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**ANNAI WOMEN’S COLLEGE**

**KARUR**

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **S NO** | **UNIT** | **PAGE NO** |
| **1** | **I** | **3-12** |
| **2** | **II** | **13-14** |
| **3** | **III** | **15-20** |
| **4** | **IV** | **21-24** |
| **5** | **V** | **25-28** |

**LITERARY CRITICISM**

**UNIT-1**

[Plato](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plato)'s ***Ion***

In [Plato](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plato)'s *Ion* [Socrates](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socrates) discusses with the titular character, a professional [rhapsode](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rhapsode) who also lectures on [Homer](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homer), the question of whether the rhapsode, a performer of poetry, gives his performance on account of his skill and knowledge or by virtue of divine possession. It is one of the shortest of Plato's dialogues

Ion's skill: Is it genuine? (530a–533c)

Ion has just come from a festival of [Asclepius](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asclepius) at the city of [Epidaurus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epidaurus), after having won first prize in the competition. Socrates engages him in discussion and Ion explains how his knowledge and skill is limited to [Homer](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homer), whom he claims to understand better than anyone alive. Socrates finds this puzzling as to him it seems that Homer treats many of the same subjects as other poets like [Hesiod](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hesiod), subjects such as war or [divination](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Divination), and that if someone is knowledgeable in any one of those he should be able to understand what *both* of these poets say. Furthermore, this man is probably not the poet, like Ion, but a specialist like a doctor, who knows better about nutrition.

**The nature of poetic inspiration (533d–536)**

Socrates deduces from this observation that Ion has no real skill, but is like a soothsayer or prophet in being divinely possessed:

"For not by art do they utter these things, but by divine influence; since, if they had fully learned by art to speak on one kind of theme, they would know how to speak on all. And for this reason God takes away the mind of these men and uses them as his ministers, just as he does soothsayers and godly seers, in order that we who hear them may know that it is not they who utter these words of great price, when they are out of their wits, but that it is God himself who speaks and addresses us through them." (534b–d)

Socrates offers the metaphor of a magnet to explain how the rhapsode transmits the poet's original inspiration from the muse to the audience. He says that the god speaks first to the poet, then gives the rhapsode his skill, and thus, gods communicate to the people. Socrates posits that Ion must be out of his mind when he acts, because he can weep even though he has lost nothing, and recoil in fear when in front of an admiring audience. Ion says that the explanation for this is very simple: it is the promise of payment that inspires his deliberate disconnection from reality. Ion says that when he looks at the audience and sees them weeping, he knows he will laugh because it has made him richer, and that when they laugh, he will be weeping at losing the money (535e).

**Ion's choice: To be skilled or inspired (536e–542)**

Ion tells Socrates that he cannot be convinced that he is possessed or mad when he performs (536d,e). Socrates then recites passages from Homer which concern various arts such as medicine, divining, fishing, and making war. He asks Ion if these skills are distinct from his art of recitation. Ion admits that while Homer discusses many different skills in his poetry, he never refers specifically to the rhapsode's craft, which is acting. Socrates presses him about the exact nature of his skill. Ion maintains that his knowledge makes him a capable military general but states that when he recites passages concerning military matters, he cannot tell whether he does it with a general's skill, or with a rhapsode's. Socrates notices that Ion changes his occupation. He was first a rhapsode and then has become a general. He gently berates the rhapsode for being Protean, which after all, is exactly what a rhapsode is: a man who is convincingly capable of being different people on stage.

Through his character Socrates, Plato argues that “Ion’s talent as an interpreter cannot be an art, a definable body of knowledge or an ordered system of skills,” but instead must come from the divine inspiration of the Muses.[[2]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ion_(dialogue)#cite_note-2)

Plato’s argument is supposed to be an early example of a so-called [genetic fallacy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Genetic_fallacy) since his conclusion arises from his famous lodestone (magnet) analogy. Ion, the [rhapsode](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rhapsode)“dangles like a lodestone at the end of a chain of lodestones. The muse inspires the poet (Homer in Ion’s case) and the poet inspires the rhapsode.”[[3]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ion_(dialogue)#cite_note-Sonkowsky1983p17-3) Plato’s dialogues are themselves “examples of artistry that continue to be stageworthy;” it is a paradox that “Plato the supreme enemy of art is also the supreme artist.”[[3]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ion_(dialogue)#cite_note-Sonkowsky1983p17-3) Plato develops a more elaborate critique of poetry in other dialogues such as in [*Phaedrus*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phaedrus_(dialogue)) 245a, [*Symposium*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symposium_(Plato)) 209a, [*Republic*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Republic_(Plato)) 398a, [*Laws*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laws_(dialogue)) 817 b–d. [[4]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ion_(dialogue)#cite_note-4) However, some researchers perceive it as a critique of unjustified belief rather than a critique of poetry in general

# [THE REPUBLIC](https://www.sparknotes.com/philosophy/republic/)

-Plato

Why do men behave justly?

Is it because they fear societal punishment? Are they trembling before notions of divine retribution? Do the stronger elements of society scare the weak into submission in the name of law? Or do men behave justly because it is good for them to do so? Is justice, regardless of its rewards and punishments, a good thing in and of itself? How do we define justice? Plato sets out to answer these questions in *The Republic*. He wants to define justice, and to define it in such a way as to show that justice is worthwhile in and of itself. He meets these two challenges with a single solution: a definition of justice that appeals to human psychology, rather than to perceived behavior.

Plato’s strategy in *The Republic* is to first explicate the primary notion of societal, or political, justice, and then to derive an analogous concept of individual justice. In Books II, III, and IV, Plato identifies political justice as harmony in a structured political body. An ideal society consists of three main classes of people—producers (craftsmen, farmers, artisans, etc.), auxiliaries (warriors), and guardians (rulers); a society is just when relations between these three classes are right. Each group must perform its appropriate function, and only that function, and each must be in the right position of power in relation to the others. Rulers must rule, auxiliaries must uphold rulers’ convictions, and producers must limit themselves to exercising whatever skills nature granted them (farming, blacksmithing, painting, etc.) Justice is a principle of specialization: a principle that requires that each person fulfill the societal role to which nature fitted him and not interfere in any other business.

