arises when critics feel threatened by a writer's talent or success. Envy can cloud the critic's objectivity, preventing them from giving a fair assessment.

3. **Focus on Trivial Faults**

Pope criticizes those who focus excessively on minor flaws rather than the overall quality of a work. These critics, whom Pope calls "Cavillers," nitpick small details and fail to appreciate the broader vision of the piece. He argues that while technical details matter, they should not overshadow the work's aesthetic and thematic contributions. Pope encourages critics to approach a work holistically, recognizing its strengths as well as its weaknesses.

4. **Bias and Narrow-Mindedness**

According to Pope, critics should avoid letting personal biases influence their judgment. He argues that narrow-minded critics often hold certain genres, forms, or styles in contempt, preventing them from appreciating diverse approaches to art. A true critic, Pope suggests, should be open-minded and capable of evaluating works based on their individual merits.

Part Three: The Ethics and Responsibilities of Critics

The third part of *An Essay on Criticism* focuses on the ethical responsibilities of critics. Pope argues that criticism should be constructive and aimed at promoting good taste rather than tearing down others. He believes that critics have a duty to nurture the development of literature and guide readers toward refined and thoughtful judgment.

1. **Criticism as a Service to Society**

Pope sees critics as cultural gatekeepers who help shape public taste and judgment. By offering fair and insightful critiques, critics can encourage writers to produce higher-

quality work. Pope's approach reflects the Neoclassical idea that art and criticism serve a social purpose, elevating the moral and intellectual standards of society.

2. **Humility and the Critic's Role**

Pope argues that critics should approach their work with humility, acknowledging their own limitations and fallibility. He cautions that excessive pride can prevent critics from learning and growing. According to Pope, true critics should remain aware of their role as guides, not gatekeepers. Their goal should be to support the evolution of literature, rather than acting as rigid enforcers of arbitrary standards.

3. **Balancing Praise and Criticism**

Pope encourages critics to be fair in their assessments, balancing praise with constructive criticism. While it is the critic's job to highlight flaws, they should also recognize and celebrate a work's merits. This balance requires a thoughtful and empathetic approach, allowing critics to provide feedback that is both honest and respectful.

Key Themes and Analysis of *An Essay on Criticism*

1. **The Nature of Good Criticism**

Pope begins his essay by acknowledging the challenges of being a good critic, emphasizing that true criticism is an art that requires natural taste as well as experience. According to Pope, taste is an innate quality that enables one to appreciate true beauty in art, yet it must be honed and perfected by study and practice. Critics should avoid harshness and strive for balance, considering both strengths and weaknesses in a work.

He warns against critics who base their opinions on rules alone, rather than on genuine appreciation of the work's qualities. Pope writes, “First follow Nature,” suggesting that critics should be guided by a natural sense of harmony rather than rigid adherence to artificial rules.

2. **Balance Between Rules and Creativity**

Pope discusses the importance of balance between the established rules of criticism and individual creativity. While he recognizes the significance of classical principles—such as the unity of time, place, and action—he also argues that blind adherence to these rules can stifle creativity. Critics

should understand that true artistry often transcends strict rules and that a poet's intuition and innovation can create exceptional work beyond conventional boundaries.

Pope uses classical poets such as Homer and Virgil as examples of artists who embody this balance, adhering to certain rules yet producing work that feels original and vibrant. He also encourages critics to be open-minded, allowing artists to explore and push beyond these traditional forms when their talent permits.

3. **The Flaws of Critics and Dangers of Arrogance**

One of the strongest themes in *An Essay on Criticism* is Pope's critique of flawed criticism. He highlights several common faults among critics, including arrogance, envy, and the tendency to focus on trivial aspects of a work rather than understanding it as a whole. According to Pope, poor critics are those who fail to recognize true beauty or talent due to their narrow-mindedness or jealousy.

Pope's lines, "A little learning is a dangerous thing," warn that superficial knowledge can lead to overconfidence and errors in judgment. He advises critics to approach their work with humility, knowing that they, too, are fallible, and to

remember that their primary role is to support the development of good taste in society, rather than to tear down others.

4. **The Role of the Poet and the Critic in Society**

Pope concludes his essay by discussing the responsibilities of both the poet and the critic to society. Poets should strive for excellence and authenticity, and critics, in turn, should provide fair, constructive feedback that encourages the flourishing of good literature. Pope's vision of criticism emphasizes that both poets and critics contribute to the cultural enrichment of society, and that this mutual respect between the artist and critic is essential for creating a balanced literary culture.

Literary Significance of *An Essay on Criticism*

Pope's essay has become a classic in literary criticism because it outlines principles that have continued to shape the field. His insights are not limited to poetry or any particular genre but apply to all forms of artistic criticism. As a foundation of New Classical Criticism, Pope's work advocates for a balance between classical principles and

creative originality, encouraging critics to approach works with empathy, openness, and intellectual rigor.

