Literary Theory from Plato to T. S. Eliot

BBL3103

BBL3103 (Units 1 – 14)

Literary Theory from Plato to T. S. Eliot

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MODUL PEMBELAJARAN : BBL 3103 LITERARY THEORY FROM PLATO TO T.S. ELIOT disediakan dalam bentuk bahan pengajaran dan pembelajaran kendiri di bawah program Pendidikan Jarak Jauh, Universiti Putra Malaysia. Sebarang pertanyaan dan cadangan untuk memperbaiki gaya penyampaian dan isi kandungan modul ini bolehlah dikemukakan kepada penulis dengan menggunakan alamat Pusat Pendidikan Luar.

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Universiti Putra Malaysia
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SECTION A
COURSE INTRODUCTION

a. Course Information

Department: English
Course Title: Literary Theory from Plato to T. S. Eliot
Course Code: BBL3103
Credit Hours: 3 (3+0)

Course Explanation and Summary

This modular course encompasses two face-to-face meetings with the lecturer within the semester. To fulfill the theoretical part of this course, students will have to complete one (1) individual assignment. This assignment will be a self-learning exercise, given that distance learning will not allow for frequent meetings between the student and the instructor.

b. Writer Information

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c. Course Objectives

The objectives of the course are:
1. To enable students to trace the development of literary criticism and aesthetic practices in the Western tradition from the beginning to the 19th century;
2. To evaluate the representative texts from various literary and cultural traditions;
3. To discuss the connection between the development of literary theory in relation to society; and
4. To develop ethical behaviour and a sense of communal responsibility.

d. Course Synopsis

This course examines representative works of literary criticism from the Classical Antiquity era to the early 20th century; investigation of the history of the creative writer’s role and function in society, and the changing patterns in aesthetic practices; relationships between literature and society; psychology of art and questions of form and style; and explication of the origins, causes, and connections of literature through a concentrated focusing on major critics.

e. Course Content

Course content will be divided by unit and subtopic. Roughly, each unit corresponds to a particular time period (e.g.: Classical Antiquity), and each topic to a particular critic from that time period. Each unit represents 3 lecture hours (1 week’s study). The 14 units therefore represent the 14 weeks of the semester.
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f. Assignment

Assignment (30%): Individual Essay  
Deadline: 1 week before final examination

Discuss ONE of the following questions:

1. Discuss the definition of *mimesis* and how this notion has been applied by literary scholars in different contexts and times.
2. With reference to TWO Romantic era critics, discuss the influence of Longinus upon the prevalent attitude towards literature at the time.
3. Write a hypothesis on the role of religion in the evolution of literature. Discuss two historical or social contexts to support your hypothesis.
4. With reference to at least TWO major literary critics, discuss how their respective theories of literature fulfil the Apollonian/Dionysian dichotomy.

*(See Appendix A at the end of this module for the Assignment Guide)*

- Your essay must be typed double space, Times New Roman, font 12
- Your essay should be around 1000 words in length
- Your cover page must be a plain piece of white paper containing your name, matric number, programme of study, course code and title, and the title of your essay.
- The cover page must simply be stapled together with your essay at the top left corner of the paper.
- Any references used must be listed according to the MLA style.
Attention: Generally, the length of individual essays do not exceed 10 pages in length not inclusive of the cover and appendices (if any). All reports must be typed double-spaced using an Arial 12 point font on A4 sized paper. The student is advised to use clear plastic binding if he/she wishes the report to be bound.

The student’s name and matric. no. must be printed clearly and legibly.

g. Course Evaluation
This course evaluation is divided into:
(i). Overall course work 60%
   • Assignment (individual) 30%
   • Test 30%
(ii). Final examination 40%
   Grand total 100%

h. Test
There will be one test that students will have to sit for. The test questions will be based on this module. The questions in this test will be in objective format (multiple choice). Tentatively the units that will be covered by the first test are units 1-3, however the full details of the test, such as question type, number of questions and the topics covered will be announced to students via e-mail or the tutors in the learning centres at an appropriate time. The overall score for this test is 30 percent.
An example of the test questions is as follows:

**Multiple choice**

Who was Longinus?
A. The author of *On the Sublime*
B. The first critic to classify tragedy as a genre
C. The author of *The Republic*
D. The first critic to establish that decorum is a necessary condition of staging a play
(Answer: A)

1. **Final examination**

   The questions in the final examination will cover all of the units in the module; however, emphasis will be placed on units not covered in the first test. The tutors in the learning centres will be informed of these topics, or students may e-mail the course lecturer to obtain the latest information. The questions in the final examination will be subjective (in the form of short essays) (Attention! The question types may change; the lecturer will inform students of any change during the face-to-face meetings).

An example of the final examination questions is as follows:

**Short Essay**

Q: Explain John Dryden's definition of drama with reference to his Neoclassicism.

A. John Dryden defines drama as a 'just and lively image of human nature, representing its passions and humours, and the change of fortune to which it is subject, for the delight and instruction of mankind'. What Dryden means by 'just and lively image' is that art must be both a faithful and imaginative representation of reality. By 'representing its passions and humours', Dryden is referring to Aristotelian universality, where every work of art must address some universal reality through particular examples; and by 'the changes of fortune to which it is subject', Dryden is referring to his preference of English drama, which was able to display a variety in terms of plotlines and themes. By 'delight and instruction of mankind', Dryden reaffirms to Neoclassical position of art being both entertaining and informative, in line with Horace's dictum of 'utile et dulce'.

vi
j. Primary sources


k. Secondary sources


I. Explanation of icons in the module

To help students understand the contents of the course, a few icons are used. These icons are designed to enable students to easily recall the structure of the module. The meanings of each icon are listed below:

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<tr>
<th>Icon</th>
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<td>Main contents → The main contents in a unit or topic</td>
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<td>d)</td>
<td>Observations/Views → To further understand a topic based on past studies or other secondary sources</td>
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<td>e)</td>
<td>Conclusion → The conclusion that can be made at the end of each unit or topic</td>
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<td>In-text questions → Questions that are inserted into the text in each unit</td>
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<td>g)</td>
<td>Self-assessment questions → Questions prepared by the writer to help students obtain a deeper understanding of the subject at hand</td>
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<td>h)</td>
<td>Check question answers → Answers based on questions at the end of every unit</td>
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<tr>
<td>i)</td>
<td>References → Reference material that can be made into a secondary resources throughout the course</td>
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<td>j)</td>
<td>Attention → This symbol will be used for matters that require students' attention</td>
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SECTION B
UNIT 1
OVERVIEW OF THE TRENDS AND TRADITIONS IN LITERARY CRITICISM

Unit Introduction

1. In this unit, students will first be presented with an overview of Western literary criticism, beginning with the nature and general function of literary criticism.
2. The various types of critical approaches that are commonly used in the analysis of texts will also be dealt with in this unit, with examples explaining their usage drawn from popular culture.
3. The divisions pertain either to the methodology or the theoretical perspective applied in a given critical approach, which will be aligned to historical contexts in the next unit.

Unit Objectives

1. To provide a general overview of the history of literary criticism.
2. To provide a workable definition of literary critical activity, as well as a detailing of its common functions.
3. To examine the various types of literary criticism that have been used throughout history.
Main Points

TOPIC 1: THE NATURE AND FUNCTION OF LITERARY CRITICISM

1.1 Definition
- On the whole, literary criticism is the exercise of judgement upon literature
- This judgement can be exercised on a singular literary text, or a body of literature
- Taking into account modern literary studies, a ‘text’ can be used to describe any cultural item or product, such as a film or a song, and not just a traditional work of literature; it must be noted that for the purposes of this module, the term ‘text’ will be used in this way

1.2 Function
- The function of literary criticism is the evaluation and interpretation of literature
- The evaluation of literature is where a text is deemed as worthy of meeting certain predetermined criteria or a predefined standard; these standards are established by a given set of values and/or a precedent set by an earlier text/texts
- The interpretation of literature is where the underlying meaning or motive of a text/texts is explicated for ease of understanding; these meanings or motives may or may not be intended by the author of a text
- Both are not mutually exclusive; often, the interpretation of literature presupposes some form of evaluation, and vice versa

1.3 Diversity
- Most critical approaches on literature can generally be divided into two categories: aesthetic and utilitarian
- Aesthetic criticism is largely centred on the aesthetic appreciation of the text alone, and not the world outside of the text
- Simply put, aesthetic criticism is ‘art-for-art’s sake’
- It must be noted that although this is also the motto of the British Aesthetes in the late 19th century (whom we shall examined in a later
unit), the two are not exactly synonymous (in this module, we will refer to the aesthetic literary movement with an uppercase ‘A’)

- Utilitarian: criticism of a text in relation to the outside world, and not the text alone
- Utilitarian criticism works on the presupposition that a text has some social function—either as being a description of, or a ‘remedy’ to, something in real life
- This can be simplified by the commonly heard question: how does literature benefit society?
- In this question, this ‘benefit’ usually refers to some form of social utility (such as literature being able to address or solve a particular social issue)
- Some believe that literature can be beneficial in this way; while others believe that literature should only be taken as it is (a cultural object) and should not be expected to have any other function than to entertain
- For instance, looking at the usage of metaphors in William Shakespeare’s Hamlet (1599) is an aesthetic approach, while comparing, say, the social hierarchy of Elsinore to actual medieval examples would be more utilitarian
- Of course, the two are not mutually exclusive; the aesthetic/utilitarian division is one of inclination alone
- It must also be kept in mind for the purposes of this module that there is a constant tension and vacillation between both approaches throughout the course of literary history
- What this means is that once a literary approach that dominates an era becomes too aesthetic, it usually gets replaced by a more utilitarian one directly after, and vice versa

**TOPIC 2: TRENDS IN LITERARY CRITICISM**

2.1 About

- This section is only designed to provide very brief descriptions of the varying trends in (or types of) literary criticism
- Not all of the below are immediately relevant to the course; the types that are will be discussed at length in the relevant units later in this module
2.2 Legislative criticism

- Legislative criticism is a type of criticism that acts as a 'how-to' teaching a prospective writer how to write
- Similar to some extent to rhetorical criticism, which dates back to Plato (specifically in Phaedrus (~370 BC))
- In legislative criticism, a text (in the case of rhetorical criticism, a popular speech) is analysed to find out which of its elements make it good or effective; these elements can be related to diction, turns of phrases, imagery etc.
- This is most evident in Aristotle's listing of the six elements of drama (which we will examine below, and more thoroughly in Unit 3); these elements, which were meant to be descriptive, later became prescriptive in the Neoclassical age
- Simple example: An analytical breakdown of the speeches of Barack Obama and John F. Kennedy to find out what elements made those speeches so memorable, and then using that analysis to form a guide on how to write a memorable speech

2.2 Judicial criticism

- Judicial criticism is related to Neoclassicism, whereby an author or a text is judged on a Classical (ancient Greek or Roman) standard
- Above, we talked about how Aristotle's listing of the elements of a good play later became prescriptive 'rules' of composition
- These 'rules' later became a standard of judgement, so that a text is 'good' when it is in accordance to these rules, and 'lacking' when it is not
- Simple example: Judging Shakespeare's King Lear (1606) to be a failure because it deviates from the rules of Classical composition

2.3 Theoretical criticism

- The scope of theoretical criticism can be a body of literature in general, and not just a particular text
- This entails applying the framework of any one, or an amalgamation of several theoretical perspectives (i.e.: feminist, Marxist, postcolonial literary criticism) onto a text/s
• Analysis is carried out on the text using the terminology and presupposed truths in a particular framework
• Theoretical criticism makes up a large percentage of literary criticism carried out in academia
• Differs from formalist criticism in that external factors (i.e.: the background of the author, the socioeconomic circumstances under which the text was produced, etc.) are taken into consideration
• Simple example: Analysing the lyrics in the songs of Billie Holliday using a framework that is both Marxist (pertinent to her socioeconomic background—a black singer who had to become a prostitute before performing mostly for white audiences) and feminist (pertinent to her being a female blues singer).

2.4 Evaluative criticism
• Evaluative criticism is the assessment of the worth and significance of a particular text
• The standards used to make this assessment can be a predetermined aesthetic yardstick (usually based on preceding texts in a similar genre), or even entirely personal (a critic not liking a text because of personal taste)
• Simple example: Determining that John Hillcoat's The Proposition (2005), a Western about the history of Australia, is a success/failure using standards established by John Ford Westerns in the 1940s/1950s, or Sergio Leone Westerns in the 1960s

2.5 Historical criticism
• Historical criticism is where a text is set against a historical context
• This context may or may not be intended by the artist, i.e.: it may be consciously foregrounded, or it may be incidental
• This context can also be the historical circumstances depicted in the text, or those surrounding the production of a text
• Simple example: The historical context consciously foregrounded in Ari Folman’s Waltz With Bashir (2008) is the 1982 Lebanon War, but one can also examine the circumstances surrounding the choice of medium (2-D Flash animation, which is simultaneously modern and low-tech, which gives the film a surreal, ironic sense of archaism)
2.6 Biographical critical

- Biographical criticism is similar to historical criticism, only with emphasis placed on the background of the author.
- In short, it is the study of the author's background to illuminate certain features of a text.
- *Simple example*: Adding bipolar disorder into the lyrics of Leonard Cohen's songs, shamanism in the lyrics of Jim Morrison or alcoholism in the lyrics of Janis Joplin.

2.7 Comparative critical

- Simply put, comparative criticism is where a text is set against another text.
- In academia, comparative criticism usually refers to the comparison of a text with another text written in another language.
- Sometimes, this includes the comparison between two texts of different genres, such as a song and a film.
- *Simple example*: Examining the thematic similarities between Radiohead's 'Let Down' (from *OK Computer*, 1997) and Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915).

2.8 Descriptive critical

- Descriptive criticism is the analysis of a text to determine its aims, methods and effects.
- Traditionally, it was the most common form of criticism employed; simply put, it is the analysis of how a text is written, and why.
- Generally aesthetic in nature, since the object of criticism is the text at hand, and is not concerned with formulating/applying any theoretical perspective.
- *Simple example*: Describing William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954) as a treaty on the inherent evil in human nature once the veil of civility is lifted.