At the end of Book IV, Plato tries to show that individual justice mirrors political justice. He claims that the soul of every individual has a three part structure analagous to the three classes of a society. There is a rational part of the soul, which seeks after truth and is responsible for our philosophical inclinations; a spirited part of the soul, which desires honor and is responsible for our feelings of anger and indignation; and an appetitive part of the soul, which lusts after all sorts of things, but money most of all (since money must be used to fulfill any other base desire). The just individual can be defined in analogy with the just society; the three parts of his soul achieve the requisite relationships of power and influence in regard to one another. In a just individual, the rational part of the soul rules, the spirited part of the soul supports this rule, and the appetitive part of the soul submits and follows wherever reason leads. Put more plainly: in a just individual, the entire soul aims at fulfilling the desires of the rational part, much as in the just society the entire community aims at fulfilling whatever the rulers will.

The parallels between the just society and the just individual run deep. Each of the three classes of society, in fact, is dominated by one of the three parts of the soul. Producers are dominated by their appetites—their urges for money, luxury, and pleasure. Warriors are dominated by their spirits, which make them courageous. Rulers are dominated by their rational faculties and strive for wisdom. Books V through VII focus on the rulers as the philosopher kings.

In a series of three analogies—the allegories of the sun, the line, and the cave—Plato explains who these individuals are while hammering out his theory of the Forms. Plato explains that the world is divided into two realms, the visible (which we grasp with our senses) and the intelligible (which we only grasp with our mind). The visible world is the universe we see around us. The intelligible world is comprised of the Forms—abstract, changeless absolutes such as Goodness, Beauty, Redness, and Sweetness that exist in permanent relation to the visible realm and make it possible. (An apple is red and sweet, the theory goes, because it participates in the Forms of Redness and Sweetness.) Only the Forms are objects of knowledge, because only they possess the eternal unchanging truth that the mind—not the senses—must apprehend.

Only those whose minds are trained to grasp the Forms—the philosophers—can know anything at all. In particular, what the philosophers must know in order to become able rulers is the Form of the Good—the source of all other Forms, and of knowledge, truth, and beauty. Plato cannot describe this Form directly, but he claims that it is to the intelligible realm what the sun is to the visible realm. Using the allegory of the cave, Plato paints an evocative portrait of the philosopher’s soul moving through various stages of cognition (represented by the line) through the visible realm into the intelligible, and finally grasping the Form of the Good. The aim of education is not to put knowledge into the soul, but to put the right desires into the soul—to fill the soul with a lust for truth, so that it desires to move past the visible world, into the intelligible, ultimately to the Form of the Good.

Philosophers form the only class of men to possess knowledge and are also the most just men. Their souls, more than others, aim to fulfil the desires of the rational part. After comparing the philosopher king to the most unjust type of man—represented by the tyrant, who is ruled entirely by his non-rational appetites—Plato claims that justice is worthwhile for its own sake. In Book IX he presents three arguments for the conclusion that it is desirable to be just. By sketching a psychological portrait of the tyrant, he attempts to prove that injustice tortures a man’s psyche, whereas a just soul is a healthy, happy one, untroubled and calm. Next he argues that, though each of the three main character types—money-loving, honor-loving, and truth-loving—have their own conceptions of pleasure and of the corresponding good life—each choosing his own life as the most pleasant—only the philosopher can judge because only he has experienced all three types of pleasure. The others should accept the philosopher’s judgement and conclude that the pleasures associated with the philosophical are most pleasant and thus that the just life is also most pleasant. He tries to demonstrate that only philosophical pleasure is really pleasure at all; all other pleasure is nothing more than cessation of pain.

One might notice that none of these arguments actually prove that justice is desirable apart from its consequences—instead, they establish that justice is always accompanied by true pleasure. In all probability, none of these is actually supposed to serve as the main reason why justice is desirable. Instead, the desirability of justice is likely connected to the intimate relationship between the just life and the Forms. The just life is good in and of itself because it involves grasping these ultimate goods, and imitating their order and harmony, thus incorporating them into one’s own life. Justice is good, in other words, because it is connected to the greatest good, the Form of the Good.

Plato ends *The Republic* on a surprising note. Having defined justice and established it as the greatest good, he banishes poets from his city. Poets, he claims, appeal to the basest part of the soul by imitating unjust inclinations. By encouraging us to indulge ignoble emotions in sympathy with the characters we hear about, poetry encourages us to indulge these emotions in life. Poetry, in sum, makes us unjust. In closing, Plato relates the myth of Er, which describes the trajectory of a soul after death. Just souls are rewarded for one thousand years, while unjust ones are punished for the same amount of time. Each soul then must choose its next life.

**ON POETICS**

**ARISTOTLE**

Aristotle proposes to discuss poetry, which he defines as a means of*mimesis,* or imitation, by means of language, rhythm, and harmony. As creatures who thrive on imitation, we are naturally drawn to poetry.

In particular, Aristotle focuses his discussion on tragedy, which uses dramatic, rather than narrative, form, and deals with agents who are better than us ourselves. Tragedy serves to arouse the emotions of pity and fear and to effect a *katharsis* (catharsis) of these emotions. Aristotle divides tragedy into six different parts, ranking them in order from most important to least important as follows: (1) *mythos*, or plot,

(2) character,

(3) thought,

(4) diction,

(5) melody, and

(6) spectacle.

The first essential to creating a good tragedy is that it should maintain unity of plot. This means that the plot must move from beginning to end according to a tightly organized sequence of necessary or probable events. The beginning should not necessarily follow from any earlier events, and the end should tie up all loose ends and not produce any necessary consequences. The plot can also be enhanced by an intelligent use of *peripeteia*, or reversal, and *anagnorisis*, or recognition. These elements work best when they are made an integral part of the plot.

A plot should consist of a hero going from happiness to misery. The hero should be portrayed consistently and in a good light, though the poet should also remain true to what we know of the character. The misery should be the result of some *hamartia*, or error, on the part of the hero. A tragic plot must always involve some sort of tragic deed, which can be done or left undone, and this deed can be approached either with full knowledge or in ignorance.

Aristotle discusses thought and diction and then moves on to address epic poetry. Epic poetry is similar to tragedy in many ways, though it is generally longer, more fantastic, and deals with a greater scope of action. After addressing some problems of criticism, Aristotle argues that tragedy is superior to epic poetry.