This approach to criticism reflects the New Classical emphasis on aesthetics, form, and the intrinsic qualities of the work itself, rather than focusing on the author's intent or historical context. Pope's essay thus represents a timeless contribution to literary criticism that continues to influence readers, writers, and critics alike.

Conclusion and Legacy of *An Essay on Criticism*

An Essay on Criticism has had a lasting impact on the field of literary criticism. Pope's advice to critics—to balance rules with taste, to approach their work with humility, and to strive for fairness—remains relevant in modern criticism. His insights have helped shape New Classical Criticism, which values a careful balance between traditional forms and creative innovation, and places an emphasis on aesthetics, structure, and formal qualities.

Pope's vision of criticism goes beyond mere evaluation; he views it as an art form in its own right, requiring a refined sense of beauty, judgment, and moral responsibility. This essay not only serves as a guide for critics but also reflects

Pope's broader philosophy on art and literature, making it a cornerstone of Neoclassical thought.

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 The last part comes from a more positive and encouraging perspective. Pope explores what makes a great critic. The ideal qualities a critic should possess include

integrity, humility, and courage. The poem closes with an extended tribute to the ancient Greek and Roman writers, as well as English writers who Pope feels best imitate the ancients. The best critics are balanced and reflective, considering their words carefully, knowing that they make and break authors' careers.

• 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.

➔ **Advice for Writers**

Pope details what he thinks are the most important rules to follow for writers. His advice is to "first follow NATURE" which is full of life and truth yet symmetrical and orderly: "Those RULES of old discover'd, not devis'd / Are Nature still, but Nature methodiz'd." Ancient Greeks and Romans are the best example of following the laws of nature in writing. The English writers of Pope's time, he argues, should study the ancients, learn from their brilliance, and apply what they learn to their own work. Writers should model their writing on the "rules of old" but great writers can be more flexible. Great writers will at times have to break rules in order to express modern ideas and the ambiguities of human life. However, even the best writers must study and understand the reasons for the rules of poetry established by the ancients. In order to become great, a writer must first know their own limitations.

➔ Advice for Critics

Pope has much more advice for critics than for writers. Critics play a large role in the literary world by influencing people's access to and thoughts about writers' work. Pope warns critics that they often think they know more than they actually do: "A little learning is a dang'rous thing; Drink deep, or taste not the *Pierian* spring." The Pierian Spring is a reference to an ancient Roman fountain that represented the Muses, or goddesses who inspired writers, artists, and musicians to create. With this epigram, or witty saying that teaches a lesson, Pope expresses that critics without in-depth learning do not have access to the beauty or meaning of poetry. Thus their critiques are not to be taken seriously. Such critics may fall into habits such as judging poetry based on its imagery, its beautiful use of language, or other surface details.

A common folly of critics is that they often focus on parts of a work of literature rather than try to understand the whole: "Most critics, fond of some subservient art, / Still make the whole depend upon a part." Pope also notes that critics should not rely on prejudice toward the author for reasons such as the author's religious background, national background, or wealth. Pope may be referencing his own

experience as a Catholic, a religious outsider due to King Henry VIII (1491–1547) splitting England from the Catholic Church. Pope also may have his work unfairly maligned because of his lack of educational background and his physical disabilities. Similarly, critics should not misunderstand work as high quality just because it is new or "extreme." Pope advises critics to be generous to writers and avoid being harsh about their inevitable missteps: "To err is human; to forgive, divine."

Samuel Johnson as a Literary Critic
(Lives of the Poets & Preface to Shakespeare)

Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) is one of the most significant literary figures of the 18th century, known for his wit, intellectual rigor, and keen insight into the human experience. His works are foundational in literary criticism, especially *Lives of the Poets* and *Preface to Shakespeare*, which together offer a comprehensive approach to understanding literature, integrating biography, aesthetic principles, and moral analysis.

As a critic, Johnson was deeply influenced by the values of the Neoclassical period, which emphasized order, clarity, and a return to classical ideals of form and structure. However, Johnson's criticism is distinguished by its openness to innovation, appreciation for individuality, and belief in literature's moral purpose. His approach in *Lives of the Poets* and *Preface to Shakespeare* is reflective of New Classical Criticism, a school of thought that maintains a respect for classical forms but also acknowledges the importance of originality, personal voice, and emotional depth.

New Classical Criticism emphasizes formal analysis, aesthetic qualities, and adherence to classical standards while acknowledging the significance of innovation and individual genius. Johnson's works capture this balance. In *Lives of the Poets*, Johnson presents biographical and critical sketches of various poets, offering insights into the moral and artistic values that guided them. Meanwhile, *Preface to Shakespeare* remains one of the earliest and most respected critiques of Shakespeare's work, addressing both its strengths and limitations in terms of plot, character, and style.

Johnson's style of criticism is not prescriptive but analytical; he does not seek to limit creativity by rigid standards but rather provides a balanced framework through which literature can be appreciated for both its technical qualities and its ethical resonance.