2.9 Impressionistic critical

- Impressionistic criticism is, like its name suggests, the personal impression a critic gets from a text.
This approach is mostly aesthetic, and is based upon any predetermined standards that the critic decides to employ; in effect, it is very similar to evaluative/descriptive reader-response criticism.

- It is entirely subjective, and not dependent upon ascribing certain values to a text based on general theoretical principles.

  **Simple example:** Examine this review of *Prince of Persia: Sands of Time* (2010) by the film critic Roger Ebert: “The two leads are not inspired. Jake Gyllenhaal could make the cover of a muscle mag, but he plays Dastan as if harbouring Spider-Man’s doubts and insecurities. I recall Gemma Arterton as resembling a gorgeous still photo in a cosmetics ad. If the two actors had found more energy and wit in their roles (if they’d ramped up to the Alfred Molina level, say), that would have been welcome” (“Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time”)

2.10 Textual/Formalist criticism

- Textual or formalist criticism is one of the more traditional methods of analysing literature.

  - In textual criticism, the text is considered as a thing-in-itself, and no external factors (i.e.: historical context, theoretical perspectives) are considered.

  - The focus of analysis is then on the structure of a text (i.e.: grammar, syntax, etc.) and literary devices (symbols, metaphors, tropes, etc.)

  - A hugely popular approach until the rise to prominence of theoretical criticism.

  **Simple example:** An examination of the use of the popular trope, the father-son journey into a wasteland, in the popular 1970s manga *Lone Wolf and Cub* by Kazuo Koike and Goseki Kojima, or in the 2009 John Hillcoat movie *The Road*.

2.11 Psychological/Psychoanalytic

- Psychological or psychoanalytic criticism is an analysis of a text generally based on the principles of psychoanalysis established by Sigmund Freud.

  - Simply put, the text is considered to be a kind of ‘dream’ which contains both manifest content (what is visible in the text) and latent content (underlying psychological motivations of the author/characters).
- Psychoanalytic criticism is sometimes also used to loosely refer to Carl G. Jung’s archetypal criticism
- These days, psychoanalytic criticism usually refers to the ideas later developed from Freud’s work by Jacques Lacan
- *Simple example*: Analysing the somewhat Oedipal relationship between Malik El Djebena and the Corsican crime boss, César Luciani, who takes Djebena under his wing, in Jacques Audiard’s *Un prophète* (2009)

2.12 Sociological/ Marxist

- Sociological or Marxist literary criticism is informed by the philosophy of Karl Marx
- Marxist literary criticism is in many ways similar historical criticism, but instead of analysing the historical context per se, it is more focused on the historical milieu (the socio(economic) environment of a given age)
- This is usually referred to as historical materialism, where ostensibly non-economic features of society and social change are a direct extension of economic conditions
- Can be an examination of the socioeconomic conditions of production (the writing) and consumption (the reading) of a text; but in most instances, Marxist literary criticism is concerned with the analysis of a text as a product of a particular society and age
- *Simple example*: The claim that mainstream hip hop music, in its general fetish for material wealth, is legitimising a capitalist ethos among young people

2.13 Archetypal

- Archetypal criticism is related to psychoanalytic criticism somewhat, because it relates back to Carl G. Jung’s study of archetypes (universal symbols)
- These archetypes are the universal symbols or original models, contained in the collective human unconscious, from which recurring character types or literary tropes appear
- *Simple example*: An oft-cited example of an archetype being played out in popular culture to great success is in George Lucas’ original *Star Wars* series (1977, 1980, 1983). Luke Skywalker’s story arc (unlikely hero turning into
saviour due to receiving special powers) is adapted from Joseph Campbell’s
_The Hero with a Thousand Faces_ (1949), in which the latter states that the
hero ‘monomyth’ is a universal archetypal pattern

**Observations/Views/Opinions**

- Purely to ease understanding of the later chapters, the aesthetic/utilitarian
dichotomy above can also be understood using a Apollonian/Dionysian
dichotomy (popularised by Friedrich Nietzsche in _The Birth of Tragedy_, 1872)
- Nietzsche felt that since the ancient Greek playwright Aeschylus, who was
believed to be responsible for penning _Prometheus Bound_, and who to
Nietzsche represented the perfect marriage of Apollonian and Dionysian
tendencies, art has tended to be more inclined with one or the other
- The dichotomy is, of course, based on the characteristics of the Greek gods
Apollo and Dionysus
- Apollo symbolises order, control, civilisation, holism, and thought; Dionysus
symbolises chaos, intoxication, primitivism, individualism, feeling
- Of course, like the aesthetic/utilitarian dichotomy, no critical approach is
_wholly_ Apollonian or Dionysian; rather, there is an inclination towards one or
the other
- For instance, the Neoclassical age—where strict adherence to a Classical
concept of beauty was preached—can be characterised as being _more_
Apollonian than the intoxicated excess of the Romantic age, which was _wholly_
more Dionysian

**Summary of the Unit**

- Literary criticism is the exercise of judgement upon literature, used as a
means of evaluation or interpretation
critical approaches to literature can be divided into two general categories—aesthetic and utilitarian—based on how much emphasis is placed on the text alone, or on the world outside the text.

This relates back to the common question: how does literature benefit society?

There are many types of literary criticism, including legislative, judicial, theoretical, evaluative, historical, biographical, comparative, descriptive, historicistic, textual, psychological, sociological, and archetypal criticism.

These types of literary criticism have been employed throughout history, but the preference of any one type during a particular age can usually be traced to social phenomena occurring at the time.

This is why there is so much difference in the application of literary criticism in (Western) history: the use of a particular approach is generally era-sensitive and has changed over time.

Additional References


Leone, Sergio, dir. *Il buono, il brutto, il cattivo*. Arturo González Producciones Cinematográficas, 1967. Film.


**Exercise 1**

1. What is the function of literary criticism?
2. What is impressionistic criticism?
3. In common usage, what does the term ‘comparative criticism’ refer to?
4. Hypothetically, can a text be looked at from evaluative, biographical, comparative and Marxist perspectives at the same time?
5. In your opinion, would a text that emphasised individual liberty over a moralistic code be more Apollonian or Dionysian?
Answers for Exercise 1

1. The evaluation and interpretation of literary texts
2. The personal, subjective impression one gets from a text
3. A text set against another produced in a different language medium, or one from another genre
4. The situation is possible if the end goal of the analysis is to determine the worth of significance of that text as a treatise on Marxism, based on the author’s history as a Marxist, and when compared to a film by a filmmaker with similar ideological leanings
5. The text would ostensibly be more Dionysian (ultimately, it is the context in which the text is written that can determine its nature)
UNIT 2
THE HISTORY OF LITERARY CRITICISM

Unit Introduction

1. In this unit, the approaches outlined in the previous unit will be associated with their respective historical contexts
2. These contexts range from Classical Antiquity to the modern age (roughly ca. World War II)
3. This will help establish the notion that literary approaches and perspectives are not formed in vacuums, but rather as a reaction to or against a particular milieu (which includes trends of thought popular at that time)

Unit Objectives

1. To provide a general overview of the history of literary criticism
2. To examine the various types of literary criticism that have been used throughout history
3. To provide a historical context to correspond to each of these types of criticism
TOPIC 1: OVERVIEW OF THE HISTORY OF LITERARY CRITICISM

1.1 About
- This overview is only intended as a very brief summary of the mood of particular ages regarding the production of literature.
- Specific aspects of each age (insofar as they are related to major shifts in literary theory) will be discussed in the relevant chapters later in this module.
- For the sake of brevity, some time periods will be treated in literary glosses over in later discussions, due to a relative lack of literary activity.

1.2 Hellenic age
- 4-5c. BC
- Athens was a centre of literary and intellectual activity.
- The period is also referred to as Classical Greece. The bulk of intellectual activity, however, is usually attributed to Athens.
- The three great Athenian playwrights wrote during this period: Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides.
- Plato and Aristotle were the first to formulate exclusive theories on the nature of art and literature, which will be discussed in the next unit.

1.3 Hellenistic age
- 323-146 BC
- Centre of intellectual activity moved from Athens to Alexandria, Egypt, after the conquests of Alexander the Great saw the marriage of Greek culture to that of South West Asia (Near and Middle East).
- Although Greek culture during this period adopted local ‘barbarian’ elements, the former was predominant, given that it was the colonising, and not the colonised culture.
- Thus, literary texts produced during this period were largely imitative of Classical Greek texts.

1.4 Greco-Roman age
- 1c. BC–2c. AD (Golden Age); 467 AD (fall of Western Roman empire)
- The centre of intellectual and cultural activity then shifted to Rome, after the rise of the Roman empire.
The two famous critics that appeared during this period, and we will be studying in this course, are Horace and Longinus.

Like the Hellenistic age, texts produced were derivative of their Classical Greek forbears although they aimed at originality; it was consciously Neoclassical in its output.

Having said that, the ideas of Horace and Longinus were influencing many centuries later, which will be addressed later in this module.

1.5 Medieval/Middle/Dark Ages

- 5-15c. AD
- Characterised by the rise of Christianity, the reestablishment of a feudal system, and increased urbanisation.
- The Middle Ages are also referred to as the Dark Ages because all of the intellectual achievements from previous eras were consciously overlooked.
- Due to the rise to prominence of Christianity during this period, Classical culture and thinking were considered pagan.
- Literary activity was mostly focused on biblical exegesis.

1.6 The Renaissance

- 14-17c.
- The shackles of medievalism were broken, and there was a renewed emphasis on humanism.
- There was a conscious effort to revive glory of ancient Greece.
- There was also a shift from more utilitarian approaches to literature, to a more aesthetic one.
- In addition, with the invention of the printing press, texts began to be translated into local vernaculars (as opposed to Latin), which for the first time, brought reading to the general public.

1.7 Neoclassical age

- 17-19c.
- Like its name suggests, the Neoclassical age in the arts was defined by an inclination to hold as the highest standard the culture of Classical Antiquity (ancient Greece and ancient Rome).
• For instance, the descriptive tenets of what constitutes good drama that Aristotle laid out many centuries earlier then became prescriptive rules for the writing of literature

1.8 Romantic age
• Latter 18c.
• As a reaction against the somewhat staid adherence to Classical rules, the Romantic age was characterised by aesthetic passion, inspiration, individuality and subjectivity
• Was also a reaction against the scientific rationalism prevalent during the age
• Synonymous by the most prominent English Romantic poets: Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Keats, William Wordsworth, Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley and William Blake

1.9 Victorian age/Belle Époque
• Late 19–early 20c.
• Defined both by the novel coming to prominence in England and France, as well as fin de siècle (turn of the century) anxiety which led to great experimentation, a precursor to the modern period
• One major difference between this age and the preceding Romantic one was an increased detachment from the artistic object (as opposed to passion), emphasis on urban aesthetic and the worship of man-made artifice (as opposed to the beauty of nature)

1.10 Modern age
• 20th c.–present
• Some make a distinction between modern and postmodern eras; if this distinction is used, then the modern period begins roughly before World War I, and the postmodern one roughly after World War II
• On the whole, the modern age is characterised by self-referentiality, nihilism and a severe disenchantment with any forms/thought structures previously held to be sacrosanct (i.e.: the existence of God, the inherent goodness of man, the civilisation project, etc.)
• Addressed the new atomised, urban reality
**Observations/Views/Opinions**

- It must be kept in mind that throughout this module, that it would be
  disingenuous to consider each period as having a definite start- and end-
  point, at least in terms of the ideological milieu.
- Naturally, it would be more useful to consider these ages as having bled into
  one another, arising as a result of socio-political factors.
- Throughout this module it will be evident that these socio-political factors play
  a very important role in shaping the general ‘mood’ of the age, which in turn is
  reflected in attitudes towards art.
- A simple example of this (though not necessarily true in all cases) is that a
  more liberal and relaxed attitude (in some cases, more aesthetic) emerges
  during extended periods of peace, and a sterner attitude emerges immediately
  before, during and immediately after a war has taken place.

**Summary of the Unit**

- The major historical periods that will be looked at in this module include
  Classical Antiquity, the Renaissance, the Neoclassical period, the Romantic
  period, the Belle Époque, and the modern age.
- Classical Antiquity will encompass ancient Greece and Rome, with focus paid
  to Plato, Aristotle, Horace and Longinus.
- The Middle Ages, that took place between Classical Antiquity and the
  Renaissance, will only be glossed over briefly, due to the relative paucity of
  literary critical activity.
- The Renaissance is primarily remembered for being the age in which the
  intellectual bridge from Classical Antiquity was restored.
- The Neoclassical age was a reaction to some of the excesses of the
  Renaissance (although a definite break in critical activity between both
  periods is non-existent).
• The Romantic period was, in turn, a reaction against the stern adherence to the Classics in the preceding Neoclassical age.
• The Belle Époque was a period of extended peace, and witnessed the emergence of many new schools of thought.
• However, the modern period that followed this was shorn of all of the previous period's optimism about the future, as well as the never-before-seen (at the time anyway) devastation as a result of World War I.

Additional References

Exercise 1
1. What values characterised the Romantic age?
2. Why are the Middle Ages referred to as the Dark Ages?
3. What is the difference between the Hellenic and Hellenistic ages?
4. Besides the revival of Classical culture, what were two important developments during the Renaissance?
5. What did fin de siècle anxiety lead to in terms of cultural production?

Answers for Exercise 1
1. Passion, inspiration, individuality and subjectivity
2. Due to the rise of Christianity, there was a conscious suppression of the intellectual and cultural achievements of ancient Greece and Rome, because it was considered pagan
3. The former has its centre in Athens (Greece), and the latter in Alexandria (modern Egypt)
4. The invention of the printing press, and the use of local vernaculars
5. Experimentation
UNIT 3
CLASSICAL CRITICISM I: PLATO AND ARISTOTLE

Unit Introduction

1. In this unit, students will be introduced to the first forms of literary theory, or literary criticism integrated into a comprehensive, overarching theory.
2. The module in general will use as its starting point the era of Classical Antiquity (ancient Greece and Rome), with this unit focusing specifically on the theories on art and poiesis developed by the noted philosophers Plato and Aristotle.
3. Their theories on art are not only significant for historical reasons, but also because they have shaped, and continue to shape, subsequent approaches to literary theory.