**THE ART OF POETRY**

[*Epistles*](https://www.enotes.com/topics/epistles?en_action=content_body_click&en_label=%2Ftopics%2Fart-poetry-horace&en_category=internal_campaign) (c. 20-15 b.c.e.) are written in the same meter, and with much the same style, as his Satires. In form, they are poetic letters intended for a recipient who is named in the first few lines; in actuality, they are general commentaries about human weaknesses or other issues of concern to the author himself.

The Art of Poetry is a reiteration of many of the same arguments found in Epistles 2.1, written at the request of Augustus. In that work, Horace discussed his views about the proper role of literature and the place of Roman poetry within the ancient literary tradition. In The Art of Poetry itself, Horace expands upon these and couples them with specific suggestions for the authors of his day.

Horace begins by praising consistency as the highest virtue of poetry. A work that attempts to be now one thing, now another, is eventually, according to Horace, being nothing at all. For this reason, authors must maintain the same tone throughout a work, not attempt to improve an inferior effort with a “purple patch” (purpureus . . . pannus, lines 15-16) of fine words every now and then. Moreover, authors should not attempt subjects that are beyond their powers. If they do, the result will make them look ridiculous.

Each incident and word in a poem should be chosen with care. Precise selection of what is needed, rather than a torrent of words, creates the most polished result. The meter, too, should be chosen with care: Dactylic hexameter, the meter of Homer (and, coincidentally, of The Art of Poetry), is appropriate for epic; elegiac couplets are appropriate for sad subjects and songs of thanksgiving; iambic verse lends itself to satire; lyric meters are suitable for victory odes and drinking songs. These meters had all become traditional by Horace’s day, and the poet warns his readers that audiences expect them: A serious thought may unintentionally be made to seem comic if presented in an improper poetic form.

In dramatic poetry, language assigned to a character must both suit the traditional depiction of that character and be consistent within the work itself. In epic poetry, it is best not to prolong the story by starting at the very beginning but to thrust the reader right “into the middle of things” (in medias res, line 148). Brevity, as well as an ability to convey both wisdom and pleasure, are essential to the skilled poet.

The reader should not, however, find fault with a poet who occasionally fails to fulfill these high standards since, in the phrase of Horace, “even great Homer sometimes nods” (line 359). Still, the public will not long endure a second-rate poet, and it is the author’s goal to see that such passages are rare. This lapse tends to occur, Horace suggests, when poets distribute their work without sufficient editing. Thus, instead of publishing a work immediately, the poet should set it aside for a time—at line 388, Horace recommends, with satirical exaggeration, that it be set aside for nine years—to see if it still seems as inspired later.

The advice that Horace provides in The Art of Poetry is thus a combination of common sense, practical observations drawn from a lifetime of writing, and views inherited from earlier literary critics such as Aristotle, Neoptolemus of Parion, and Philodemus. Probably the last work that Horace wrote, The Art of Poetry has played an important role in defining both the classical style and the canons of good writing developed in later periods.

**On The Sublime**

**Longinus.**

On the Sublime by Longinus is a work of literary criticism thought to date back to 1st century Rome. While the author is not definitively known, Longinus or Pseudo-Longinus is typically credited for the work. On the Sublime centers on aesthetics and the benefits of strong writing. Longinus does this by analyzing both strong and weak writing from works written over the previous thousand years. The goal, according to Longinus, is to achieve the sublime. In philosophy, the sublime is a quality of greatness. It can be physical, intellectual, moral, aesthetic, spiritual, artistic, or metaphysical. Another quality of of the sublime is that it

can’t be calculated, imitated, or measured.

On the Sublime is written in epistolary form. An epistolary work is usually written through letters, journal entries, or a combination of the two. There is a missing part to this treatise—the final part—which reportedly handles the topic of public speaking. Longinus dedicated the work to one Posthumius Terentianus, a public figure in Ancient Rome known for being cultured. On the Sublime includes works by roughly fifty authors including Homer, the famed blind poet of Ancient Greek culture. Longinus also mentions Genesis, a book in Hebrew Bible. Because of this, many have assumed that Longinus was either knowledgeable about Jewish culture, or possbly even a Hellenized (Greek) Jew.

One of Longinus’ assertions is that in order for one’s writing to reach the sublime, the writer must possess and exhibit what he refers to as “moral excellence.” Theories abound that Longinus avoided publishing his writings in order to preserve his modesty and therefore moral excellence. This might be another reason why the authorship of On the Sublime is uncertain. Another main point that Longinus makes is that a writer who transgresses social mores may not necessarily be a fool or shameless. For Longinus, social subjectivity is also important. He writes that in order to support spirit and hope, freedom is necessary. That said, too much freedom can lead to a decline in eloquence, which according to Longinus, which can hamper one’s ability to write in the sublime.

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

In addition, Longinus admires genius in writing. He mentions specific writers in addition to Homer, including Sappho, Plato, and Aristophanes. Longinus talks about these writers’ ability to create the sublime by causing readers to feel pleasure. Other writers on his list are Apollonius of Rhodes and Theocritus for their sophisticated poetry; however, Longinus says they fail to measure up to classic writers like Homer because they lack the bravery. Bravery is necessary to take risks, and taking risks is necessary to reach the sublime. After making his points about the sublime, Longinus laments the decline of the oratory arts. The reason for this is two-fold: it comes from the absence of freedom as well as moral corruption. These two phenomena, Longinus reminds readers, damages the high spirit which creates the sublime.

It’s important to note that the use of the English word “sublime” and all its philosophical associations that accompany arise from multiple translations, but the word truly means “the essentials of a noble and impressive style.” Longinus’ own writing is rarely described as perfect or even sublime in part because of his overzealous enthusiasm. This leads to an overuse of hyperbole, or overstatement, on his part. Longinus is also criticized for writing tediously in On the Sublime.

By the 10th century, On the Sublime was copied into a medieval manuscript where it was incorrectly attributed to Dionysius or Longinus, which was misread or mistranslated as Dionysius Longinus, and therefore confused with Dionysius of Halicarnassus, who also lived during the first century. The work was also attributed to Cassius Longinus, but as he lived from 213-273 C.E., he cannot be the same Longinus who wrote On the Sublime. Three hundred years later, references were made by a Byzantine rhetorician to text that might be On the Sublime. In the 16th century, the treatise was published by Francis Robortello in Basel, and six years later by Niccolò da Falgano. In the 1600s, the concept of reaching the sublime becomes a major goal of Baroque literature, and the treatise is rediscovered. Since then, On the Sublime has received more attention with each passing century.