Analysis of *Lives of the Poets*: Biography and Critique

Lives of the Poets, published in multiple volumes between 1779 and 1781, comprises biographical sketches and critical evaluations of fifty-two poets spanning the 16th to the 18th centuries, including John Milton, John Dryden, Alexander Pope, and others who shaped English literature. Johnson's

criticism reflects his belief in literature's moral and instructive purpose, while also providing aesthetic judgments that evaluate poetry based on its adherence to and departures from classical standards.

1. **The Role of Biography in Literary Criticism**

Johnson's *Lives of the Poets* is one of the first significant attempts to connect a writer's personal life with their literary work. Johnson believed that understanding a poet's character, motivations, and personal challenges could deepen one's appreciation for their writing. This biographical approach reflects Johnson's belief in literature as an extension of human experience and morality. He suggests that readers can better understand a poet's themes, styles, and messages by examining their lives and values.

For instance, in his life of John Milton, Johnson reflects on Milton's personal convictions, religious faith, and political activism, which he sees as central to understanding *Paradise Lost*. Milton's depiction of moral struggle, divine justice, and human fallibility, Johnson argues, are rooted in Milton's own life and philosophical beliefs.

2. **Moral Evaluation in Poetry**

Johnson's criticism is not only biographical but also moralistic. He frequently evaluates poets based on the ethical dimensions of their work, reflecting the Neoclassical belief that literature should serve a moral purpose. According to Johnson, great literature should instruct as well as entertain, offering readers insights into human nature and moral truths.

In his assessment of Alexander Pope, for instance, Johnson admires Pope's intellectual depth and technical skill but also critiques Pope's tendency toward satire and personal attack, which Johnson feels detracts from the moral purpose of poetry. By exploring these moral questions, Johnson presents criticism as an ethical endeavor that considers both aesthetic values and the broader social impact of literature.

3. **Aesthetic Standards and Classical Ideals**

While Johnson emphasizes moral purpose, he also holds poets to high aesthetic standards. He frequently refers to classical ideals such as clarity, harmony, and structure as benchmarks for good poetry. Johnson appreciates poets

who can adhere to these classical principles while also bringing something unique to their work, balancing tradition with innovation.

However, Johnson is not rigid in his application of these standards; he respects poets who successfully deviate from conventions when it enhances the artistic value of their work. For example, he praises Dryden for his flexibility in adapting poetic form to match the tone and purpose of each work. Dryden's ability to incorporate new styles while maintaining an overarching sense of harmony and purpose makes him, in Johnson's eyes, one of the finest English poets.

4. **Legacy and Influence of *Lives of the Poets***

Johnson's *Lives of the Poets* became a model for integrating biographical, moral, and aesthetic evaluation in literary criticism. This comprehensive approach, blending personal history with technical and ethical analysis, influenced later critics to consider literature as an expression of human values as well as artistic skill. Johnson's method encourages a deep engagement with both the text and the author, fostering a fuller understanding of the literary work.

Overview of *Lives of the Poets*

1. **Biographical Insight and Moral Judgment**

Johnson believed that a poet's life directly influenced their work, so *Lives of the Poets* emphasizes biography as a way to understand their writing. His focus on moral integrity and ethical considerations reflects the classical belief that literature should have a purpose beyond entertainment, aspiring to enlighten and guide readers.

For instance, in his discussion of Milton, Johnson addresses Milton's complex personality, moral convictions, and their impact on *Paradise Lost*. Similarly, he evaluates Dryden not only for his technical skill and wit but also for his adaptability and responsiveness to changing political climates. Johnson combines aesthetic appreciation with moral criticism, balancing technical evaluation with personal and ethical reflections.

2. **Artistic Evaluation and Technical Standards**

Johnson's critical insights often assess poetry based on classical ideals like harmony, order, and clarity. However, Johnson does not advocate for strict adherence to classical forms but appreciates innovation, recognizing that poetry's

effectiveness depends on both its beauty and its emotional or intellectual resonance with readers.

For example, he critiques Thomas Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* for its sentimentality, while also acknowledging its linguistic beauty. This balanced approach reflects the New Classical Criticism's focus on structure and style, coupled with an openness to new approaches in poetic expression.

3. **Legacy and Influence of *Lives of the Poets***

Lives of the Poets remains significant because it provided a model for how biographical and critical studies could be integrated. By blending biographical detail with moral and aesthetic judgment, Johnson set a new standard for literary criticism. His work encouraged critics to evaluate literature holistically, balancing formal qualities with considerations of the poet's character and intent.

Analysis of *Preface to Shakespeare*: The Art of Balanced Critique

Johnson's *Preface to Shakespeare*, published in 1765, is one of the earliest and most influential critiques of Shakespeare's work. Johnson's approach to Shakespeare is both appreciative and critical, recognizing Shakespeare's brilliance while also addressing the limitations he perceives in his work.

1. **Realism in Characterization**

One of Johnson's primary insights is his appreciation for Shakespeare's **realistic portrayal of human nature**. Johnson believes that Shakespeare's characters resonate with audiences because they embody universal human qualities, making them relatable and memorable. Unlike the idealized heroes of classical drama, Shakespeare's characters are complex and flawed, reflecting the diversity and contradictions of human nature.