Unit Objectives

1. To establish a definite starting point of literary theory (as we know it).
2. To introduce the theories of the ancient Greek philosophers, Plato and Aristotle, and their theories on art and poiesis.
3. To provide students with an understanding of the theories that continue to shape and influence literary theory in the present day.
Main Points

**TOPIC 1: PLATO (427-347 BC)**

1.1 Athens

- During Plato's time, Athens was already in decline, due to the imminent threat from the more militaristic Sparta (Sparta eventually overcame Athens in the Peloponnesian War, which ended in 404 BC)
- Given this situation, military and practical virtues were prized above all else
- Literature was increasingly being thought of as an immoral pursuit
- It must be kept in mind that the three most exalted playwrights from Classical Athens were significantly older than Plato: Aeschylus lived from 525-455 BC, Sophocles from 496-407 BC, and Euripides from 480-406 BC. Homer, of course, predates Plato's time by more than 400 years
- Thus, philosophers enjoyed an exalted status, more so than poets
- What is important to keep in mind here is that *rationality* was praised more than *inspiration*

1.2 The systematic critic

- Plato was the first *systematic* literary critic
- He is called this because all his views of poetry are not just disparate ideas, but grow outward from a singular, overriding 'truth' (hence the existence of a system, or in other words, a theory)
- Wrote poems in his youth, but destroyed them under the influence of Socrates (his teacher), which may have influenced his denigration of the arts later in his life
- Plato became interested in philosophy and maths instead (more rational endeavours than art), and eventually formed the *Academy*, where he instructed young men in philosophy and maths
1.3 Poiesis/Mimesis

- Poiesis and mimesis are extremely significant (and related) concepts that were later to shape Western literature and literary theory.
- Poiesis in its original form is a verb, meaning to create; it is the origin of the modern word, 'poetry'.
- It must be noted that in later and subsequent units, the terms 'poetry', 'literature' and 'art' are interchangeable, unless otherwise indicated; so too the terms 'poet', 'writer', 'author' and 'artist'.
- Plato equated poiesis with mimesis or imitation (poiesis = mimesis); in other words, he believed that all poetry was imitation.
- Plato believed in the existence of Ideas, that is the perfect, ideal form of earthly things (for the purposes of this module, we shall refer to this as the World of Ideas).
- As Will Durant states: “Behind the surface phenomena and particulars which greet our sense, are generalisations, regularities and directions of development, unperceived by sensation but conceived by reason and thought. These ideas, laws and ideals are more permanent—and therefore, more ‘real’—than the sense-perceived particular things through which we conceived and deduce them” (28-9).
- The earthly things themselves were copies of Ideas.
- Artistic renditions of these earthly things are then copies of copies.
- Simplistically put: if F1 is the ideal form of a flower, F2 an actual flower, and F3 the picture of a flower, then: F3 is a copy of F2, and F2 is a copy of F1.
- It can then be said that F3 is twice removed from F1; so, if the Idea is Truth, then any artistic rendition is twice removed from Truth.
- Philosophy was thus greater than art, since philosophy is about seeking an ultimate truth beyond perceptual appearances, whereas art is necessarily (by the above equation) removed from the truth.
- If this logic is taken to its logical conclusion, this would then mean that every artist is essentially a liar.
- Plato was in the business of churning out young potential leaders from his Academy, so if poets and artists were essentially liars, and given to passion/inspiration instead of rational thinking, then they would not be good role models for these young men...
1.4 Poetic inspiration

- With regards to this inspiration, Plato also believed that artists/poets were
divinely inspired
- He believed that artists were prophets of sorts, channelling the divine
- It must be kept in mind that this was intended as a negative comment, given
  that the implication is that poetry is *irrational*, because it arises out of impulse
  and passion, not contemplative judgment
- This latter point would later be given positive spin in the Neoclassical age
  (which will be discussed later in this module)

1.5 Plato’s objection to poetry

i) Moral

- Plato believed that poetry was not conducive to social morality, since poets
generally narrate tales of vice
- And because ancient Greek literature involved the gods as characters, poets
  were also in the business of making the gods out to be immoral
- In addition, Plato also trotted out the idea (still common in this day and age,
  with regards to culture in general) that poetry was bad for children
- If children are naturally imitative of poetry, and poetry was immoral, then
  children would become immoral too
- Drama is worse than lyric poetry, for while lyric poetry (verse, in this sense)
  aspires towards higher truths somewhat, drama readily appeals to man’s
  baser instincts

ii) Emotional

- Since poets are divinely inspired, and therefore irrational, they cannot be
  relied upon for moral guidance
- And being non-rational, poetry was ultimately useless; even if it did contain
  some nuggets of wisdom, the means by which this wisdom was delivered is
  deliberately vague
- If art is already twice removed from the truth, then the dramatic actors who
  play these works of literature are steeped in further imitation, and are thrice
  removed
And there is always the danger that these actors would adopt the characteristics they play long after the actual play is over; this would represent an impairment of their personal moral refinement.

Poetry also rouses the passions, since it essentially appeals to the emotions rather than the rational mind; this can lead to a loss of moral balance.

Furthermore, there is an emphasis on the emotions of pity and grief, which are emotions that should be restrained, instead of encouraged.

iii) Intellectual/Utilitarian

- As stated above, poets are, in Plato's logic, essentially liars.
- They can only imitate (and for the most part, not very well) natural objects and phenomena which are in themselves imitations of the Ideal.
- In addition, poetry is also not functional, since it neither 'uses' nor 'makes'.

1.6 The divinely inspired poet

- Given that Plato is openly disparaging towards poetry, why are his theories on art considered so influential?
- It is through his denigration of all art as imitations of imitations, that Plato hints at the possibility of the artist drawing inspiration directly from the Ideal; this idea was taken up (or perhaps, purposefully misinterpreted) by many later poets, most notably by Sir Philip Sidney.
- What this means is that artists should (or at least, can) rendering not what is (what is seen) but what could/should be.
- In addition, Plato's World of Ideas hinted at an ulterior truth lying behind appearances.
- This, in some way, is the basic idea underlying almost all of modern Theory, which detects non-visible superstructures/ideologies operating behind the veil of reality (i.e.: the 'master narrative' of history being viewed as a Western construct).
TOPIC 2: ARISTOTLE (384-322 BC)

2.1 The scientific critic

- Where Plato is regarded as the first systematic literary critic, Aristotle (his student) is often considered to be the first scientific literary critic, due to his scientific approach to literary criticism, and his extensive classifications of the constituent components of literature.
- Most of his literary criticism is contained in his Poetics (~335 BC), the earliest known surviving treatise on literary theory.

2.2 About the Poetics

- Aristotle states that all poetry begins with two forms: the satire and the epic.
- The satiric then becomes comedy, and the epic/heroic tragedy.
- Accordingly, the principles valid for judgment of satire are also to an extent valid for comedy; the principles for the epic are valid for tragedy.
- Unlike Plato, who arrived at philosophical truths by way of dialectics (dialogue), Aristotle approached literature like a scientist: he uses as his starting point existing evidence, namely Greek poetry.
- In this way, Aristotle is scientific: analyses facts to arrive at generalisations.
- In addition, he studies poetry in relation to man, which can be seen as the first attempt at a psychological analysis of literature.
- Also, he believed that poetry is more philosophical and elevated than history, since it "tends to express the universal": if philosophy addresses universal ideas, and history particular truths, then poetry can be marriage of the two.

2.3 Poetic unity

i) The organic poem

- Aristotle claims that a poem is like a living organism, where every constituent part serves the whole.
- A work of art must not only impart pleasure by means of its harmonies and sequences, but also its structure and development.
- Every poem thus has to have holistic unity, or correspond to the three unities: time, place, and action.
• Unity of time and place is usually an indicator of continuity; for instance, if in a play the scene switches from night to day (time) or from Athens to Sparta (place) in an unexpected and illogical fashion, the play then loses credibility.

• However, Aristotle is chiefly concerned with the unity of action; this unity is contained within the plot (see 'tragic plot' below).

• All actions within the play must serve the overall effect aimed at by the author; even complex plays with multiple incidences/storylines must be linked causally.

• Simplistically put, this means that having comic scenes, for its own sake, in a tragic play would ruin the overall effect; and even if this tragic play concerned the lives of the characters, they must be linked together by cause and effect to show unity.

ii) The aim of poetry

• In the end, the general aim of a play must be to give its audience refined pleasure, which appeals to the intellect as well as to the feelings.

• Unified actions must also serve this purpose.

• Aristotle maintains that refined pleasure is inherently moral.

• One can infer from this that morality is therefore incidental, and does not have to be the major function of literature.

iii) Katharsis

• Pleasure is brought about by catharsis (catharsis, a release).

• If tragedy reflects life, the viewer is able to, in a way, act out his emotional responses indirectly.

• The emotions referred to here are pity and fear.

• Events in a play that incite an excess of pity and fear in the audience will help them display the appropriate 'amount' of emotion in a real-life instance by establishing a sense of moral perspective.

• And the release of these emotions is, from a moral standpoint, cleansing.
2.4 Tragedy

i) Definition

- Aristotle defined tragedy as the imitation of an action in beautiful language which results in a catharsis of pity and fear.

ii) The tragic plot

- Must have a sequential beginning, middle and end; and must be long enough to allow action to develop, but short enough to stop the action from being diluted.
- Aristotle divides plot into two kinds: simple and complex.
- Simple: without peripety and/or discovery; complex: with peripety and discovery.
- Peripety: change in the fortunes of the hero; discovery: the hero's progression from ignorance to knowledge.

iii) The tragic hero/characters

- Characters must be good, appropriate, lifelike, and consistent; evil characters may be introduced, but they must serve the function of the plot.
- All characters, good or evil, must reflect character types in real life, and must be consistent with their rank/station/profession etc.
- The ideal tragic hero is neither wholly good nor wholly bad; he should, however, lean towards 'good' more than he does 'bad'.
- What separates the tragic hero from a regular 'good guy' protagonist (hence making him more three-dimensional and effective) is that the former falls from a position of eminence, because of hamartia: a tragic flaw.
- This hamartia is usually hubris (excessive pride).

2.5 Poiesis

i) Poiesis and mimesis

- Aristotle agreed with Plato that all art is imitation; the imitation only differs in object, medium, and manner.
- The difference between poetry (literature) and other forms of art is that it imitates imaginatively.
- It also aspires towards the universal, not the particular.
• It must be noted that what Aristotle means by universal is not just a general truth applicable to all humanity: poetry is not about a particular individual, nor strictly about human nature as we know it, but the potentialities that human nature can express.

• A simple analogy: the description of the potential 'prefect' tree able to grow from an acorn, as opposed to a particular acorn, or of a particular fully-formed tree.

• This can be equated somewhat to the 18th century German writer Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's term 'pregnant moment' (although he used the term to describe sculpture): the moment from which potentiality can be expressed.

• This is where Aristotle diverges slightly from Plato: Aristotle believed that poetry is essentially an attempt to attain a higher truth, one greater than that afforded by Nature.

• It can also be put this way: Plato believed that ideas/forms (or characteristics thereof, such as beauty) were abstract and removed from the artistic object (being a virtue of the ideal), but Aristotle believed that beauty was intrinsic to the object.

• This is only a slight divergence: although Plato stated that poetry is merely a twice removed copy from the truth, it can be inferred that he believed poetry can aspire towards truth.

ii) Imaginative reality

• In the case of a fictional world, or a fictional series of events, there must still be unity of action, place and time.

• Despite the reader employing suspension of disbelief when reading of an imaginative reality, the details of that fictional world must be internally logical, and the events internally sequential.

iii) The improbable

• Good poetry shuns the improbable.

• Material improbability: improbability of facts

• Irrationality: logical or sequential chain broken

• Moral improbability: going against laws of human nature.
2.6 Theoretical text

- As noted above, the *Poetics* was the first proper analytical treatise on literature; it was the first theoretical text to formulate principles of poetry and drama.
- Again, it must be kept in mind that Aristotle worked not from generalities downwards, but from the actual evidence of texts (mostly from the evidence of the great plays written before his time) upwards; in this way, the *Poetics* was more descriptive than it was prescriptive.
- In analysing audience effect, and the characteristics of catharsis and the tragic hero, the *Poetics* contained a rudimentary form of psychological criticism.

Observations/Views/Opinions

- Although Plato prized the rational, philosophical mind, and he was scathing in his attack of art, he had the temperament of an artist: using as his starting point the singular idea that art is imitation, and subsequently fleshing that idea out.
- He likened the work of an artist as someone reproducing a real-life object (again, already once removed from the ideal) in a mirror.
- The idea seems simple enough, but its traces can be seen in almost all aesthetic theories, for it addresses the representation of reality.
- The idea of representation became problematic in the Romantic era when doubt in the existence of God began to become more widespread—working on the notion that artists can bypass reality and see into the ‘divine’ through their art, and given that the divine is the Ideal (the original), if that is removed, then what becomes of the artistic object?
- This ‘re-powering’ of the artist (who, in the ‘absence’ of a Creator then becomes the creator him/herself), is also conflated with the doctrine of Idealism.
- Plato, naturally, is labelled as the first Idealist; but where he held that Ideas/Ideals had independent existence (as tangible objects, existing
somewhere), later idealism was more centred on the mind, which is where ideas are stored

- This, in a roundabout way (Kantian Idealism), empowers the individual, since it may be argued that reality exists through the individual's perception of phenomena, taking the form of space and time (and may or may not exist outside that)

- The idea of representation is also a common problematic in modern day theory, where representations of groups (by gender, ethnicity, religion, etc.) are measured against reality, or where the ideologies that come to shape that representation are called into question

- Plato worked like an artist, Aristotle, on the other hand, was more analytical in his approach, approaching literature as a scientist does a test subject

- Plato believed in a World of Ideas, and that everything in the observable world was, in a sense, a lie; Aristotle was very much grounded in the real world, but was interested in the potentialities of the objects within it; in other words, Plato saw the real world as an inferior copy of some ideal, whereas Aristotle saw ideals in real-world objects

- Plato believed that art was a copy of nature; Aristotle believed that although art did imitate nature, it also hinted at an 'ideal' of sorts

- Plato believed that philosophy was greater than art; Aristotle believed that art was greater at least than history, and could approach the level of philosophy, because of the potential to express universals

- Plato distrusted emotions; Aristotle emphasised the need to release emotions

Summary of the Unit

- During Plato's time, Athens was in decline and militaristic, rational values were prized higher than artistic inspiration

- Through his general disdain of poetry (poiesis), Plato became the first systematic literary critic
• He equated poiesis with mimesis, where all art is an imitation of Nature, which in itself is an imitation of an abstract, ideal form; this rendered all works of art as inferior copies, and all artists as liars.