***UNIT - II***

***An Apology for Poetry*** (or, ***The Defence of Poesy***)

-- Sidney

***An Apology for Poetry*** (or, ***The Defence of Poesy***) is a work of literary criticism by [Elizabethan poet](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elizabethan_poetry) [Philip Sidney](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philip_Sidney). It was written in approximately 1580, and first published in , 1595, after his death.

It is generally believed that he was at least partly motivated by [Stephen Gosson](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stephen_Gosson), a former playwright who dedicated his attack on the English stage, *The School of Abuse*, to Sidney in 1579, but Sidney primarily addresses more general objections to poetry, such as those of Plato. In his essay, Sidney integrates a number of classical and Italian precepts on [fiction](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fiction). The essence of his defense is that poetry, by combining the liveliness of [history](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History) with the [ethical](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethics) focus of [philosophy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philosophy), is more effective than either history or philosophy in rousing its readers to virtue. The work also offers important comments on [Edmund Spenser](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edmund_Spenser) and the [Elizabethan stage](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English_Renaissance_theatre).

*An Apology for Poetry* is one of the most important contributions to literary theory written in English during the Renaissance. Sidney advocates a place for poetry within the framework of an aristocratic state, while showing concern for both literary and national identity. Sidney responds in *Apology* to an emerging antipathy to poetry as expressed in Stephen Gosson's *The Schoole of Abuse*. Gosson offers what is in essence an attack on imaginative literature (Griffiths 5). What is at stake in Sidney's argument is a defense of poetry's nobility. The significance of the nobility of poetry is its power to move readers to virtuous action. True poets must teach and delight – a view that dates back to [Horace](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Horace).

In an era of antipathy to poetry and puritanical belief in the corruption engendered by literature, Sidney's defense was a significant contribution to the [genre](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Genre) of literary criticism. It was England's first philosophical defense in which he describes poetry's ancient and indispensable place in society, its [mimetic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mimesis) nature, and its [ethical](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethical) function. Among Sidney's gifts to his contemporaries were his respect for tradition and willingness to experiment. An example of the latter is his approach to [Plato](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plato). He reconfigures Plato's argument against poets by saying poets are "the least liar." Poets never claim to know the truth, nor “make circles around your imagination,” nor rely on authority. As an expression of a cultural attitude descending from Aristotle, Sidney, when stating that the poet "never affirmeth," makes the claim that all statements in literature are hypothetical or pseudo-statements. Sidney, as a traditionalist, however, gives attention to [drama](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Drama) in contradistinction to poetry. Drama, writes Sidney, is “observing neither rules of honest [civility](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civility) nor of skillful poetry” and thus cannot do justice to this genre.

In Sidney's day [anti-theatricality](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anti-theatricality), an aesthetic and ideological concern, flourished among Sidney's circle at court. [Theatre](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theatre) became a contentious issue in part because of the culmination of a growing contempt for the values of the emergent consumer culture. An expanding money economy encouraged [social mobility](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_mobility). Europe, at this time, had its first encounter with inflation. London's theatres at that time grew in popularity so much that by 1605, despite the introduction of charges, London commercial theatres could accommodate up to eight thousand men and women. Sidney had his own views on drama. In *Apology*, he shows opposition to the current of his day that pays little attention to unity of place in drama, but more specifically, his concern is with the "manner" that the "matter" is conveyed. He explains that tragedy is not bound to history or the narrative but to "laws of poesy," having "liberty, either to feign a quite new matter, or to frame the history to the most tragical conveniency."

Sidney employs a number of strategies to assert the proper place of poetry. For instance, he argues against the way in which poetry was misaligned with youth, the effeminate and the timorous. He does so by introducing the idea that “poetry is the companion of camps” and by invoking the heroes of ages past. Sidney's reverence for the poet as soldier is significant because he himself was a soldier at one time. Poetry, in *Apology*, becomes an art that requires the noble stirring of courage.

Sidney writes *An Apology for Poetry* in the form of a judicial [oration](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oration) for the defense, and thus it is like a trial in structure. Crucial to his defense is the descriptive [discourse](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Discourse) and the idea that poetry creates a separate reality. Sidney employs forensic rhetoric as a tool to make the [argument](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Argument) that poetry not only conveys a separate reality, but that it has a long and venerable history, and it does not lie. It is defensible in its own right as a means to move readers to virtuous action.

# *UNIT - III*

# *Essay of Dramatick Poesie*

***Essay of Dramatic Poesie*** is a work by [John Dryden](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Dryden), England's first [Poet Laureate](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poet_Laureate_of_the_United_Kingdom), in which Dryden attempts to justify drama as a legitimate form of "poetry" comparable to the epic, as well as defend English drama against that of the ancients and the French. The Essay was probably written during the [plague](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bubonic_plague) year of 1666, and first published in 1668. In presenting his argument, Dryden takes up the subject that [Philip Sidney](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philip_Sidney) had set forth in his [*Defence of Poesie*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Defence_of_Poesie) in 1580.