Johnson praises this realism, arguing that Shakespeare's ability to create characters who feel authentically human is one of his greatest strengths. Characters like Hamlet, Macbeth, and Othello display psychological depth and moral

ambiguity, allowing audiences to see themselves in these figures. This perspective marks a departure from the classical preference for idealized characters, showing Johnson's openness to innovation and complexity in literature.

2. **Critique of Language and Style**

While Johnson admires Shakespeare's talent, he critiques certain aspects of his style, particularly his language. Johnson feels that Shakespeare's language can be overly elaborate and filled with puns, metaphors, and complex constructions that can obscure meaning rather than clarify it.

This criticism reflects Johnson's Neoclassical preference for clarity and restraint in language. He believes that literary language should enhance the reader's understanding and emotional engagement, not distract from it. However, Johnson acknowledges that Shakespeare's inventive use of language contributes to the energy and emotional depth of his plays, suggesting that Shakespeare's style, while flawed, ultimately serves his larger artistic vision.

3. **The Unities and Structural Innovation**

Johnson addresses Shakespeare's frequent disregard for the **classical unities** of time, place, and action. According to the Neoclassical tradition, these unities were essential for maintaining coherence and focus within a play. Shakespeare, however, often shifts locations, time periods, and introduces subplots, creating complex narratives that deviate from the classical structure.

Johnson defends Shakespeare's decision to forgo the unities, arguing that strict adherence to them can limit the dramatic potential of a play. By allowing more flexibility, Shakespeare creates richer plots and characters, which Johnson believes compensate for any lack of structural coherence. This defense of Shakespeare's innovation demonstrates Johnson's understanding that true artistry sometimes requires breaking traditional rules to achieve greater emotional and intellectual depth.

4. **Moral Purpose and Ethical Complexity**

Johnson believes that literature should ultimately serve a moral purpose, and he finds this purpose in Shakespeare's portrayal of the consequences of human actions. Although

Shakespeare’s plays often feature morally ambiguous characters, Johnson argues that they still reflect an underlying moral vision. Shakespeare shows the dangers of unchecked ambition, jealousy, and betrayal, revealing the moral consequences of these flaws.

Johnson’s view aligns with the Neoclassical ideal that literature should not only reflect life but also elevate it, guiding readers toward ethical reflection. He respects Shakespeare’s ability to entertain while also engaging with moral questions, seeing this balance as essential to good literature.

5. **Legacy of *Preface to Shakespeare***

Johnson’s *Preface to Shakespeare* is a foundational work in Shakespearean criticism and literary analysis more broadly. Johnson’s balanced approach, which combines admiration with critical insight, set a precedent for later critics, encouraging them to approach literature with both appreciation and rigor. His recognition of Shakespeare’s innovation and moral depth helped establish Shakespeare’s reputation as one of the greatest writers in the English language.

Overview of *Preface to Shakespeare*

Johnson's *Preface to Shakespeare* (1765) is an insightful critique that set the foundation for the modern appreciation of Shakespeare's genius. Johnson praises Shakespeare for his realistic portrayal of human nature while also acknowledging his flaws in style and structure.

1. **Realism and Universality in Characterization**

One of Johnson's most significant contributions to Shakespearean criticism is his emphasis on Shakespeare's **realistic depiction of human nature**. Johnson argues that Shakespeare's characters are memorable because they embody universal traits, making them relatable to audiences across different times and places. This realism, according to Johnson, is central to Shakespeare's appeal and enduring influence.

In contrast to the exaggerated heroes of classical literature, Shakespeare's characters possess both virtues and flaws, making them deeply human. For instance, Hamlet's introspection, Macbeth's ambition, and Othello's jealousy

are portrayed with psychological depth, allowing audiences to see themselves in these characters.

2. **Shakespeare's Language and Style**

Although Johnson admires Shakespeare's natural dialogue and emotional depth, he also critiques his **language and style**. Johnson feels that Shakespeare's language can sometimes be overly elaborate, full of puns, and unnecessarily obscure, which can distract from the plot and character development.

Johnson's critique reflects his Neoclassical preference for clarity, structure, and restraint in literary style. He believes that effective literature should balance beauty with clarity and should avoid stylistic excess that detracts from its overall impact.

3. **Violations of Classical Unities**

Johnson addresses Shakespeare's frequent disregard for the classical unities of time, place, and action. According to the Neoclassical tradition, these unities ensure coherence and focus within a play. However, Shakespeare often disregards these rules, shifting time, place, and multiple plot lines in a single work.

Johnson defends Shakespeare's departure from these unities, arguing that strict adherence to them may limit the dramatic potential of a play. Shakespeare's innovation allows for richer plots and more complex character development, which compensates for any structural inconsistencies. Johnson's defense of Shakespeare's versatility demonstrates his belief that the true value of literature lies in its capacity to evoke a genuine emotional response.