• Plato also held that artists work from (divine) inspiration and hence were irrational.

• He was objected to poetry on a number of fronts: morally, he argued that poetry is not conducive to social morality; emotionally, poetry emphasises passions ahead of rational thought; and intellectually, poetry cannot be considered wise since they are essentially liars.

• However, his emphasis on truths operating, as it were, behind the appearance of reality was to become, directly or not, an important aspect in the study of literary criticism many centuries later.

• Aristotle, Plato’s student, was regarded as the first scientific literary critic.

• This relates to both philosopher’s modus operandi: where Plato worked outwards from a singular idea (poiesis = mimesis), Aristotle examined poetic texts as study objects, and formed generalisations from their study.

• Aristotle also stressed the importance of poetic unity; art is like a living organism, where every constituent part serves the whole, and so must display unity of time, place, and most importantly, action.

• He defines tragedy as the imitation of an action in beautiful language which results in a catharsis of pity and fear.

• The general aim of a play is to give the audience refined pleasure (which is inherently moral) through this emotional catharsis.

• The tragic hero is neither all good nor all bad; he does, however, lean towards the former, and to be truly effective as a character, the tragic hero must fall from a high position due to his or her own hamartia (tragic flaw).

• Although Aristotle agrees with Plato that poiesis = mimesis, he states that artistic imitation is imaginative: it aspires towards the universal, and it is an expression of the potentialities that a real-world object possesses intrinsically.

• Both Plato and Aristotle continue to exert significant influence on modern day literary theory: the former for being the first to apply systematic theory onto art, and the latter for scientifically categorising the constituent parts of art, and examining the psychological effect of art on man.
Additional References


Exercise 1

1. In what way does Plato accuse artists of being blasphemous?
2. Why is Plato referred to as the first systematic literary critic?
3. One of Plato’s supposed derogatory statements about poets was later taken up by defenders of poetry. Which statement was this?
4. When Aristotle speaks of emotional catharsis, which two emotions is he primarily referring to?
5. Can you explain the differences between Plato’s and Aristotle’s take on poiesis and mimesis?
Answers for Exercise 1

1. Poets were inclined to narrate tales of vice, which contained the gods as characters.
2. His criticisms of literature extended outwards from a single theory systematically, instead of being a collection of disparate ideas.
3. Poets are like prophets who are able to channel the divine.
4. Pity and grief.
5. To Plato, the equation of poiesis with mimesis meant that any work of art is necessarily a twice removed imitation of the original, with the original being an object’s ideal form. To Aristotle, poetic/artistic mimesis was imaginative, and hence could illuminate the ideal ‘hidden’ within an object (which Nature cannot do).
UNIT 4
CLASSICAL CRITICISM II: HORACE AND LONGINUS

Unit Introduction

1. In this unit, students will move on from the theories of ancient Greece, and be introduced to literary theory from ancient Rome.
2. The unit will focus specifically on the theories on art developed by Horace, which in itself was a reverential reformulation of Aristotle’s Poetics, as well as the text of On the Sublime, written by Longinus.
3. Horace’s Ars Poetica was almost as influential as Aristotle’s Poetics during the Renaissance and the Neoclassical age, whereas On the Sublime flew in the face somewhat of the continuity established with the cultural productions of ancient Greece.

Unit Objectives

1. To establish the continuity and linkage between the culture of ancient Greece and ancient Rome.
2. To introduce the ideas of the ancient Roman theorists, Horace and Longinus; as well as to show how literary theory vacillates between Apollonian and Dionysian extremes, by noting Longinus’ diversion from the tradition propagated by Horace.
3. To provide students with an understanding of the theories that continue to shape and influence literary theory in the present day.
TOPIC 1: HORACE (65-8 BC)

1.1 Ancient Rome

- At the height of the Roman empire, the centre of intellectual activity shifted from Alexandria to Rome.
- The Golden Age of Roman literature took place under the rule of Augustus (27 BC-14 AD), who personally funded the arts. During this time, the three greatest poets of Rome emerged: Virgil, Cicero, Horace.
- In contrast to the conditions prevalent in Ancient Greece in the preceding chapter, this age was characterised by relative peace, which allowed for a greater emphasis on the arts.
- It was also underscored by nationalism (or the ideology of the Augustan government); literature was viewed as a means of spreading this ideology and as a way of equalling/surpassing the cultural achievements of the Greeks.
- Due to a great number of writers during this period, critical activity (undertaken by good poets like Horace) flourished to keep the 'bad' poets in check.
- As mentioned earlier, there was a self-conscious revival of Greek Classicism.
- A focus on practical utility and formal beauty: where poetry has a discernable social function, and a quantifiable (or at least definable) notion of beauty.

1.2 Ars Poetica or The Art of Poetry

- Horace wrote the Ars Poetica (The Art of Poetry), an epistle or a how-to guide for composing poetry for Piso, a young aspiring poet.
- The Ars Poetica equalled Aristotle's Poetics in terms of influence during the Renaissance.
- In simplistic terms, Horace took Aristotle's (largely) descriptive tenets of poetry (Poetics) and made them prescriptive.
- Persistent theme throughout: a great emphasis on decorum.
- The subject matter of Ars Poetica can be split into three: poesis, poema, poeta.

1) Poesis (content)

- The Latin spelling of poiesis
• Like Aristotle, Horace states that a poem must have organic unity; its constant
cannot lapse into absurdity, and its diction and metre must suit genre
• Poets are free to be creative and imaginative, but within reason

ii) *Poema* (form)
• All plotlines within a poem must be concise and logical
• Characters must correspond to type; *verisimilitude* (a likeness to reality),
similar to Aristotle’s emphasis on characters being lifelike and believable
• Only the appropriate must be represented on stage (decorum)

iii) *Poeta* (poet)
• A poet must work hard to write poetry, and must be a keen observer of
humanity
• The source of good writing is sound judgement
• The most important point of the *Ars Poetica* is Horace’s stress on *utile et
dulce*
• *Utile et dulce* (useful and beautiful): profit with pleasure, instruction with
delight
• Echoing Plato somewhat, Horace said that poetic inspiration is absurd, in the
sense that any poetic excess (or poetic frenzy) should be curtailed

1.3 Supremacy of Greek literature
• As one of the leading lights of the Golden Age, Horace helped to establish the
supremacy of Greek literature and criticism via attempting to establish the
supremacy of Roman literature and criticism
• There was a recreation and reinterpretation of old art forms, which was to be
seen many times again throughout history (especially in the Neoclassical age)
• This is not only seen in relation to the ancient Greeks, but in the general
sense of paying homage to past greats: it implies that a sound knowledge of
artistic principles, structural logic and decorum (as opposed to pure artistic
inspiration) can produce aesthetic results
TOPIC 2: LONGINUS (N.D.)

2.1 Identity

- The exact identity of ‘Longinus’, and the date On the Sublime was written unknown (estimated to be about -1st century AD)
- He was initially thought to be Cassius Longinus, a Roman scholar, or Dionysus of Halicarnassus, but this was proven to be unlikely; critics sometimes refer to the author of On the Sublime as Pseudo-Longinus
- References to over 50 texts, including Genesis (Bible)
- On The Sublime contains a listing of vices that constitute the ‘false sublime’ and characteristics of ‘true sublime’

2.2 On The Sublime

i) The Sublime

- The sublime is loftiness of content and excellence of language
- Put simply, it is the stuff of epic: elements that raise a text into an exalted, grandiose state
- Upon encountering the sublime in a text, the reader is ‘transported’ (moved or carried away by the text)
- Readers will also experience a loss of rationality, an identification with the artist, and exaltation
- Longinus believed that—like in the Iliad, which was rife with plot digressions and illogical events but was still a momentous work of art—it is better for a work to be majestic and flawed, rather than immaculately crafted and mediocre
- This particular point, of course, places him at a directly opposing pole to Horace, who emphasised decorum and intricacy of craft above all else
- Even experimental writers are to be lauded, for they are “bold, lawless and original”
- The ‘true sublime’ uplifts the soul, and expresses an eternal beauty that is not diminished with the passing of time, or a change in context; the ‘false sublime’ is banality guised in bombast
- This distinction was to have great ramifications on the Modern period, as we shall see below
ii) Sources of the sublime

- **Grandeur of conception**: the poet must be free from base and ignoble thoughts, since great ideas spring from great souls
  - These great ideas must then be organised to form an organic whole
    (which is a point of similarity to Horace)

- **Intensity of emotion**: all art must arise from the passions (which is a point of divergence from Plato); amplified emotions transmit a complexity and immensity associated to a subject
  - Although sublimity can be reached by amplification, amplification alone, however, is not sublimity

- **Appropriate use of figures**: these refer to figures of thought and figures of speech; these figures convey emotion
  - Vivid poetical figures and images function to shock and awe, whereas rhetorical images function to clarify
  - Like amplification though, these figures cannot be used arbitrarily; unnatural or incorrect use of these figures (wrong place, wrong time) causes **bathos**
  - Some of these figures include **hyperbaton** (inversion), **anaphora** (repetition), **asyndetan** (conjunctions left out), **apostrophe** (addressing inanimate object), and **periphrasis** (paraphrasing)

- **Nobility of diction**: the choice of words is also an indicator of the sublime; these include metaphors, similes and hyperbole
  - There are no set rules to the employment of these words, but they must arise out of passion to be effective

- **Dignified composition**: phrases must also be arranged in such a way as to be rhythmic

2.3 Imagination and passion

- Unlike his predecessors, Longinus speaks of art as arising from imagination and passion; it is not something that can be mechanically crafted

- Although Plato also spoke of this inspiration (describing artists as being divinely inspired) he meant it in a derogatory manner, insisting instead that artists should rely on their rational faculties; Longinus speaks of inspiration positively, and as a necessary condition to greatness
• More importantly, Longinus can also be considered as the first aesthetic critic; he does not speak at all of the practical (utilitarian) use of art, besides pure aesthetic pleasure for its own sake.

• In his attempt to define exactly and classify what constitutes the sublime, Longinus can be equated to Aristotle.

• But where Aristotle's legacy was to inspire strict adherence in his followers—such as Horace and the later Neoclassics, who turned the philosopher's descriptive terms into prescriptive rules—Longinus' was to inspire the free passion of the Romantics, who adhered to his sentiments more than his descriptions.

Observations/Views/Opinions

• The Modernist poet Archibald MacLeish composed a poem entitled "Ars Poetica" (1925) which is about the metaphysical nature of poetry; the term *ars poetica* is now used to describe a rhetorical device, in which say, a song is understood by a song, a poem by a poem, etc.

• Horace's *Ars Poetica* held great sway for many poets throughout the Renaissance and the Romantic period; not in the sense of his 'rules' being followed strictly, but more for his basic descriptions of what constitutes good poetry.

• *Utile et dulce*: the term is also referred to as *dulce et utile*; either way, the message of rhetoric is the same: with the presupposition that any text should be moral, its inherent message can be delivered easier if it is encased within pleasurable content.

• In other words, the message of *utile et dulce* can be reduced to the line from the song in Mary Poppins: 'Just a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down.'

• Thus, the poet was responsible for not only creating a moral text, but also to create a pleasurable one, to ensure that its intrinsic message is delivered effectively.
In Longinus’ overall ‘failure’ to classify exactly what it is that makes a work of art sublime, he hints at a ‘grace beyond the reach of art’ (in Alexander Pope’s words), which posits that true greatness is, in fact, impossible to reduce into simple formulae.

And although it is unspoken, Longinus’ identification of the sublime—an ‘X-factor’, as it were—is the very sentiment that greets many readers’ reverence when encountered with a great work of art.

This idea of an indescribable brilliance taken for granted, the ‘true sublime’ would be broken down to great effect by James Joyce in his Ulysses (1922), in which the banal, humdrum events of Leopold Bloom’s life are given epic dress (Ulysses is structured, part for part, like the Iliad).

Interestingly, although this is Longinus’ very definition of the ‘false sublime’, Ulysses is now considered a sublime work of art.

Summary of the Unit

Under the reign of Augustus, Rome experienced its Golden Age of literature, where poets were looking to equal/surpass the literary achievements of the ancient Greeks.

This led to a very self-conscious revival of Greek Classicism, but with an added emphasis on social utility.

Accordingly, Horace’s Ars Poetica, which took the form of a how-to guide to a young poet, took many of Aristotle’s descriptive tenets and turned them into prescriptive rules.

On the whole, Horace prioritised decorum in poetry, in terms of its poesis (content, whereby every poem has to have organic unity), poema (form, where versimilitude is expected to be employed in the creation of characters) and poeta (poet, where the poet has to mix duty with pleasure or utile et dulce).
What Horace’s *Ars Poetica* achieved (since it was required reading for poets hundreds of years later) was the exaltation of ancient Greek literature via the exaltation of ancient Roman literature.