The treatise is a [dialogue](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dialogue) between four speakers: Eugenius, Crites, Lisideius, and Neander. The four speakers represented, respectively Charles Sackville ( Lord Buchhurst and later sixth Earl of Dorset), [Sir Robert Howard](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Howard_(playwright)) [playwright and Dryden's brother-in-law], Sir Charles Sedley ( Edward Malone identified him as Lisideius) and [Dryden](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dryden) himself (*neander*means "new man" and implies that Dryden, as a respected member of the gentry class, is entitled to join in this dialogue on an equal footing with the three older men who are his social superiors). On the day that the English fleet encounters the Dutch at sea near the mouth of the Thames, the four friends take a barge downriver towards the noise from the battle. Rightly concluding, as the noise subsides, that the English have triumphed, they order the bargeman to row them back upriver as they begin a dialogue on the advances made by modern civilization. They agree to measure progress by comparing ancient arts with modern, focusing specifically on the art of drama (or "dramatic poesy"). The four men debate a series of three topics: (1) the relative merit of classical drama (upheld by Crites) vs. modern drama (championed by Eugenius); (2) whether French drama, as Lisideius maintains, is better than English drama (supported by Neander, who famously calls [Shakespeare](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shakespeare) "the greatest soul, ancient or modern"); and (3) whether plays in rhyme are an improvement upon blank verse drama—a proposition that Neander, despite having defended the Elizabethans, now advances against the skeptical Crites (who also switches from his original position and defends the blank verse tradition of Elizabethan drama). Invoking the so-called unities from [Aristotle's](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aristotle%27s) *Poetics* (as interpreted by Italian and refined by French scholars over the last century), the four speakers discuss what makes a play "a just and lively imitation" of human nature in action. This definition of a play, supplied by Lisideius/Orrery (whose rhymed plays had dazzled the court and were a model for the new drama), gives the debaters a versatile and richly ambiguous touchstone. To Crites' argument that the plots of classical drama are more "just," Eugenius can retort that modern plots are more "lively" thanks to their variety. Lisideius shows that the French plots carefully preserve Aristotle's unities of action, place, and time; Neander replies that English dramatists like [Ben Jonson](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ben_Jonson) also kept the unities when they wanted to, but that they preferred to develop character and motive. Even Neander's final argument with Crites over whether rhyme is suitable in drama depends on Aristotle's *Poetics*: Neander says that Aristotle demands a verbally artful ("lively") imitation of nature, while Crites thinks that dramatic imitation ceases to be "just" when it departs from ordinary speech—i.e. prose or blank verse. A year later, the two brothers-in-law quarreled publicly over this third topic. See Dryden's "Defense of An Essay of Dramatic Poesy" (1669), where Dryden tries to persuade the rather literal-minded Howard that audiences expect a play to be an *imitation* of nature, not a surrogate for nature itself.

**PREFACE TO SHAKESPEARE**

[Samuel Johnson](https://www.enotes.com/topics/samuel-johnson?en_action=content_body_click&en_label=%2Ftopics%2Fpreface-shakespeare-samuel-johnson&en_category=internal_campaign)’s preface to The Plays of William Shakespeare has long been considered a classic document of English literary criticism. In it Johnson sets forth his editorial principles and gives an appreciative analysis of the “excellences” and “defects” of the work of the great Elizabethan dramatist. Many of his points have become fundamental tenets of modern criticism; others give greater insight into Johnson’s prejudices than into Shakespeare’s genius. The resonant prose of the preface adds authority to the views of its author.

Perhaps no other document exhibits the character of eighteenth century literary criticism better than what is commonly known as Johnson’s Preface to Shakespeare. Written after Johnson had spent nine years laboring to produce an edition of Shakespeare’s plays, the Preface to Shakespeare is characterized by sweeping generalizations about the dramatist’s work and by stunning pronouncements about its merits, judgments that elevated Shakespeare to the top spot among European writers of any century. At times, Johnson displays the tendency of his contemporaries to fault Shakespeare for his propensity for wordplay and for ignoring the demands for poetic justice in his plays; readers of subsequent generations have found these criticisms to reflect the inadequacies of the critic more than they do those of the dramatist. What sets Johnson’s work apart from that of his contemporaries, however, is the immense learning that lies beneath so many of his judgments; he consistently displays his familiarity with the texts, and his generalizations are rooted in specific passages from the dramas. Further, Johnson is the first among the great Shakespeare critics to stress the playwright’s sound understanding of human nature. Johnson’s focus on character analysis initiated a critical trend that would be dominant in Shakespeare criticism (in fact, all of dramatic criticism) for more than a century and would lead to the great work of critics such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Charles Lamb, and A. C. Bradley.

Preface to Shakespeare, however, goes beyond its contributions to Shakespeare scholarship. First, it is the most significant practical application of a critical principle that Johnson espoused consistently and that has become a staple of the practice since: comparison. His systematic attempt to measure Shakespeare against others, both classical and contemporary, became the model. Second, the Preface to Shakespeare exemplifies Johnson’s belief that good criticism can be produced only after good scholarship has been practiced. The critic who wishes to judge an author’s originality or an author’s contributions to the tradition must first practice sound literary reading and research in order to understand what has been borrowed and what has been invented.

Characteristically, Johnson makes his Shakespeare criticism the foundation for general statements about people, nature, and literature. He is a true classicist in his concern with the universal rather than with the particular; the highest praise he can bestow upon Shakespeare is to say that his plays are “just representations of general nature.” The dramatist has relied upon his knowledge of human nature, rather than on bizarre effects, for his success. “The pleasures of sudden wonder are soon exhausted, and the mind can only repose on the stability of truth,” Johnson concludes. It is for this reason that Shakespeare has outlived his century and reached the point at which his works can be judged solely on their own merits, without the interference of personal interests and prejudices that make criticism of one’s contemporaries difficult.

Johnson feels that the readers of his time can often understand the universality of Shakespeare’s vision better than the audiences of Elizabethan England could, for the intervening centuries have freed the plays of their topicality. The characters in the plays are not limited by time or nationality; they are, rather, “the genuine progeny of common humanity, such as the world will always supply, and observation will always find.”

Implicitly criticizing earlier editors of Shakespeare, who had dotted their pages with asterisks marking particularly fine passages, Johnson contends that the greatness of the plays lies primarily in their total effect, in the naturalness of the action, the dialogue, and the characterization. Again and again Johnson stresses the same point: “This, therefore, is the praise of Shakespeare, that his drama is the mirror of life.” The playwright’s personages are drawn from the world familiar to everyone: “Shakespeare has no heroes; his scenes are occupied only by men, who act and speak as the reader thinks that he should himself have spoken or acted on the same occasion.”

That Shakespeare wrote “contrary to the rules of criticism” is, for Johnson, not a problem. Aside from the fact that Aristotle’s rules were not widely known during Shakespeare’s time, Johnson notes, “There is always an appeal open from criticism to nature.” Life itself justifies the mingling of comedy and tragedy on the stage; together they exhibit “the real state of sublunary nature, which partakes of good and evil, joy and sorrow, mingled with endless variety of proportion and innumerable modes of combination.”

While Johnson is aware of Shakespeare’s skills in both comedy and tragedy, he suggests that the playwright’s natural forte was the former: “In tragedy he is always struggling after some occasion to be comick; but in comedy he seems to repose, or to luxuriate, as in a mode of thinking congenial to his nature.” Johnson later criticizes some of the plays’ tragic speeches as bombast, forced, unnatural emotion, and he complains that all too often scenes of pathos are marred by “idle conceits,” those inspiring terror and pity by “sudden frigidity.” The critic later confesses, however, that in spite of these flaws one finds one’s mind seized more strongly by Shakespeare’s tragedies than by those of any other writer.