4. **Moral Purpose of Shakespeare's Works**

Johnson believes that literature should serve a moral purpose, and he praises Shakespeare for his ability to blend instruction with pleasure. Although Shakespeare's characters often display moral ambiguity, Johnson argues that his plays ultimately reinforce a moral vision, showing the consequences of vice and the rewards of virtue. This perspective aligns with the Neoclassical ideal that literature should guide and improve society

Johnson’s Impact on New Classical Criticism

Samuel Johnson’s works exemplify the principles of New Classical Criticism, which combines respect for classical standards with an appreciation for individuality and moral depth. In both *Lives of the Poets* and *Preface to Shakespeare*, Johnson demonstrates that effective criticism must consider a writer’s life, ethical values, and aesthetic qualities. His works encourage readers to approach literature as both an artistic and ethical endeavor, recognizing that great literature speaks to universal human experiences and contributes to moral reflection.

Johnson’s emphasis on biography, ethical analysis, and structural appreciation reflects a holistic approach to criticism that continues to influence modern literary studies. By advocating for a balanced critique that respects both tradition and innovation, Johnson’s criticism remains a foundational guide for understanding literature’s role in shaping culture and human values.

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Legacy of Johnson's Criticism

Lives of the Poets and *Preface to Shakespeare* have had a lasting influence on the field of literary criticism, demonstrating Johnson's commitment to balance between tradition and innovation. His works illustrate the ideals of New Classical Criticism by respecting classical forms while recognizing individual genius. Johnson's insistence on a moral dimension in literature has influenced generations of critics, and his respect for both structure and creativity continues to be relevant in modern literary studies.

Johnson's works encourage readers to approach literature with both intellectual and moral considerations, and his critiques of structure, language, and character serve as timeless guides for understanding both poetry and drama.

➔ ***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. 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.

➔ ***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 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 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.

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

In the late 18th century, the rise of Romanticism marked a dramatic departure from the Enlightenment ideals of reason, order, and formality that dominated European thought. Romanticism celebrated emotion, individual experience, and a profound connection with nature, challenging the prevailing Neoclassical emphasis on intellect and restraint. One of the earliest and most influential works of Romantic literature was *Lyrical Ballads*, a collection of poems by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, first published in 1798.

Lyrical Ballads was revolutionary not only for its content but for the way it redefined poetry's role and purpose. Wordsworth's preface to the second edition (1800) served as a manifesto for Romantic Criticism, outlining a new approach to poetry that emphasized genuine emotion, the beauty of ordinary life, and a return to nature as a source of inspiration and spiritual guidance. Wordsworth argued that poetry should be accessible, sincere, and free from the constraints of rigid formalism, advocating for a more personal and intuitive form of expression.

Romantic Criticism, as exemplified by *Lyrical Ballads*, emphasizes individuality, emotion, and a close connection to nature and human experience. Wordsworth's preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (1800) elaborates on these ideals, outlining his vision for a new kind of poetry that would be more accessible, sincere, and grounded in everyday life.

In Romantic Criticism, there is a focus on subjective experience, a deep appreciation for nature, and a respect for ordinary life and language. Wordsworth, as one of the movement's central figures, advocated for poetry that reflected authentic human emotions and used language that could be understood by all. His ideas challenged the formal, refined, and often artificial language of earlier poetry, proposing a new aesthetic centered around simplicity, emotional depth, and an intimate portrayal of nature.

This chapter examines *Lyrical Ballads* as a foundational text in Romantic Criticism, analyzing Wordsworth's views on emotion, language, nature, and imagination, and exploring how these elements manifest in specific poems within the collection.

Key Themes in *Lyrical Ballads*

1. **Poetry as the "Spontaneous Overflow of Powerful Feelings"**

One of Wordsworth's most enduring contributions to Romantic Criticism is his assertion that poetry is the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings." For Wordsworth, poetry should be a natural and unfiltered expression of the poet's deepest emotions, emerging from a genuine connection to their experiences and reflections. This idea stood in stark contrast to the Neoclassical view of poetry as a crafted, intellectual pursuit governed by formal rules.

Wordsworth's concept of emotional spontaneity reflects a broader Romantic belief that art should express inner truth rather than conform to social expectations or stylistic conventions. His poem *Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey* exemplifies this philosophy. In the poem, Wordsworth meditates on the profound emotional impact of revisiting a beloved landscape, expressing how nature has shaped his moral and spiritual outlook. This personal reflection reveals how nature and memory combine to

inspire a deep emotional response, a hallmark of Romantic poetry.

2. **Focus on Ordinary Life and Common Language**

A radical aspect of Wordsworth's poetic vision was his commitment to using plain language and depicting the lives of everyday people. In the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, he argued that poetry should reflect the language of common people, avoiding the lofty and artificial diction that often characterized earlier poetry. He believed that authentic language would bring poetry closer to the lives of ordinary readers, allowing it to be more relatable and sincere.