Longinus’ *On the Sublime* concerns what he calls the sublime, which is loftiness of content and excellence of language.

Readers, upon encountering the sublime, experience an ecstatic rapture.

This only applies to the ‘true sublime’; the ‘false sublime’, which is banality dressed in bombastic language cannot produce the same effect.

Longinus’ believed that a majestic and flawed text is better than an intricately crafted but mediocre text.

The sources of the sublime are grandeur of conception, intensity of emotion, appropriate use of figures, nobility of diction and dignifies composition.

Unlike Horace, Longinus insists that the sublime writer works from inspiration, rather than contemplative, rational adherence to predetermined rules.

Because of this, and his insistence upon the textual effects alone (as opposed to insisting that a text serve as a moral compass or fulfil some other utilitarian need) Longinus can be considered the first aesthetic critic, where art is enjoyed for its own sake.

Longinus was very influential in terms of identifying (although not in any comprehensive manner) the indescribable reverence paid towards a great work of art.

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**Additional References**


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**Exercise 1**

1. What is the overriding trait emphasised throughout the *Ars Poetica*?
2. What is *verisimilitude*?
3. What is *utile et dulce*?
4. What is the false sublime?
5. Explain the different stances towards poetic inspiration that both Horace and Longinus took.
Answers for Exercise 1

1. Decorum

2. A likeness to reality; this is similar to Aristotle’s dictum that all characters should be lifelike and believable.

3. The combination of instruction and delight in a text; the message of a text (the primary instructional element) would be more effectively delivered when

4. Banality falsely expressed with bombastic language

5. Horace: poetic excess arising from inspiration was absurd; attempted to show that structural logic and decorum can be used to produce aesthetic results. Longinus: the sublime can only be achieved when inspired by passion, since the ultimate goal is to move the emotions, and not to persuade by means of rhetoric.
UNIT 5
CRITICISM OF THE ENGLISH RENAISSANCE:
THE MIDDLE AGES, SIR PHILIP SIDNEY AND BEN JONSON

Unit Introduction

1. Given that the intellectual achievements of Classical Antiquity were repressed during the Middle Ages (Medieval/Dark Ages), literary critical activity was to a large extent limited to biblical exegesis, the unit will only gloss over this period briefly.
2. The period did, however, catalyse the coming of the Renaissance, where the culture and intellectual achievements of Classical Antiquity were revived, most notably in Sir Philip Sidney’s *Defence of Poetry*.
3. This inclination towards the Classics was further emphasised by Ben Jonson.

Unit Objectives

1. To further evidence the idea of continuity (chronological and thematic) in literary theory, as an ongoing activity that is based on preceding thought.
2. To introduce literary critical activity taking place during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance; in this case, with special attention paid to Sir Philip Sidney and Ben Jonson.
3. To provide students with an understanding of the theories that continue to shape and influence literary theory in the present day.
Main Points

TOPIC 1: THE MIDDLE AGES (5-15 c.)

1.1 History

- The period referred to as the Middle Ages (or the Dark Ages) took place after the fall of the Western Roman empire.
- The fall of the Roman empire was caused by the rise of barbarian hordes in the West (and later the rise of the Ottoman empire in the East, which in turn catalysed the Renaissance).
- The increased decentralisation of government saw a surge of nationalism (nation-states), and the idea of an international Christendom (fusion of Church and state within individual nation-states, and in some cases, linkage to the Vatican in Rome).
- Due to Christianity playing such a major role in the culture of the era, Greco-Roman literary/cultural activity was mostly neglected, since it was considered pagan (pre-Christian).
- There was a persistent militaristic culture present during most of the era.

1.2 Literary Activity

- This is not to say that literary activity was entirely absent; a number of very significant texts were written during this period (i.e.: Beowulf, ca. 8th century; The Song of Roland, ca. 1140; The Song of the Nibelungs, ca. 1230; and Geoffrey Chaucer’s The Canterbury Tales, 1483), but literary critical activity was focused almost entirely on biblical exegesis (interpretation).
- But arguably the most important text written during this period, Dante Alighieri’s The Divine Comedy (1308) was in many ways an indicator of the impending Renaissance.
- Although dealing very specifically with Christian mythology, in his illustration of the Christian Hell Dante includes many figures from Greco-Roman history and mythology.

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This was to have great importance on later interpretations of Christian mythology (specifically popular conceptions of Heaven and Hell), but to some extent, the close association of Christian with Greco-Roman myth legitimised the latter.

In addition, Dante was also instrumental in ushering in the use of vernacular (in his case, the Florentine Italian dialect) instead of Latin.

**TOPIC 2: THE RENAISSANCE**

2.1 History

- With the fall of Constantinople (the Eastern Roman stronghold, to Ottoman forces in 1453) the Renaissance was ushered in.
- ‘Renaissance’ is the French word for rebirth; this period is usually referred to as such due to the revival of the lineage of Classical thought, which was interrupted by the Dark Ages.
- Greek scholars moved and settled further West (especially in Italy), bringing with them texts of Antiquity; these included translations of Aristotle and Horace; this is where (specifically, in Florence) it is usually claimed that the Renaissance was born.
- It must be kept in mind that with the Renaissance, or even with any of the time periods in this module, there is no exact start and end point, and no uniform change across geographical regions; the dates given in this unit are generalisations intended to ease understanding.
- It was also during this period that the printing press (by Johannes Gutenberg in 1440) was invented, and texts began to be translated into local vernaculars, as stated above.
- This had a very significant social impact: culture was no longer the sole dominion of the ruling and priestly class, but could be consumed by all levels of society (naturally, such a marked change in the designated audience for cultural products would in turn change their modes of production).
- The Renaissance is more well-known for its artistic output, rather than its criticism, neither of which were uniform across the board.
• In terms of artistic output, for every Shakespeare, who toyed with established dramatic structures at will, there was a Classical rule-adhering Ben Johnson.

• But perhaps two of the most well-known artistic figures of the age are Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo; it was their dabbling in a variety of fields that spawned the term 'Renaissance Man'.

• Also, it became, for lack of a better term, fashionable for the common man to become a man of learning, enabled by the wealth of Greco-Roman cultural products which were being translated into local vernaculars at the time, and once again, there would be a revival of Greco-Roman modes of thought (inquiry, appreciation of beauty) that did not necessarily hinge on its practical use to the Church.

2.2 Chief concerns of the age

• There was a dichotomous situation in existence during the Renaissance with regards to the type of literature to be produced.

• One the one hand, there were those, such as Shakespeare, who were prone to experiment—a freedom afforded by culture no longer being strictly bound by the decrees of the Church.

• On the other, the abundance of Greco-Roman texts, specifically those of Aristotle and Horace, meant that there were ready-made ‘guide books’ on how to produce exalted literature.

• The chief concerns of the Renaissance were:
  • *Literary genres*: Aristotle and Plato had already classified genres of literature, and thus it was in these genres (poetry and drama) that the majority of texts were written (novels, such as Miguel Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, were also written during this period, but their production was far behind that of the other two genres).
  • *Decorum and rules*: As stated earlier, since the texts of Aristotle and Horace provided ready-made how-to guides on producing literature, many of their rules were adapted into poetic composition.
  • *Classic vs. English meter*: In England, since English was an accented language, there was a debate as to whether to use Classical meter (dependent on syllable length) in the interests of being fully adherent to
Classical rules, or whether to use English meter (such as the iambic pentameter, which was dependent on accents)

- Imaginative literature vs. Classical literature vs. moralists: As stated above, there was a debate on whether literature should be imaginative/experimental, or should be adherent to Classical forms, subject matter and even the composition to be moral.

2.3 The four stages

- Roughly, literary critical activity during the Renaissance can be divided into four stages:

  i) The rhetorical phase
  - The first Classical texts that began to be studied in 14th century Italy were the works of rhetoricians, especially Cicero and Quintilian
  - As is noted in the first unit (under 'legislative criticism') rhetorical criticism examines the style and manner of delivery of rhetoric, which in its categorisation of effect, is a form of literary criticism.

  ii) Classification of poetic forms
  - With the arrival of other Classical texts (with the migration of Greek scholars into Italy, and the translation of these texts into Latin), Classical systems of prose and verse forms began to be classified systematically
  - Also, it is during this phase that Classical meter began to be introduced into England (which then, as described above, morphed into its own entity)

  iii) Philosophical and apologetic criticism
  - English poetry (in verse forms that were not imitated, but originally English) was attacked by Classicists/moralists (see above); the former, who disliked the deviation from Classical forms, and the latter, who felt that poetry was immoral
  - This is where 'apologists' like Sir Philip Sidney came in, with his Defence of Poetry, to 'save' the art by studying its history and fundamental principles
iv) Classicism
- The Classicism of Ben Jonson, where more emphasis was placed on rules and dogma (in relation to the creative process) took centre stage towards the end of the Renaissance.
- This paved the way for Neoclassicism, which will be examined in the next unit.

TOPIC 3: SIR PHILIP SIDNEY (1554-1586)

3.1 The Defence of Poetry
- Sidney was a prominent Elizabethan poet, but is probably more well-known as the author of The Defence of Poetry (or An Apology for Poetry, 1581).
- The Defence of Poetry was written in a reply to Stephen Gosson’s The School of Abuse (1579), which was dedicated to Sidney, and attacked literature on a number of issues, but all having to do with morality.
- Gosson claimed that:
  - Poets are mere ‘jesters’ and enemies of virtue
  - Music is debilitating, and undermines virtue;
  - Drama is an incitement to popular debauchery;
  - Tragic drama was filled with acts of cruelty;
  - Comedic drama was filled with vulgar love affairs; and
  - Plato himself banished poets from his ideal state.

3.2 Counterarguments
- The Defence of Poetry has five main counterarguments:
  1) The Antiquity and universality of poetry
   - Poetry precedes all other branches of learning; it is one of the oldest forms of human expression
   - It is from these early poets that philosophers and historians arose
   - Poetry flourished in all ages and in all countries
   - The Greeks and Romans elevated the poet to almost godlike status (the word ‘poet’ in Greek means ‘maker’).
ii) Types of poetry, is nature and usefulness
- Religious poetry functions to sing the praises of God/the gods
- Philosophical poetry imparts knowledge
- True poetry is conjured by the actual ‘makers’; these include the epic poets who inspire men to action

iii) Sidney’s direct reply to criticisms
- Criticism: “Poetry is useless and a waste of time”
  - Sidney held that poetry is actually conducive to virtue, and therefore superior to philosophy or history
- Criticism: “Poets are liars”
  - If the poet never makes any claims to truth, then by definition he cannot be a liar
  - The poet represents instead an imaginative reality: what should be instead of what is
- Criticism: “Poetry inclines one towards contemplation, and disinclines one from action”
  - Given that all knowledge is contemplative, if the above criticism is to be taken to its logical conclusion, then all books on all fields of human knowledge should be banned
  - The claim is rendered false anyway by the fact that poetry has inspired men for ages, especially in times of war
- Criticism: “Plato himself banished poets from his ideal state”
  - Plato, Sidney claims, was more concerned with the abuse of poetry (thereby implying that ‘poets’ in this sense are ‘bad poets’)
  - Plato, who was a poet himself in his youth, regarded the true poet as being divinely inspired

iv) The state of contemporary English drama
- Part of the reason there was so much contempt for poetry, Sidney claimed, was that contemporary English drama was lacking
- In an era of relative peace in England, poets had become sluggish
• There was an absence of true geniuses; and those that did engage in poetry were ignorant of the poetic art (read: ignorant of the rules of Classical Antiquity, especially the rules of Aristotle)
• Echoing Aristotle, Sidney doggedly emphasised the three unities (time, place, action)
• And like Aristotle, Sidney did not approve of tragicomedy as a genre, since the mingling of two disparate elements caused a rupture in unity
• He also disapproved of the evil and vulgar being presented in comedy
• Contemporary love-poetry was degenerate; its ornate style was not suited to its content

v) Remarks on style, diction and versification
• Sidney believed that English was a far superior language to other continental languages
• He disapproved of flamboyant displays of wordplay; he maintained that ‘true art lies in concealing art’
• He was one of the proponents of the introduction of Classical meter into English verse

TOPIC 4: BEN JONSON (1572-1637)

4.1 About Ben Jonson
• Like Sidney, Jonson was a Classicist; he was not as much a Classicist as John Dryden and Samuel Johnson (see next unit), but he was a Classicist nonetheless
• Jonson’s criticism was a reaction against the Romantic tendencies of the Elizabethan age (Jonson was a contemporary of Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe, see below); it was an attempt to impose order upon chaos
• As a testament to his Classicism, Jonson translated Horace’s Ars Poetica into verse
4.2 His criticism
i) The nature and function of poetry
   - Like Sidney, Jonson believed that art ranked above other branches of human knowledge because those branches reached their apex within art.
   - Thus, art provided one with a how-to guide to live a happy and well-adjusted life.
   - Like Horace, Jonson held the view that art can both instruct and delight (utile et dulce).

ii) The poet
   - Jonson stated that the poet (note that this is distinct from 'a poet', indicating that Jonson is describing the epitome of the art) must fulfill certain criteria:
     - To have natural or inborn instinct (Nature): a poet should possess the divine within him/her.
     - To constantly practice and exercise his gift (Exercise): to perfect that inborn gift.
     - To imitate past models (Imitation): the poet should be able to assimilate and adapt what he finds good in previous poets' works.
     - To be widely read (Studies): so that knowledge is at his disposal.
     - To have 'art' or knowledge of poetic technique (Art): what makes a poet perfect.
   - Jonson's emphasis on imitation is a measure of his indebtedness to Classical Antiquity, which he viewed as a necessary criteria of greatness.
   - 'A poet is that which by the Greeks is called kaf exochn, o poiihiz [the maker par excellence], a maker or a feigner; his art, an art of imitation or feigning, expressing the life of man in fit measure, numbers, and harmony, according to Aristotle: from the word polein, which signifies to make or feign. Hence, he is called a poet, not he which writeth in measure only; but that feigneth and formeth a fable, and writes things like the truth. For, fable and fiction is (as it were) the form and soul of any poetical work, or poem'.
   - "...to convert the substance, or Riches of an other Poet, to his owne use. To make choice of one excellent man above the rest, and so to follow him, till he grow very Hee: or so like him, as the Copie may be mistaken for the Principall" (in Messer, "There Are No Accidents").
iii) The ancients