Johnson praises Shakespeare’s language as that of the “common intercourse of life,” used among those who speak only to be understood, without ambition or elegance. One of Johnson’s most stringent objections to Shakespeare’s work arises from Johnson’s strong conviction that literature is, or should be, essentially didactic. He is disturbed by Shakespeare’s disregard of poetic justice. Johnson, convinced that a writer should show the virtuous rewarded and the evil punished, asserts that Shakespeare, by ignoring this premise, “sacrifices virtue to convenience.” In Johnson’s eyes, the fact that in life evil often triumphs over good is no excuse: “It is always a writer’s duty to make the world better.”

Shakespeare’s careless plotting and his “disregard for distinctions of time and place” are also noted as flaws: “We need not wonder to find Hector quoting Aristotle, when we see the loves of Theseus and Hippolyta combined with the Gothick mythology of fairies.” Although Johnson dislikes Shakespeare’s often coarse language, he is willing to concede that that fault, at least, might have rested with the indelicacy of the ladies and gentlemen at the courts of Elizabeth I and James I rather than with the playwright. These minor “errors” are far less irritating to Johnson than Shakespeare’s use of puns: “A quibble was to him the fatal Cleopatra for which he lost the world, and was content to lose it.” Puns, being language’s form of disorderly conduct, disturbed Johnson’s neoclassical understanding.

Johnson’s contemporaries often condemned Shakespeare for his lack of attention to the Aristotelian unities of time, place, and action, which were assiduously observed by the French classical dramatists and their English imitators. Johnson notes that Shakespeare observed the principle of unity of action in giving each of his plays a beginning, a middle, and an end, and in developing his plots by cause and effect. Moreover, Johnson sees no harm in Shakespeare’s failure in most cases to limit his action to one place and one day. Most strict neoclassical critics maintained that such limitations of time and space are necessary for dramatic credibility, but Johnson finds this assertion ridiculous, for every member of the audience knows that all drama is illusion: “He that can take the stage at one time for the palace of the Ptolemies, may take it in half an hour for the promontory of Actium. Delusion, if delusion be admitted, has no certain limitation.” Real dramatic credibility comes from the validity of the emotions presented: “The reflection that strikes the heart is not, that the evils before us are real evils, but that they are evils to which we ourselves may be exposed.”

Anticipating the historical critics of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Johnson assesses some of the aspects of Elizabethan England that probably influenced Shakespeare. He stresses the fact that the dramatist was in many ways a pioneer, for he had few truly outstanding English works of drama or poetry on which to build. Shakespeare’s complicated plots can be traced to the popularity of the elaborate pastoral romances read by his audiences and occasionally used as sources for the plays.

Johnson does not emphasize Shakespeare’s learning, noting that the playwright could have read in translation the classical works he mentions. Shakespeare’s greatest knowledge came not from books, but from life: “Mankind was not then to be studied in the closet; he that would know the world, was under the necessity of gleaning his own remarks, by mingling as he could in its business and amusements.”

Concluding his general commentary, Johnson summarizes Shakespeare’s gifts to English literature: The form, the characters, the language, and the shows of the English drama are his. . . . To him we must ascribe the praise, unless Spenser may divide it with him, of having first discovered to how much smoothness and harmony the English language could be softened.

In the remainder of the Preface to Shakespeare, Johnson delineates his editorial standards, rejecting the temptation to follow the practices of his predecessors, who had emended—essentially rewritten—the plays where they could not understand or did not like what they found in the earliest texts of Shakespeare’s works. Johnson followed Alexander Pope in basing his edition on the original quarto versions of the plays and on the first folio, and he states that he attempted to leave them as nearly as possible as he found them. His explanatory notes offer not only his own ideas but also the views of earlier critics. He quotes others to refute them more often than to praise them, believing that “the first care of the builder of a new system, is to demolish the fabricks which are standing.”

In a final exhortation to the reader, Johnson places his efforts in perspective; notes are often necessary, but they are necessary evils. The reader who has not yet experienced Shakespeare’s genius must first ignore the editor’s aids and simply read for “the highest pleasure that the drama can give.” Johnson’s modesty is in itself a tribute to Shakespeare; his whole task as editor and critic was to make the great plays more accessible to the public, and his criticism still gives valuable insights to the modern lover of Shakespeare.

**UNIT-IV**

**William Wordsworth** (7 April 1770 – 23 April 1850) was a major English [Romantic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romantic_poetry) poet who, with [Samuel Taylor Coleridge](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samuel_Taylor_Coleridge), helped to launch the [Romantic Age](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romanticism) in [English literature](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English_literature) with their joint publication [*Lyrical Ballads*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lyrical_Ballads) (1798).

Wordsworth's [*magnum opus*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Masterpiece) is generally considered to be [*The Prelude*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Prelude), a semi-autobiographical poem of his early years that he revised and expanded a number of times. It was posthumously titled and published, before which it was generally known as "the poem to Coleridge".[[1]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Wordsworth#cite_note-1) Wordsworth was Britain's [poet laureate](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poet_laureate) from 1843 until his death from [pleurisy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pleurisy) on 23 April 1850.

First publication and *Lyrical Ballads*

Wordsworth in 1798, about the time he began [*The Prelude*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Prelude).[[13]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Wordsworth#cite_note-13)

The year 1793 saw the first publication of poems by Wordsworth, in the collections *An Evening Walk* and *Descriptive Sketches*. In 1795 he received a legacy of 900 pounds from Raisley Calvert and became able to pursue a career as a poet.