Wordsworth's choice to portray rural life and common experiences aligned with his belief that the simplicity of rural people brought them closer to nature and truth. This theme is evident in poems like *The Idiot Boy*, where Wordsworth tells the story of a simple, rural boy and his mother, conveying their emotional depth without romanticizing or idealizing their circumstances. Similarly, *We Are Seven* presents a young girl's perspective on life and death, using straightforward language to explore complex themes of innocence and loss.

3. **Nature as a Source of Inspiration and Spiritual Renewal**

Nature plays a central role in *Lyrical Ballads*, not only as a subject of poetry but as a profound source of emotional and spiritual insight. For Wordsworth, nature was more than a scenic backdrop; it was a living presence capable of healing, guiding, and nurturing the human soul. This reverence for nature reflects a key tenet of Romanticism: the belief that communion with nature can reveal deeper truths and provide solace from the artificiality and pressures of society.

In *Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey*, Wordsworth expresses gratitude for the comfort that nature has provided him throughout his life, describing it as a source of "tranquil restoration." He speaks of the "still, sad music of humanity" and the peace that nature imparts, emphasizing how it elevates his spirit and reconnects him with his best self. This poem, like many others in *Lyrical Ballads*, conveys a sense of nature’s moral and spiritual authority, contrasting sharply with the Enlightenment’s focus on scientific analysis and control over the natural world.

4. **Imagination and the Power of Memory**

Wordsworth believed that imagination and memory were powerful tools for understanding and transforming experience. Unlike rational thought, which he felt limited human understanding, imagination could illuminate hidden connections and reveal new perspectives. Memory, meanwhile, allowed individuals to revisit significant moments, finding new layers of meaning in past experiences.

In *Tintern Abbey*, Wordsworth reflects on his earlier encounters with nature, noting how his memories of those experiences continue to influence him. He describes how the “beauteous forms” of nature are imprinted on his mind, providing him with strength and insight even in times of distance or adversity. This theme of memory and imagination as sources of insight is central to Romantic thought, which values subjective experience as a way to transcend ordinary understanding and connect with universal truths.

5. **Emphasis on Personal and Emotional Truth**

Wordsworth’s poetry champions the idea of personal truth as a source of universal insight. His approach to poetry emphasizes individual experience and subjective perception

as ways to connect with broader human truths. Wordsworth argues that a poet's true subject is their own mind, their thoughts, and feelings as they interact with the world around them. This focus on personal experience is evident in Wordsworth's intense, introspective poems, where he shares his reflections on nature, memory, and human relationships.

For example, in *Michael*, Wordsworth tells the tragic story of a shepherd and his son, capturing the raw, painful emotions of rural life. The poem's simplicity and emotional depth invite readers to empathize with the characters, highlighting the Romantic belief in the emotional and moral significance of ordinary human experiences.

The Influence and Cultural Significance of *Lyrical Ballads*

Lyrical Ballads is not only significant for its themes but for the cultural shift it represents. Wordsworth and Coleridge's emphasis on emotion, nature, and simplicity challenged established literary norms, promoting a new vision of poetry that valued personal expression and sincerity over formality

and decorum. This shift laid the foundation for Romantic Criticism, which embraces the idea that art should reflect the subjective experiences and emotions of the individual.

Wordsworth's preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* further articulated his critique of Neoclassical values, positioning Romantic poetry as a counterpoint to the rationalism, order, and restraint that characterized Enlightenment thought. By advocating for poetry that is emotionally sincere and socially relevant, Wordsworth inspired a generation of writers to explore their own unique perspectives, emotions, and connections to nature.

The impact of *Lyrical Ballads* extended beyond literature, influencing the broader Romantic movement and shaping cultural attitudes toward individuality, emotional expression, and the natural world. Its legacy can be seen in the works of later Romantic poets such as Percy Bysshe Shelley, John Keats, and Lord Byron, who continued to explore themes of personal freedom, emotional depth, and the sublime power of nature.

Literary and Cultural Significance of *Lyrical Ballads*

Lyrical Ballads not only marked the beginning of the Romantic era in English literature but also redefined poetry's role and purpose. Wordsworth's emphasis on natural language, authentic emotion, and reverence for the natural world challenged the conventions of his time and inspired future generations of poets to embrace individuality and emotional expression.

The ideas presented in *Lyrical Ballads* set the foundation for Romantic Criticism, which values the subjective experience and emotional truth over rigid structure and rationalism. Wordsworth's poetic principles encouraged a more personal, introspective approach to literature, one that valued the individual's connection to nature, memory, and inner life. This shift had a lasting impact, influencing writers, critics, and readers who sought literature that spoke to the heart and soul rather than to intellectual or social expectations.

➔ ***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.

➔*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.*

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.”

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.

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 poet, critic, philosopher, and one of the leading figures of the Romantic movement in England. His contributions to Romantic thought, particularly his theories on the imagination, have had a lasting impact on literature, philosophy, and criticism. Coleridge's essays on imagination, especially as articulated in his major work *Biographia Literaria* (1817), delve into the creative process and explore the mind's role in shaping reality through artistic expression.