- Despite Jonson's emphasis on imitation, he states that the ancients (classical Antiquity) should function as guides, not commanders
- With regard to dramatic criticism, the outward forms of the ancients can be disregarded

Observations/Views/Opinions

- It must be stressed that there is no overriding trend in the art produced during the Renaissance
- There were two distinct strands of artistic production—the experimental, which was the extension of the artistic freedom and humanism prevalent during the age, and the Classical, which was an extension of the new discovered wealth of ancient Greek and Roman texts
- Many eminent critics of the period were artists themselves and were very much of the latter camp
- But arguably, it is the experimental strain that has survived better, being more readily associated with the Renaissance in popular opinion
- Sir Philip Sidney was very much a Classicist, and in his *Defence of Poetry* a direct lineage from Aristotle and Horace can be traced; Ben Jonson (who will be studied in the next unit) is of similar inclination, especially since he produced a translation of Horace's *Ars Poetica*
- We will also see in a later unit the similarities between Sidney's *Defence of Poetry* and Percy Bysshe Shelley's similarly titled defence, produced in the Romantic age
- Ben Jonson too was very much in a Neoclassical camp; his drama was an extension of the new rediscovered wealth of ancient Greek and Roman texts
- Jonson's constant emphasis on looking back to Antiquity (in his criticism and drama) is greatly contrasted to the imaginative excess of his most famous contemporary, William Shakespeare
- Jonson was sometimes critical of Shakespeare's art: one famous anecdote is when Jonson was told that Shakespeare never blotted any lines when writing, to which he replied 'Would he had blotted a thousand'.
- Although both playwrights were of roughly equal standing during the period, Jonson was known as the more educated of the two, being well-versed in the Classics, and who adhered to the rules that they had set; while he described Shakespeare as possessing 'small Latine, and lesse Greeke', and as a man who adhered only to rules set by his audience.
- Despite this however, Jonson readily acknowledged Shakespeare's natural genius.
- It was the Classical strain that was to carry directly into the Neoclassical period, while the experimental strain was taken to its logical conclusion in the Romantic period.

Summary of the Unit

- The period referred to as the Middle Ages took place after the fall of the Roman Empire.
- It was characterised by the rise to prominence of Christianity, which had a direct influence of the culture of the age: the culture of Antiquity was largely ignored, since it was considered pagan; and as a result, literary critical activity was mostly confined to biblical exegesis.
- There were a number of epic texts written during this period, but arguably the most prominent, Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, is notable for incorporating Greco-Roman mythology into a very Christian framework, which was an early indication of the change that was about to sweep Europe later that century.
- With the fall of Constantinople, the Renaissance was ushered in with the migration of many Greeks to Italy, who brought along with them texts of Antiquity.
- Two important factors changed the mode of cultural output irrevocably: the increased usage of local vernaculars, and the invention of the printing press.
brought culture to the masses (a new audience), as opposed to being the sole dominion of a learned few

- There were two very distinct strands of art that reflected this period of great change: the imaginative, which was an extension of the humanism of the Renaissance, and the needs of the new cultural audience; and the Classical, which was an extension of the new wealth of texts of Antiquity

- Fittingly, the chief concerns of the age (aside from imaginative literature vs. Classical literature) were literary genres, decorum and rules, Classical vs. English meter

- Literary critical activity during the Renaissance can be divided into four stages: the rhetorical phase, classification of poetic forms, philosophical and apologetic criticism, and Classicism

- Sir Philip Sidney wrote his *Defence of Poetry* (during the third philosophical stage) as a response to attacks on poetry by Stephen Gosson

- On the whole, Sidney was arguing from the standpoint of a Classicist, and noted that: poetry is conducive to virtue; poets are not liars since they present an imaginative reality; poetry is not purely a wasteful, contemplative activity; and stating that Plato's denigration of poets was actually a denigration of bad poets

- Sidney did, however, lament the state of contemporary English drama during his time, stating that there was an absence of true geniuses

- Ben Jonson was more of a Classicist than Sidney (the fourth Classical stage of critical activity during the Renaissance; see previous unit), and actively looked to curtail the Romantic (imaginative) excesses in the literature of his age (best exemplified by William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe)

- With regard to the nature and function of poetry, Jonson (echoing Horace and Sidney) believed that art ranked above other branches of human knowledge, partly because it has the ability to both instruct and delight

- But arguably Jonson's most famous theories concerned the poet (as distinguished from 'a poet'): the poet should have natural genius, should constantly hone this gift, to imitate past models (the Classics), to be widely read, and to have 'art' or knowledge of poetic technique
• Despite the emphasis on the imitation of the Classics, however, he maintained that they should only be used as guides, and not masters.

Additional References


Exercise 1

1. Explain how the rise to prominence of Christianity affected cultural output during the Middle Ages.
2. What does the term ‘Renaissance Man’ refer to?
3. What are the four stages of literary criticism during the Renaissance?
4. How did Sir Philip Sidney deflect Stephen Gosson’s claim that Plato banished poets from his ideal state?
5. What are the characteristics of ‘the poet’ according to Jonson?

Answers for Exercise 1

1. Due to the rise of Christianity, pre-Christian forms of knowledge and culture were considered pagan; thus, the culture of Antiquity was largely ignored or suppressed, and all literary critical activity concerned biblical exegesis.
2. A man of great learning, with interests in numerous fields of culture.
3. The rhetorical phase, classification of poetic forms, philosophical and apologetic criticism, Classicism.
4. Sidney claimed that Plato only wished to banish bad poets, and not good poets, since the latter were divinely inspired.
5. The poet should have natural genius, the industry to hone this genius through practice, imitate past models of other great poets, to be widely read and to have ‘art’ or knowledge of poetic technique. In short, the poet must both possess natural talent and the aptitude to work within established notions of greatness.
UNIT 6
CRITICISM OF THE NEO-CLASSICAL PERIOD:
JOHN DRYDEN, ALEXANDER POPE, JOSEPH ADDISON & SAMUEL JOHNSON

Unit Introduction

1. The Classical strain from the Renaissance bled into the Neoclassical age, which became of even greater import due to the rise of Puritanism
2. As its name implies, there was even greater emphasis on the rules of Classical composition—specifically with John Dryden and Samuel Johnson—of which morality in literature was already a major defining feature
3. This unit especially will show that literary critical activity does not only hinge on chronology, nor on past literary models, but also on particular socio-political factors

Unit Objectives

1. To further evidence the idea of continuity (chronological and thematic) in literary theory, as an ongoing activity that is based on preceding thought
2. To introduce literary critical activity taking place during 17th and 18th century Europe; with special attention paid to the John Dryden and Samuel Johnson
3. To provide students with an understanding of the theories that continue to shape and influence literary theory in the present day
Main Points

TOPIC 1: NEOCLASSICISM (17-18 c.)

1.1 General characteristics and historical background

- The Italian influence from the preceding age began to be replaced by the French
- Following on from the Classicist strain of the Renaissance (see previous unit), there was a greater emphasis on Greco-Roman rules of Classical composition
- England underwent a civil war in the 17th century; Charles I was eventually overthrown and executed by Oliver Cromwell, who made England into a republic for the first and only time in its history (The Commonwealth of England, 1649)
- Cromwell was a strict Puritan; historically, a Puritan is a term for an associate of Protestant religious groups advocating a purer form of worship and doctrine, to rid the Church of England from its more ‘Catholic’ aspects
- Cromwell, or rather his parliament, banned all public activities that were thought to contravene puritanical codes of morality, and this included all theatre activities
- Some of the harsher acts of Puritanism include:
  - William Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre in South London being torn down in 1644; in 1648 all playhouses are torn down
  - The whipping of all players (actors), and fines for any member of the public caught attending a play
  - The outlawing of Christmas and Easter, because their origins are pagan (Roman)
- After Cromwell’s death, Charles II restored the monarchy (the Restoration), and reopened playhouses
- Charles II’s reign was a relatively peaceful one, and there was also a relative stagnation in literary activity
1.2 Literary Activity

- Purely for ease of understanding, we can label the experimental strain of the Renaissance (see previous unit) in 'Italian' strain, and the post-Renaissance Classical strain a 'French' strain.

- The Italian strain was so strong during the Renaissance because of the way rules of Classical composition were flouted to achieve greatness and originality, but the French, through strictly Neoclassical playwrights like Jean Racine, had shown that greatness can be achieved by adhering to those rules.

- Besides the French influence in this century, the Classical strain already growing in influence in the previous one, and the after effects of the Puritanical wave, Neoclassicism was also a response to Baroque (Metaphysical) art:
  - The Baroque was sanctioned by the Catholic church, and aimed at grandeur and excess via breaking through the limits of Classical composition.
  - The Metaphysical poets in England (John Donne, John Milton) explored religious themes that did not necessarily agree with the Church of England.
  - Besides, their verse was characterised by an often violent passion (especially that of Milton) that was to become influential in the Romantic era.

- The general features of Neoclassicism include:
  - *Follow nature*: Nature in this sense is taken to mean external reality; see verisimilitude and mimesis from the previous units.
  - *Correctness and good sense*: This emphasis on decorum implies a sort of staid modesty in verse, where emotions, originality and *furore poetico* (poetic frenzy or inspiration) were to be kept in check by rules.
  - *Universality*: Emphasised over the particular, which was stressed by Aristotle.
• **Utile et dulce:** Like Horace (and Sir Philip Sidney and Ben Jonson after him) the Neoclassicists stressed that literature must both instruct and delight

• **Elevation of poetic language:** Poetic language must be elevated and distinct from prose and everyday language

• **Rhyme vs. blank verse:** To an extent, this was an extension of the English vs. Classical meter in the Renaissance; this time, there was an emphasis on rhyme (classical) over blank verse (employed most famously by Shakespeare and Milton)

**TOPIC 2: JOHN DRYDEN (1631-1700)**

2.1 About John Dryden

- John Dryden, poet, playwright and critic, is regarded as the father of English criticism; he loomed over the Age of Restoration so large that the age is sometimes known as 'The Age of Dryden'
- Part of this was due to the fact that he popularised comparative and practical criticism, as opposed to the legislative criticism that was common before him
- Dryden was very much a Neoclassicist, but glorified English drama over the French
- His criticism is contained in *Essay on Dramatick Poesie*, and numerous prefaces and epilogues to his works

2.1 Works

i) *Essay on Satire* (preface to translation of Juvenal's *Satires*)
- The aim of satire is a correction of manners
- Raised the status of satire as a genre to epic proportions

ii) *Essay on Heroic Tragedy* (preface to Dryden's own *The Conquest of Granada*)
- Here, Dryden defines a heroic play as 'an imitation...of a heroic poem'
- Love and valour are important themes, more so than Aristotelian pity and fear
iii) Preface to Fables (preface to translations of Homer, Ovid, Giovanni Boccaccio and Geoffrey Chaucer)

- Raises the standing of Chaucer by comparing his 'genius' to Ovid's
- Here, Dryden also defines drama as a 'just and lively image of human nature, representing its passions and humours, and the changes of fortune to which it is subject, for the delight and instruction of mankind'
- Just and lively image of human nature:
  - Just, a fair representation; lively: an imaginative representation of humanity
- Representing its passions and humours, and the changes of fortune to which it is subject
  - This pertains to Aristotelian universality, as well as variety (see Essay on Dramatick Poesie below)
- For the delight and instruction of mankind:
  - Delight and instruction: utile et dulce
  - In one instance, Dryden says the chief aim of poetry is to instruct; but he also says 'a bare imitation will not serve'
  - There is an emphasis on delight
  - Delight can be taken to mean the delight attained from the appreciation of beauty; and what is beautiful is often noble; therefore beauty instructs man to appreciate nobility and morality

iv) Essay on Dramatick Poesie

- The essay is a dialogue between four speakers: Eugenius, Crites, Lisideius and Neander (Neander represented Dryden himself)
- The four men discuss three major themes: Classical vs. modern drama, French vs. English drama, and rhyme vs. blank verse
  - Classical vs. modern drama: Crites maintains that Classical drama had plots which were more 'just' (moral), while Eugenius maintains that modern drama is more 'lively. Neander sides with the moderns
  - French vs. English drama and rhyme vs. blank verse: Lisideius states that French plots (which, as mentioned above, tended to show a greater inclination towards Classicism) are better at preserving Aristotle's three unities; but Neander counters by saying that in the works of English
dramatists, the three unities are maintained without sacrificing character and motive

- French plays better adhere to Classical rules, but the result is a cramped style; English plays may violate these rules, but they contain more humour and variety
- Neander also states that tragicomedy (a hybrid genre usually thought to be unique to Elizabethan English dramatists) is not absurd; instead, it is natural, and allows each element to play off one another; even certain French dramatists mingle tragedy and comedy
- In addition, Neander claims that plays should suit the temperament of its people, stating that long speeches are suited to the French, while brevity and wit are suited to the English
- This is because, as he claims, English plays are more ‘masculine’
- He believes that the contemporary English dramatists have surpassed those of other countries, and even the ancients
- Word choice is more paramount to determine the naturalness of language, not so much its placement
- The Elizabethans have taken the art of blank verse to its height; the Restoration poets cannot match them, so they must resort to rhyme to suit the era

2.2 Post-Dryden

- Criticism post-Dryden does not alter much from the Restoration period
- If anything, it only becomes more Neoclassical, with some of Dryden’s ideas being taken to their logical conclusions
- It is characterised by:
  - Cultural nationalism (preference of English over French); to the extent that everything from France was considered bad by some critics
  - Historicism (reverence of the Classics)
  - The belief that different ages call for different standards of interpretation
  - Criticism becomes more and more descriptive, and is no longer legislative
3.1 Joseph Addison

- As noted in the previous unit, one of the features of criticism post-Dryden was a marked sense of historicism.
- Joseph Addison, the founder of *The Spectator* magazine, was mostly Aristotelian in his criticism, for instance in his denouncement of tragicomedy as a genre.
- However, he did not limit his criticism to a particular set of rules or a genre, but formulated a kind of reader-response criticism intended for all of society.
- Arguably his most notable contribution was his incorporation of Longinus’s term ‘sublime’ in his interpretation of Milton— which was to have great importance in the following Romantic phase.