It was also in 1795 that he met [Samuel Taylor Coleridge](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samuel_Taylor_Coleridge) in Somerset. The two poets quickly developed a close friendship. In 1797, Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy moved to [Alfoxton House](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfoxton_House), Somerset, just a few miles away from Coleridge's home in [Nether Stowey](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nether_Stowey). Together Wordsworth and Coleridge (with insights from Dorothy) produced [*Lyrical Ballads*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lyrical_Ballads) (1798), an important work in the English [Romantic movement](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romanticism).[[14]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Wordsworth#cite_note-14) The volume gave neither Wordsworth's nor Coleridge's name as author. One of Wordsworth's most famous poems, "[Tintern Abbey](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tintern_Abbey_(poem))", was published in this collection, along with Coleridge's "[The Rime of the Ancient Mariner](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Rime_of_the_Ancient_Mariner)". The second edition, published in 1800, had only Wordsworth listed as the author, and included a preface to the poems.[[15]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Wordsworth#cite_note-15) It was augmented significantly in the next edition, published in 1802.[[16]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Wordsworth#cite_note-16) In this preface, which some scholars consider a central work of Romantic literary theory, Wordsworth discusses what he sees as the elements of a new type of verse, one that is based on the "real language of men" and avoids the poetic diction of much 18th-century verse. Wordsworth also gives his famous definition of poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility", and calls his own poems in the book "experimental". A fourth and final edition of *Lyrical Ballads* was published in 1805.

**BIOGRAPHIA LITERARIA,**

or in full ***Biographia Literaria; or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions***, is an [autobiography](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Autobiography) in discourse by [Samuel Taylor Coleridge](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samuel_Taylor_Coleridge), which he published in 1817, in two volume of twenty-three chapters

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](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Wordsworth)'s theory of poetry as given in the preface to the [*Lyrical Ballads*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lyrical_Ballads) (a work on which Coleridge collaborated), and a statement of Coleridge's philosophical views.

In the first part of the work Coleridge is mainly concerned with showing the evolution of his philosophic creed. At first an adherent of the associational psychology of [David Hartley](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Hartley_(philosopher)), 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](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Essay) on [philosophy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philosophy). In particular, it discusses and engages the [philosophy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philosophy) of [Immanuel Kant](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Immanuel_Kant), [Johann Gottlieb Fichte](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johann_Gottlieb_Fichte), and [Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Friedrich_Wilhelm_Joseph_von_Schelling). Being fluent in German, Coleridge was one of the first major English literary figures to translate and discuss Schelling, in particular.

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

The book contains Coleridge's celebrated and vexed distinction between “imagination” and “fancy”. Chapter XIV is the origin of the famous critical concept of a “willing [suspension of disbelief](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Suspension_of_disbelief)”.

Critics have reacted strongly to the *Biographia Literaria*. Early reactions were that it was a demonstration of Coleridge's [opiate-driven](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Opium) decline into ill health. Recent re-evaluations have given it more credit. While contemporary critics recognize the degree to which Coleridge borrowed from his sources (with straight [lifts](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plagiarism) from Schelling), they also see in the work far more structure and planning than is apparent on first glance.

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**UNIT**-**V**

**'A Study of Poetry'**

Matthew Arnold.

In this essay Arnold criticizes the art of poetry as well as the art of criticism. Arnold believes that the art of poetry is capable of high destinies. It is the art in which the idea itself is the fact. He says that we should understand the worth of poetry as it is poetry that shows us a mirror of life. Science, according to Arnold, is incomplete without poetry, and, religion and philosophy will give way to poetry. Arnold terms poetry as a criticism of life thereby refuting the accusation of Plato and says that as time goes on man will continue to find comfort and solace in poetry.

Arnold says that when one reads poetry he tends to estimate whether it is of the best form or not. It happens in three ways- the real estimate, the historic estimate, and the personal estimate. The real estimate is an unbiased viewpoint that takes into account both the historical context and the creative faculty to judge the worth of poetry. But the real estimate is often surpassed by the historic and personal estimate. The historic estimate places the historical context above the value of the art itself. The personal estimate on the other hand depends on the personal taste, the likes and dislikes of the reader which affects his judgment of poetry. Arnold says that both these estimates tend to be fallacious.

The historic and personal estimate often overshadows the real estimate. But Arnold also says that it is natural. The study of the historical background of poetry and its development often leads to the critic skipping over the shortcomings because of its historical significance. Historic estimate raises poetry to a high pedestal and thus hinders one from noticing its weaknesses. It is the historic estimate that leads to the creation of classics and raises the poet to a nearly God like standard. Arnold says that if a poet is truly a classic his poetry will give the reader real pleasure and enable him to compare and contrast other poetry which are not of the same high standard. This according to Arnold is the real estimate of poetry. Thus Arnold appeals to his readers to read classics with an open eye and not be blind to its faults. This will enable one to rate poetry with its proper value.

Arnold proposes the ‘touchstone’ method of analyzing poetry in order to determine whether it is of a high standard or not. He borrows this method from Longinus who said in his idea of the sublime that if a certain example of sublimity can please anyone regardless of habits, tastes or age and can please at all times then it can be considered as a true example of the sublime. This method was first suggested in England by Addison who said that he would have a man read classical works which have stood the test of time and place and also those modern works which find high praise among contemporaries. If the man fails to find any delight in them then he would conclude that it is not the author who lacks quality but the reader who is incapable of discovering them. Arnold applies the touchstone method by taking examples from the time tested classics and comparing them with other poetry to determine whether they possess the high poetic standard of the classics. He says that the poems need not resemble or possess any similarity to the touchstones. Once the critic has lodged the touchstones in his mind in order to detect the possession of high poetic quality he will have the tact of finding it in other poetry that he compares to the touchstones. Arnold quotes Homer, Dante, Shakespeare and Milton in an attempt to exemplify touchstone poetry. He says that the examples he has quoted are very dissimilar to one another but they all possess a high poetic quality. He says that a critic need not labour in vain trying to explain the greatness of poetry. He can do so by merely pointing at some specimens of the highest poetic quality. Arnold says that the high quality of poetry lies in its matter and its manner. He then goes by Aristotle’s observation and says that the best form of poetry possesses high truth and seriousness that makes up its subject matter along with superior diction that marks its manner. However, Arnold mentions that the true force of this method lies in its application. He therefore urges critics to apply the touchstone method to analyse and rate poetry.

Arnold then speaks about French poetry which had a tremendous influence on the poetry of England. He differentiates between the poetry of northern France and the poetry of southern France. The poetry of southern France influenced Italian literature. But it is the poetry of northern France that was dominant in Europe in the twelfth and thirteenth century. This poetry came to England with the Anglo- Normans and had a tremendous impact on English poetry. It was the romance- poems of France that was popular during that time. But Arnold says that it did not have any special characteristics and lacked the high truth, seriousness and diction of classic poetry and remain significant only from the historical point of view.