Coleridge's views on imagination were foundational to Romantic Criticism, as they emphasized the power of the mind to create, transform, and elevate human experience. For Coleridge, imagination was not merely a tool for creating fiction but a fundamental aspect of human consciousness that bridges the gap between the internal world of thoughts and the external world of nature. Coleridge distinguished between two types of imagination—*primary* and *secondary*—each serving a unique purpose in the creative process. His understanding of imagination provided the Romantics with a philosophical framework that celebrated creativity,

individuality, and emotional depth, all of which were central to the Romantic movement.

Key Concepts of Coleridge’s Theory of Imagination

1. Primary Imagination: The Foundation of Perception

Coleridge defines the *primary imagination* as the "living power and prime agent of all human perception." It is a spontaneous and unconscious faculty that allows individuals to perceive and make sense of the world around them. This form of imagination, according to Coleridge, is universal, shared by all human beings as a way to connect with reality and make sense of sensory experiences.

Primary imagination is involuntary and fundamental to human consciousness; it operates automatically, enabling individuals to experience unity in their perception of the world. Coleridge believed this faculty reflected divine creation, as it is through the primary imagination that people perceive the world in an organized, coherent way. For Coleridge, primary imagination is almost a divine force, as it mirrors the creative act of God in shaping the universe.

2. **Secondary Imagination: The Creative Force of Art and Poetry**

Coleridge's *secondary imagination* is distinct from the primary imagination but builds upon it. This secondary imagination is a conscious and active faculty that allows poets and artists to transform their perceptions into something new and creative. Unlike the primary imagination, which is universal and spontaneous, the secondary imagination requires intentional effort, as it involves a "dissolution" and "recreation" of sensory impressions and ideas to create art.

The secondary imagination allows the artist to break down reality, reinterpret it, and reassemble it into a work of art. This imaginative process, according to Coleridge, is marked by an intense interaction between the individual and the world, where the poet draws on personal emotions and experiences to shape something unique. This creative act allows poets to reach new levels of meaning and insight, elevating them beyond mere imitation to genuine artistic expression.

3. **Fancy: The Power of Association**

Coleridge also differentiates imagination from *fancy*, a lesser faculty that is limited to rearranging existing images and concepts without creating new meaning. While fancy relies on the superficial association of ideas, imagination involves a deeper, more transformative engagement with the material. Fancy is a mechanical process, while imagination is organic and dynamic.

Fancy, therefore, is more passive, rearranging fragments of memories or experiences without unifying them into something profound. For Coleridge, fancy is more decorative than meaningful, and he views it as a lower form of creativity. In distinguishing imagination from fancy, Coleridge elevates the role of true imagination as the essential force in creating art that resonates deeply with the human experience.

4. **The Imagination as a Link Between Man and Nature**

Coleridge's theory of imagination also emphasizes the Romantic belief in the interconnectedness of humanity and nature. Imagination, according to Coleridge, allows individuals to bridge the gap between the self and the world,

between subject and object. Through imagination, humans can perceive nature not as a separate entity but as a living, interactive presence. This connection with nature reflects the Romantic ideal that human experience is deeply intertwined with the natural world, and that through imagination, individuals can achieve a spiritual and emotional union with it.

In this view, imagination is not just an artistic tool but a means of achieving a deeper understanding of existence and fostering empathy with nature and others. Coleridge believed that the imagination allowed individuals to see beyond mere appearances and to access the underlying unity of all things, an idea that became central to Romantic thought.

The Role of Imagination in Coleridge's Own Poetry

Coleridge's theory of imagination is not only a philosophical concept but also a driving force behind his poetic works. His poems, especially those in *Lyrical Ballads* and later works like *Kubla Khan* and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, illustrate his belief in the transformative power of imagination. These works are marked by intense, visionary imagery and a blending of the real and the surreal,

demonstrating how imagination can reshape reality into something transcendent and sublime.

In *Kubla Khan*, for example, Coleridge captures the powerful, dreamlike quality of imagination, where he describes a fantastical, almost mystical landscape that seems to exist both within and beyond the real world. This poem reflects Coleridge's fascination with the secondary imagination as a creative force, where the poet transforms raw material from memory and dreams into an entirely new vision. Similarly, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* uses the secondary imagination to transport readers into a world of mystery and supernatural wonder, illustrating Coleridge's belief in the ability of poetry to transcend ordinary experience.

The Legacy of Coleridge's Theory of Imagination in Romantic Criticism

Coleridge's ideas about imagination had a profound influence on the development of Romantic Criticism. By positioning imagination as a vital, almost spiritual force, Coleridge elevated the role of the artist as a visionary who possesses the power to reveal deeper truths about the world and humanity. His distinction between primary and

secondary imagination offered a framework for understanding creativity as a dynamic and transformative process, not simply an act of imitation.

In the Romantic tradition, imagination became a central theme, celebrated as a way to transcend the limitations of ordinary perception and to connect with universal truths. Coleridge's insights encouraged poets, writers, and critics to value individuality, emotional depth, and a profound engagement with nature, setting the tone for the entire Romantic movement and influencing subsequent generations of writers and thinkers.