3.2 Alexander Pope

- Alexander Pope is usually remembered more for being a poet than a critic.
- His contribution to literary criticism is that he is a ‘bastardised’ Neoclassical; in the previous unit, it was noted that criticism post-Dryden was also characterised by Neoclassicism being taken to its logical conclusion.
- Pope not only incorporated the rules not of the ancients themselves, but those who had revised and reformulated the Ancients (including Horace).
- In Pope’s view, the Neoclassical emphasis on ‘following nature’ can apply to ‘following the Ancients’ as well: i.e.: to read Homer was to read nature.

4.1 The age

- The second half of the 18th century was marked by a dual trend in literary criticism.
- Once again, there was the (Neo)classical strain and the Romantic strain; the latter carried forward from the spontaneity of the Elizabethan age (which we will examine in the next unit).
- However, there was no clear distinction between the two in terms of practice (the actual writing of literary texts).
Once again, it is important to bear in mind that changes in literary practices are not as marked as indicated by timelines, as in going from being entirely Neoclassical to entirely Romantic; these changes—barring massive socio-political upheavals—are usually slow to develop, and display a great deal of overlapping and co-existence.

4.2 About Samuel Johnson

- Samuel Johnson sought to defend Classicism, particularly against the rising Romantic trend.
- It is important to note that despite popular depictions (such as in the British television show Blackadder) of Johnson co-existing with the five rising Romantic poets, he is significantly older than any of them: Coleridge and Wordsworth would only have been in their early teens, and with Shelley, Byron and Keats not even being born at the time of Johnson’s death.
- He was known as a fierce literary dictator; asserted a magisterial presence on 18th century England, and sought to bring order upon the age.
- Wrote *A Dictionary of the English Language*, which was not the first dictionary, but the first comprehensive classification of the English language.
- Johnson said he published the Dictionary for ‘the use of such as aspire to exactness of criticism, or elegance of style’.
- In terms of criticism, he is perhaps best known for his *Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets* (*Lives of the Poets, 1779-1781*) which was a collection of short biographies and criticism of 52 poets (including Milton, Dryden, Addison and Pope), which as its name would indicate, was a work of biographical criticism.
- He also wrote a preface to *The Plays of William Shakespeare*, which contained his criticism of Shakespeare, who was not included in *Lives of the Poets*.

4.3 *Lives of the Poets*

- Johnson believed even trivial details of an author’s life is necessary for the appreciation and criticism of literature.
What Johnson was aiming at was to introduce sincerity and truthfulness in literature, as opposed to artificial ornaments and trivial, particular concerns.

However, his criticism is very much coloured by his personal beliefs and prejudices: Johnson was a conservative, a Classicist, and a monarchist; he had little patience with those who had dissimilar beliefs.

On the whole, Johnson is a strict Neoclassicist, but was able to rise above his preconceived notions on what literature should be on occasion, when presented with genius.

It can be said that Johnson’s Classicism was liberal; he rose above the limitations of the age because he was independent.

He defines poetry as ‘the art of writing pleasure with truth, by calling imagination to the help of reason; and states that ‘the essence of poetry is invention; such invention as, by producing something unexpected, surprises and delights’; with regard to the function of poetry, Johnson says that ‘poetry must give pleasure, but it must also have truth’.

He was a firm believer in utile et dulce, in the sense of utile being an universal moral or religious truth, and with an emphasis on imagination in the dulce.

In this sense, he was Aristotelian: he believed that poetry must address universal human interest, and was critical of literature that was too imaginative or escapist for its own sake, or did not deal with issues pertinent to the human condition.

General dislike of blank verse (since he believed that the language of life should be true to everyday life), but made exceptions where he felt blank verse seemed natural, most notably with John Milton and William Shakespeare.

4.4 On Milton

- Contained in Life of Milton (part of Lives of the Poets)
- Johnson had no sympathy for, and was often savagely rude towards Milton’s advocacy of freedom of speech/press, and personal religious liberty
- Johnson was especially critical of Milton’s lesser-known poems
• However, in his critique of *Paradise Lost*, Johnson is seemingly freed from his preconceptions: he praises Milton’s breadth of vision, and emphasis on morality
• In here as well Johnson is not blind to Milton’s faults (for instance, the fact that *Paradise Lost* is somewhat lacking in human interest)

4.5 On Shakespeare
• As noted earlier, Johnson’s criticism of Shakespeare’s works is not contained in *Lives of the Poets*, but in his Preface to *The Plays of William Shakespeare*
• Johnson maintained a very balanced view of Shakespeare: he praises Shakespeare’s virtues despite the fact that some of those virtues went against Classical dogma
• These virtues include Shakespeare’s accurate portrayal of general human nature: Johnson states that Shakespeare does not have heroes, but only human beings; also, these human beings are universal types, but at the same time, fiercely individual
• Johnson defends Shakespeare’s most oft-cited deviation from Classical rules, his lack of unity (time and place) and the mingling of tragedy and comedy in Shakespeare’s works, in the interest of his overall genius
• Somewhat refreshingly, Johnson was not blind to Shakespeare’s faults, such as the playwright’s simple plots, excessive punning, sometimes base humour, and frequent lapses into convenient turns of phrases that disrupts pathos

Observations/Views/Opinions

• Art during the Puritanical movement (Cromwell) can be equated to the need to ‘keep in check’ the excesses of the Italian-influenced Renaissance by guardians of Classical culture
• It is very apparent in this unit, as with other units in this module, that the evolution of literary criticism cannot be truly detached from socio-political
concerns; the most simple essence of this being the paucity of great
literature produced in times of extended peace, and vice versa.

• To put it simply, literature (and its attendant criticism) can be viewed as
being reactionary: against a particular socio-political occurrence, or a spirit
of the age.

• It can generally be observed that contemporary opinion of literary critics
sometimes hinge on their appreciation of Shakespeare and Milton (in the
sense that those ultimately decisive of either, rightly or wrongly, tend to
get ‘forgotten’ in literary criticism)

• We can see Dryden making exceptions in his Neoclassicism for
Elizabethan dramatic verse; a trend that was to be repeated by Dr Samuel
Johnson (as we will see in the next unit)

• As noted in the previous unit, contemporary opinion of literary critics
sometimes hinge on their appreciation of Shakespeare and Milton; this is
especially true of Samuel Johnson, who not only acclaimed the genius of
Shakespeare and Milton, but also set the tone for readings of their texts for
generations.

• Both Milton’s and Shakespeare’s lapses into furore poeticus seem to
escape censure from Johnson’s Classicism on account of their overall
genius; it is probably ironic then, since Johnson set out to be a bastion of
Classicism against the rising trend of Romanticism, that both Shakespeare
and Milton became heroes of the Romantic era; Milton’s Satan, for
instance, came to represent the Romantic Byronic hero par excellence.

• See, for instance, this example from Satan’s ‘first speech’ in Milton’s
Paradise Lost:

“...To bow and sue for grace
With suppliant knee, and defy his power
Who, from the terror of this arm, so late
Doubted his empire—that were low indeed;
That were an ignominy and shame beneath
This downfall; since, by fate, the strength of Gods,
And this empyreal substance, cannot fail” (Book I, 22)

• The contemporary critic Harold Bloom is noted for his reverence of
Johnson, and arguably exerts a similar influence upon 20th century literary
criticism; he takes Johnson’s claim that Shakespeare addressed universal human nature to its logical conclusion by claiming that Shakespeare ‘invented’ certain human characteristics that we take as a given.

Summary of the Unit

- Towards the end of the Renaissance in the 17th century, the Italian influence (generally Romantic/experimental) upon England began to be replaced by the French influence (generally Classical).
- This, or at least the emphasis on morality, was made even more apparent with the Puritanical movement during the reign of Oliver Cromwell.
- Neoclassicism can also be seen as a reaction against the Baroque, which bore the ‘seal of approval’ from the Catholic church.
- Although cultural activities resumed during the Restoration, there was a general stagnation of literary activity.
- Generally, Neoclassicism can be characterised by an ‘imitation’ of nature, respect for Classical rules, correctness and good sense, universality, an emphasis on util et dulce and Classical rhyming verse, and the elevation of poetic language over everyday English.
- John Dryden, who is regarded as the father of English criticism, was instrumental in shifting the emphasis of literary criticism from descriptive to legislative criticalness.
- In the Essay on Heroic Tragedy, Dryden defines a heroic play as ‘an imitation...of a heroic poem’, where love and valour are to be prized higher than Aristotelian pity and fear.
- In the Preface to Fables, Dryden defines drama as a ‘just and lively image of human nature, representing its passions and humour, and the changes of fortune to which it is subject, for the delight and instruction of mankind’.
- In the Essay on Dramatick Poesie, Dryden/Neander claims the that modern drama can live up to its Classical forbears, that English drama is more masculine than its French equivalent; the prevailing idea in this essay is
that criticism should be contextual (the nature and tastes of a particular community at a particular point of time)

- Criticism post-Dryden is characterised by cultural nationalism (preference of English over French), historicism (reverence of the Classics), the belief that different ages call for different standards of interpretation, and a greater inclination towards descriptive criticism

- The inclination towards historicism in criticism post-Dryden are evident in the theories of the poet-critics Joseph Addison and Alexander Pope

- Addison's contribution to Neoclassical literary theory was the formulation of a kind of reader-response criticism, and the incorporation of Longinus as part of his Classical repertoire

- Pope's contribution was one of taking simulation to its logical conclusion—for seemingly putting the Classics on equal footing with Neoclassicists

- Samuel Johnson, like Ben Jonson before him, operated on the basis of keeping Romantic tendencies in check

- Besides Dictionary of the English Language, Johnson is best known for his Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets (Lives of the Poets) and the Preface to The Plays of William Shakespeare

- As much as Johnson was a strict Neoclassicist, conservative, Protestant and monarchist, he was able to rise above his preconceptions when presented with instances of genius, such as with William Shakespeare and John Milton; importantly, in context of later critics, he was also not blind to their faults

- Johnson defines poetry 'the art of writing pleasure with truth, by calling imagination to the help of reason, and states that 'the essence of poetry is invention, such invention as, by producing something unexpected, surprises and delights'

- In the Lives of the Poets, Johnson worked on the principle that even the more trivial details of an author's life need to be understood for a full critical appreciation (biographical criticism)

- Johnson was also instrumental in raising the profile of Milton, praising his breadth of vision in Paradise Lost
And despite Shakespeare’s obvious deviations from rules of Classical composition, Johnson praises his invention of characters, who speak to universal human behaviour while remaining fiercely individual.

Additional References


Exercise 1

1. How did Oliver Cromwell's Puritanism affect culture in 17th century England?
2. What are the features of the Baroque?
4. Explain John Dryden's definition of drama.
5. What, according to Samuel Johnson, is the essence of poetry?

Answers for Exercise 1

1. All theatre activities were outlawed, with the closing of playhouses and the whipping of players.
2. The Baroque aimed at grandeur and excess breaking through Classical boundaries, and was often characterised by passion.
3. Dryden/Neander claims that modern drama can match up to the Classics; that English drama is more masculine than its French equivalent; that tragicomedy is not absurd; that plays should suit the temperament of the people in the country of origin; and that Elizabethan dramatists took the art of the blank verse to its height.
4. A fair but imaginative representation of universal aspects of humanity ('just and lively image of human nature, representing its passions and humours, and the changes of fortune to which it is subject'), which can both delight and instruct in its beauty ('for the delight and instruction of mankind').
5. The essence of poetry is invention, which in its presentation of the unexpected, both instructs and delights.
UNIT 7
CRITICISM OF THE ROMANTIC PERIOD:
SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE, WILLIAM WORDSWORTH &
PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

Unit Introduction

1. The Romantic/experimental strain that emerged in the Renaissance
   (inspired by Longinus) took prominence in late 18th and early 19th
century England
2. Arguably the most prominent critic amongst the five Romantic poets
   was Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who will be the focus of this unit
3. Although Wordsworth is not remembered as being as influential as Coleridge, it was his Preface to *The Lyrical Ballads* that became the
   unofficial manifesto of Romanticism; the unit will also feature Percy
   Bysshe Shelley’s *A Defence of Poetry*, which is remarkably similar to
   Sir Philip Sidney’s defence of the same title

Unit Objectives

1. To further evidence the idea of continuity (chronological and thematic)
   in literary theory, as an ongoing activity that is based on preceding
   thought
2. To introduce literary critical activity taking place during 18th and 19th
   century Europe; with special attention paid to Samuel Taylor Coleridge,
   William Wordsworth and Percy Bysshe Shelley
3. To provide students with an understanding of the theories that continue
   to shape and influence literary theory in the present day
Main Points

TOPIC 1: ENGLISH ROMANTICISM (18-19 c.)