Next Arnold speaks about Chaucer who was much influenced by French and Italian poetry. Arnold says that Chaucer’s poetic importance is a result of the real estimate and not the historic estimate. The superiority of Chaucer’s verse lies both in his subject matter and his style. He writes about human life and nature as he sees it. Arnold speaks highly of Chaucer’s diction and calls it ‘liquid diction’ to emphasise the fluidity in the manner of Chaucer’s writing which he considers to be an irresistible virtue. Arnold however says that Chaucer is not a classic. He compares Chaucer to Dante and points out that Chaucer lacks the high seriousness of the classics thereby depriving him of the high honour.

Next Arnold mentions Milton and Shakespeare and credits them as classics and moves on to speak about Dryden and Pope. According to the historic estimate Dryden and Pope are no doubt great poets of the eighteenth century. Arnold observes that Dryden and Pope were better prose writers than poets. The restoration period faced the necessity of a fit prose with proper imaginative quality and this is what Dryden and Pope provided. Arnold therefore concludes that they are classics not of poetry but of prose.

After Dryden and Pope Arnold speaks about Gray. Gray did not write much but what he wrote has high poetic value. Arnold therefore considers Gray to be a classic.

Arnold now speaks about Robert Burns in the late eighteenth century and says that this is the period from which the personal estimate begins to affect the real estimate. Burns, according to Arnold, is a better poet in Scottish than in English. Like Chaucer Arnold does not consider Burns to be a classic. He says that Burns too lacks the high seriousness desired of poetry. He compares Burns to Chaucer and finds that Burns’ manner of presentation is deeper than that of Chaucer. According to the real estimate Burns lacks the high seriousness of the classics but his poetry nevertheless has truthful substance and style.

Then Arnold moves on to speak about Byron, Shelley and Wordsworth but does not pass any judgement on their poetry. Arnold believes that his estimate of these poets will be influenced by his personal passion as they are closer to his age than the classics and also because their writings are of a more personal nature. Finally Arnold speaks about the self-preservation of the classics. Any amount of good literature will not be able to surpass the supremacy of the classics as they have already stood the test of time and people will continue to enjoy them for the ages to come. Arnold says that this is the result of the self preserving nature of humanity. Human nature will remain the same throughout the ages and those parts of the classics dealing with the subject will remain relevant at all times thus preserving themselves from being lost in time.

# TRADITION AND THE INDIVIDUAL TALENT

**"Tradition and the Individual Talent"** (1919) is an essay written by poet and literary critic [T. S. Eliot](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/T._S._Eliot). The essay was first published in [*The Egoist*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Egoist_(periodical)) (1919) and later in Eliot's first book of criticism, ["The Sacred Wood" (1920)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Sacred_Wood_(T._S._Eliot)).[[1]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tradition_and_the_Individual_Talent#cite_note-1) The essay is also available in Eliot's "Selected Prose" and "[Selected Essays](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Selected_Essays,_1917-1932)".

While Eliot is most often known for his poetry, he also contributed to the field of literary criticism. In this dual role, he acted as poet-critic, comparable to [Sir Philip Sidney](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sir_Philip_Sidney) and [Samuel Taylor Coleridge](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samuel_Taylor_Coleridge). "Tradition and the Individual Talent" is one of the more well known works that Eliot produced in his critic capacity. It formulates Eliot's influential conception of the relationship between the poet and the literary tradition which precedes them.

## Content of the essay

This essay is divided into three parts: firstly, the concept of "Tradition," then, the Theory of Impersonal Poetry, and finally the Conclusion or Summing up.

Eliot presents his conception of tradition and the definition of the poet and poetry in relation to it. He wishes to correct the fact that, as he perceives it, "in English writing we seldom speak of tradition, though we occasionally apply its name in deploring its absence." Eliot posits that, though the English tradition generally upholds the belief that art progresses through change – a separation from tradition, literary advancements are instead recognised only when they conform to the tradition. Eliot, a [classicist](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Classics), felt that the true incorporation of tradition into literature was unrecognised, that tradition, a word that "seldom... appear[s] except in a phrase of censure," was actually a thus-far unrealised element of literary criticism.

For Eliot, the term "tradition" is imbued with a special and complex character. It represents a "simultaneous order," by which Eliot means a historical timelessness – a fusion of past and present – and, at the same time, a sense of present temporality. A poet must embody "the whole of the literature of Europe from [Homer](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homer)," while, simultaneously, expressing their contemporary environment. Eliot challenges the common perception that a poet's greatness and individuality lie in their departure from their predecessors; he argues that "the most individual parts of his [the poet's] work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously." Eliot claims that this "historical sense" is not only a resemblance to traditional works but an awareness and understanding of their relation to his poetry.

This fidelity to tradition, however, does not require the great poet to forfeit novelty in an act of surrender to repetition. Rather, Eliot has a much more dynamic and progressive conception of the poetic process: novelty is possible only through tapping into tradition. When a poet engages in the creation of new work, they realise an aesthetic "ideal order," as it has been established by the literary tradition that has come before them. As such, the act of artistic creation does not take place in a vacuum. The introduction of a new work alters the cohesion of this existing order, and causes a readjustment of the old to accommodate the new. The inclusion of the new work alters the way in which the past is seen; elements of the past that are noted and realised. In Eliot’s own words, "What happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art that preceded it." Eliot refers to this organic tradition, this developing canon, as the "mind of Europe." The private mind is subsumed by this more massive one.

This leads to Eliot’s so-called "Impersonal Theory" of poetry. Since the poet engages in a "continual surrender of himself" to the vast order of tradition, artistic creation is a process of depersonalisation. The mature poet is viewed as a medium, through which tradition is channelled and elaborated. They compare the poet to a catalyst in a chemical reaction, in which the reactants are feelings and emotions that are synthesised to create an artistic image that captures and relays these same feelings and emotions. While the mind of the poet is necessary for the production, it emerges unaffected by the process. The artist stores feelings and emotions and properly unites them into a specific combination, which is the artistic product. What lends greatness to a work of art are not the feelings and emotions themselves, but the nature of the artistic process by which they are synthesised. The artist is responsible for creating "the pressure, so to speak, under which the fusion takes place." And, it is the intensity of fusion that renders art great. In this view, Eliot rejects the theory that art expresses metaphysical unity in the soul of the poet. The poet is a depersonalised vessel, a mere medium.