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

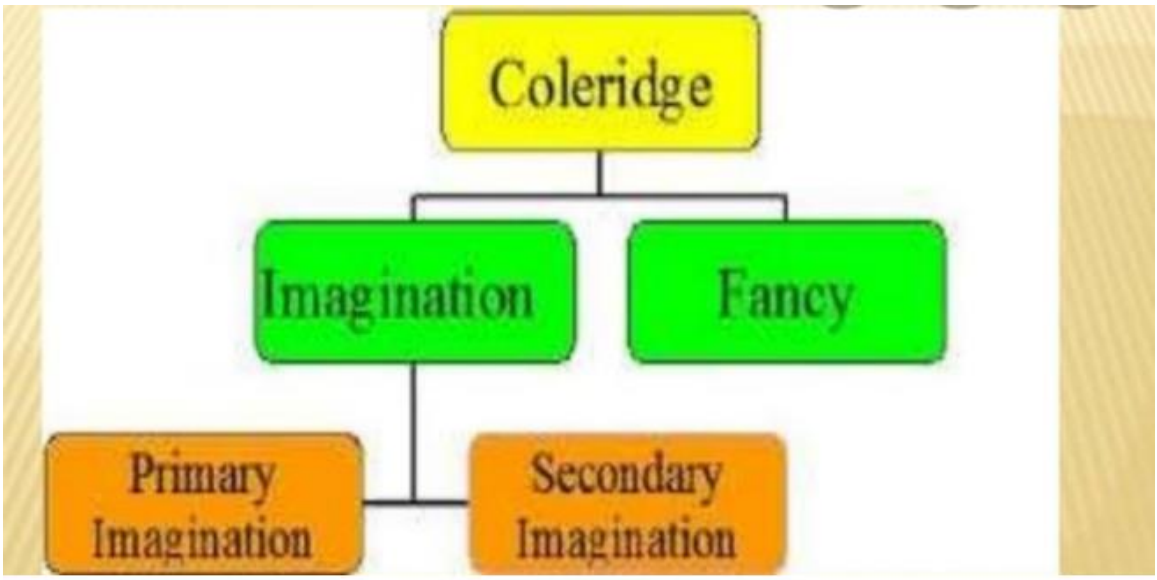
a **willing suspension of disbelief** for the sake of pleasure, which was also the key concern for the Romantics.

➔ ***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."*

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.

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 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 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.

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, leaving the beneficial nature of sciences and history to override its importance. 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.

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.

Along these four ages, we can witness the gradual withdrawal of poetry from the realm of fact first, and then of thought. 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 Aristophanes, Horace, and Juvenal. The poetry of this age is characterized by an exquisite 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.

➔ ***The Four Ages of Poetry Analysis***

THE IRON AGE is a savage age of warriors and superstition, a savage age where poetry is the only kind of intellectual activity. Not that it is eminently refined: it is merely propaganda for the deeds of the savage chieftains.

THE GOLDEN AGE sees the rise of kingdoms, social institutions; it is more settled, and tends to reminisce the deeds of the iron age. It is an age which glories in its ancestors. The truly great poets, like Homer, belong to this age; their poetry is rough, energetic and inclusive. Poetry is still the greatest intellectual achievement: science and philosophy have not been developed yet. But, Peacock observes, "with the progress of reason and civilization, facts become more interesting than fiction: indeed this maturity of poetry may be considered the infancy of history" (492). Moral and cognitive aims begin to prevail over mythology, and soon the sciences are born: it is the end of the golden age.

THE SILVER AGE is the age of civilized life. The Romans, the neoclassical, are the perfect examples of a silver age. Poetry is less original than that of the golden age: it tends to take that poetry as its model, at least as far as serious genres are concerned. Virgil imitates Homer, and the originality of the silver age is restricted to the minor or

comical genres. It is an age of refinement and selection; perfection is more appreciated than variety, and this often results in monotony. Poetry has limited its range, and tends towards the commonplace. History, morals, philosophy, all sciences attain a high development; their findings are too specialized to afford a subject for poetry; poetry ceases to be an instrument of knowledge, it cannot follow the development of these sciences. "Good sense and elegant learning, conveyed in polished and somewhat monotonous verse, are the perfection of the original and imitative poetry of civilized life . . . . It is now evident that poetry must either cease to be cultivated, or strike into a new path" (493).

THE AGE OF BRASS wants to restore the original strength of purity. It wants to become the second childhood of poetry: it tries to revive the golden age and the intimacy with nature, but to no avail. It lacks energy, and instead of the great epics of the golden age, we have a detailed description of thoughts, passions, actions, persons and things, in that loose style of verse, which anyone may write at the rate of two hundred lines in an hour.

➔ ***The Four Ages of Poetry Analysis***

Starting with the **IRON AGE**, Peacock alludes that this age is the reason poetry is even held in high regards in the first

place. 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. 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. 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." Peacock 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*”, consequently isolating themselves from the majority of readers and rendering their poetry an adornment to, rather than an influence on their society.

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 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" .