1.1 General characteristics

- There was an awakening of sensibility in the mid-18th century
- Sensibility in this sense has more to do with feeling and the senses; it is characterised by:
  - Sensation over perception
  - Capacity for refined emotion
  - Sensitivity to nature
  - Sympathy for human suffering
  - Impression; individualism
- The rise of (English) Romanticism was due to several factors, not least against the Neoclassical strain that had dominated in the centuries before it (which, arguably, came full circle with Alexander Pope). These factors are:
  - A love of liberty and independence: It was evident even with the Neoclassicists that Classical rules could not be followed to the letter; even John Dryden and Samuel Johnson made exceptions when it suited them
  - Translation of Longinus: The French version of On the Sublime (which had hitherto been ‘lost’ in literary circles until Joseph Addison) was widely read in England; poets became influenced by the emphasis on transport and rapture
  - The French Revolution (1789-1799) and the American War of Independence (1775-1783): These wars brought to the fore the revolutionary spirit of free thinking and independence
  - Vocal men of genius: Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth (who, it must be noted, were elder to John Keats, Lord Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley) voiced their protest against Neoclassical rules; Wordsworth’s Preface to The Lyrical Ballads became the unofficial manifesto for Romanticism
- The characteristics of Romanticism are:
- A disdain for Neoclassical rules of judgement: the worth of the work of art is judged by the impression it leaves upon the individual, instead of its degree of adherence to predetermined rules
- Concerned with the fundamentals of poetry: These fundamentals were the essence of poetry, and the creative process; matters of style, genre and diction (Neoclassical) are unimportant
- Imagination and emotion: These are of greater import than reason, good sense and imitation
- An emphasis on pleasure: The ultimate function of poetry is pleasure; it instructs (utile) through pleasure (dulce); one cannot be viewed as distinct from the other
- An emphasis on creativity: One of the most interesting aspects in terms of criticism is that the critical art became a creative process in itself

**TOPIC 2: SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE (1772-1834)**

2.1 About Samuel Taylor Coleridge
- Samuel Taylor Coleridge was one of England’s greatest poet-critics
- It must be noted, however, that the critics from the Neoclassical period were all poets themselves; generally, poet-critics outline the boundaries of and provide defences for their own art
- Critical works are scattered and fragmentary; mostly contained in *Lectures on Shakespeare and Other Poets* (1811-1812) and *Biographia Literaria* (1817)

2.2 Lectures on Shakespeare and Other Poets
- Coleridge’s approach to Shakespeare was largely impressionistic; he believed that Shakespeare’s genius lies in the latter’s ‘sympathy that enables him to identify himself with his characters at will’
- In these lectures, Coleridge formulated his dictum that the aim of poetry is to provide pleasure, and the idea that every work of art is an organic, unified whole, subject to only the laws of its own existence
2.3 *Biographia Literaria*

- Emphasis on literary aesthetics and literary theory
- Some of the influences upon *Biographia Literaria* include:
  - William Wordsworth
    - Coleridge met William Wordsworth (see below) when he was 24; his interest in the power of imagination was influenced by Wordsworth
    - Based on this influence, he formulated the idea that *imagination* and *fancy* are two distinct faculties (although Wordsworth considered them to be the same thing)
    - "fancy was the union of deep feeling and profound thought, the fine balance of truth in observing, with the imaginative faculty in modifying the objects observed; and above all the original gift of the tone, the atmosphere, and with it the depth and height of the ideal world around forms, incidents and situations, of which, for the common view, custom had dimmed all the lustre and dried up the sparkle and the dewdrops" (Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* 55)
  - Associationist Psychology
    - Coleridge maintained a mechanist view of the formulation of human character; mechanism is the belief that the source of an entity's order is imposed from within (the parts) as opposed to without (the whole)
    - Objects are perceived by the senses; these impressions are then formed into simple ideas, which are then compounded into complex ideas
    - Pleasures are then associated with certain actions and objects; these actions are repeated, and then form one's moral character
    - Thus one only needs to be a passive recipient of sense-perceptions for full development
  - German Idealism
    - Coleridge takes the Kantian view of imagination being an esemplastic power
    - The imagination moulds and re-creates; art is then not an imitation of nature, but a re-creation
    - Beauty is therefore not objective; it is the inward soul's projection of itself onto external objects
• With regard to imagination, Coleridge stated that imagination is split into primary and secondary imagination (both being distinct from fancy).
  • Primary imagination is when one receives sense-perception from the outside world, i.e.: after a flower is looked upon, the image of a flower received by the mind; it is ‘...the living power and prime agent of all human perception’
  • Secondary imagination reshapes sense-perceptions into objects of beauty, i.e.: the framing of said flower as an object of beauty in one’s mind; this secondary imagination is a “magical, synthetic power” that is at the heart of all poetic creation, and is “...identical with the former in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree and in the mode of its operation...it dissolves, diffuses, dissipates in order to recreate; or...it struggles to idealise and unity” (Biographia Literaria 61)
• On the other hand, Coleridge states that fancy is not a creative power
  • Fancy can combine disparate elements into beautiful objects; but it cannot unify like the imagination can
  • Fancy “...has no other counters to play with but fixities and definites...no other than a mode of memory emancipated from the order of time and space; and blended with and modified by that empirical phenomenon of the will which [one] expresses by the word choice...but equally with the ordinary memory it must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association” (Biographia Literaria, 364)
• With regard to the function of poetry/organic unity:
  • The ultimate end of poetry is to give pleasure
  • In an ideal society, truth might be the ultimate end (thus giving pleasure)
  • But in our imperfect society, pleasure in itself can be an immediate end, without regard for truth or morality
  • A poem must have organic unity; while pleasure can be drawn from each part, it must correspond to or assist in the transmittance of pleasure of the whole
  • Of course, the mechanistic perspective on this is that the whole cannot give meaning to the part, if the part itself contains none
Ornaments cannot be stuck on for their own sake if they do not serve the purpose of the whole (‘pleasure superadded’)

Simplistically put, Coleridge places a greater emphasis on pleasure rather than instruction (in a sense, dulce > utile)

Coleridge also makes the distinction between poem and poetry

Poetry is the creative activity of the poet’s mind; a poem is merely one of the forms of its expression

In terms of the reader’s reception to this expression, he/she must enter a state of willing suspension of disbelief

“The poet does not require us to be awake and believe; he solicits us only to yield ourselves to a dream; and this, too, with our eyes open…” (Biographia Literaria 327)

**TOPIC 3: WILLIAM WORDSWORTH (1770-1850)**

3.1 About William Wordsworth

- William Wordsworth is regarded as one of the greatest English poets; and he was a friend and contemporary of Coleridge
- Wordsworth is primarily a poet; critical work is contained in the numerous prefaces to *The Lyrical Ballads* (the 1802 Preface is taken as the standard)
- The *Preface* is considered to be the unofficial manifesto of Romanticism; it gave the movement momentum and direction
- Considered the first critical account of the process of poetic creation

3.2 Preface to *The Lyrical Ballads*

- In the tradition of many (but not all) poet-critics, Wordsworth did not set out to lay out a systematic theory of poetry; only to offer his readers an introduction on the type of poetry he produced
- Some of the ideas suggested in the Preface:
  - Poetic diction:
    - Wordsworth felt that the language of verse should not be differentiated from everyday language: to separate poetry from ordinary language is to separate it from ordinary life

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A plea for sympathy (in this sense, sympathy is more to do with empathy) in theme and treatment

- The subject of poetry can be found in everyday life, as opposed to the stuff of myth, or the goings-on of court life
- What he meant by 'everyday' was rustic pastoral life, and rustic language, which were free from the vulgarities and ostentation of poetic language
- He believed that the 'poor' convey their emotions more sincerely and directly

Wordsworth also held that there cannot be an essential difference between prose and verse

- The metre of verse only serves to augment the enjoyment of its reading
- On the whole, the type of language used must suit the subject, and the undercurrent of emotions related to the treatment of that subject

Wordsworth is in agreement with Coleridge on the function of poetry: it is solely to give pleasure

- In the capacity of pleasure to impart knowledge, this pleasure is exalted
- Poetry gives pleasure because it imitates nature well, and a thing well-imitated causes pleasure
- It also increases the reader's knowledge of the primary nature of man
- It arouses sympathy; sympathy brings inner satisfaction
- It increases the reader's knowledge of the essence of man and nature

Echoing Ben Jonson, Wordsworth considered poetry to be superior to philosophy, history and science

- Poetry is the most philosophical art, and complements science by adding feeling to its truths

Somewhat echoing Jonson again, Wordsworth contended that the poet differs from other men only in the degree of his gifts, and not his inherent nature

- In conveying emotions that the poet himself has not experienced, he must imaginatively empathise and live through the characters, in order for the language to seem natural

- With regard to poetic creation, Wordsworth believed that 'all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings'
This is an often misconstrued quote, since it is sometimes taken to refer to a gush of raw emotion.

Rather, what Wordsworth is referring to is emotion modified and mediated by contemplation.

There are four stages in the process of poetic creation: observation, recollection, contemplation and imaginative excitement of past emotions.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the poem most synonymous with Wordsworth, "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud":

"For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils" (57)

Poetic taste: to create taste, the poet must overcome the prejudices and apathy of his readers.

The poet must make his readers sympathise with even lowly subjects, and teach them humility, so as to 'purify' their souls.

Taste is an active process whereby the reader cooperates with the poet to be transported into an exalted state.

TOPIC 4: PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY (1792-1822)

4.1 About Percy Bysshe Shelley

Percy Bysshe Shelley, another of the famous five Romantic poets, wrote a Defence of Poetry in response to an attack on poetry by Thomas Love Peacock; his Defence, arguably the most eloquent apologia for literature, deals with theory in the sense that it is a philosophical treatise on poetry, as opposed to the judgement of individual authors.

Of course, as its name would suggest, Shelley’s Defence of Poetry is akin to Sir Philip Sidney’s Defence of Poetry.
Just as Sidney wrote his *Defence* as a counterargument to an attack on poetry by Stephen Gosson, Shelley's *Defence* is a response to an attack by Peacock.

Shelley's scope is slightly larger than Sidney's, for the former defends all creative activity (of which poetry is chief).

4.2 Gosson and Peacock

- As mentioned previously, Gosson's attack in *School of Abuse* is primarily based on *morality*, as in poetry is immoral (see unit on the Renaissance).
- Peacock's attack in *Four Ages of Poetry* (1820) is based on *utility*, as in poetry is useless.
- Peacock's attack on poetry does seem slightly peculiar.
  - He was a close friend of Shelley, and a minor poet himself (although he is remembered as a comedian/satirist).
  - He is described as an 'idler'; which was surely a Romantic mode of being.
  - Unable to make a living from writing poetry, Peacock began to work as the secretary of an admiral.
  - On board the HMS Venerable, he states that: 'Writing poetry, or doing anything else that is *rational*, in this floating inferno, is next to a moral impossibility. I would give the world to be at home and devote the winter to the composition of a comedy.'
- Peacock, upon leaving the HMS Venerable, continued to write until the end of his life.

*Four Ages of Poetry*

- Peacock divides poetic production into four ages.
  - Iron age: the beginnings of poetry (pre-Antiquity)
  - Golden age: the height of poetry (Antiquity)
  - Silver age: copying golden age (Neoclassical)
  - Brass age: decay of poetry (Romantic poetry)

Peacock claimed that poetry is the most worthless of all intellectual exercises; a man's time will be better served doing something to benefit society.
Poetry in itself _should_ exist, on the basis that it is entertaining, but it does not mean that the poet should be one who essentially wastes his own time, and the time of others.

- Peacock contends that reason is more useful than imagination.
- As soon as Shelley read the _Four Ages of Poetry_, he wrote to Peacock, saying "your anathemas against poetry itself excited me to a sacred rage...I had the greatest possible desire to break a lance with you...in honour of my mistress Urania" (27).
- Three of the four parts of Shelley's _Defence_ correspond to Sidney's _Defence_.

i) Definition and nature of poetry

- Any form of human imaginative expression is 'poetry': 'the expression of the imagination'.
- Poetry is greater than science, since the substance of science is nature alone.
- Poetry is also greater than other types of art, since the substance of other arts are also found in nature alone.
- Poetry uses language as its medium, and language originates from the intellect.

ii) Second: Moral/utilitarian function of poetry

- Regarding Plato's objection to poetry, Shelley says that since Plato's utopian republic admits women and goods, then it is itself immoral.
- Poetry is the vision of the Ideal: 'a poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth'.
- Poetry is also greater than philosophy; poetry (to an extent) teaches by example, whereas philosophy deals in abstract truths alone.
- Poetry is also greater history; poetry can make the distinction between moral/immoral, whereas history deals in facts alone.
- The true effect of poetry upon the morals is akin to Aristotle's _katharsis_: a purification of the soul by affecting the _imagination_.
- An enlarged imagination, which has been affected by the heightening of emotions, produces sympathy; a lack of sympathy is what causes cruelty.
• Moral sense can also be cultivated by an appreciation of underlying beauty; and poetry is able to strip away the familiarity of nature to make the reader realise the beauty hidden within, or to rediscover the beauty that has been overlooked.

iii) Defence against detractors
• The ‘decay’ of poetry is concurrent with the social decay; noble poetry can only be produced in a noble age.
• Poetry is the embodiment of the divine beauty of life; obscenity is its polar opposite, and therefore not poetry.
• Nevertheless, no matter how corrupt the ‘poetry’ of the age may be, that poetry is still the embodiment of everything ‘good’ from the age in which it was written—even if that ‘good’ is temporal and particular.

iv) Summary + impassioned eulogy for poetry
• “Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended 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.”

Observations/Views/Opinions

• Coleridge’s idea of an organic poem has many broad similarities with Aristotle’s conception of the same idea.
• The difference between the two is subtle, and is informed by Coleridge’s mechanistic view of nature.
• Mechanism is philosophically opposed to Aristotle’s organism, since the mechanistic view is that the parts that inform the whole, not the whole that defines the parts.
• Essentially, mechanism is a ‘bottom-up’ philosophy, as opposed to a ‘top-down’ one; in this way, disparate sense perceptions contribute to the formation of an individual’s morality.

• Wordsworth’s claim that poetic language should not be differentiated from everyday language is in opposition from the Neoclassical view that poetic language should be elevated.

• As Coleridge himself claimed, Wordsworth’s claim was slightly erroneous (a claim which contributed to the later rift between the two).

• Wordsworth’s conception of a simple, rustic language that he used in his poetry was essentially not ‘everyday’, for the words were used **poetically**.

• Wordsworth’s other claim that verse cannot be separated from prose is also erroneous, since his own verse (accented and rhyming) was not really how ‘rustic’ folk actually speak.

• It is tempting to look at Wordsworth’s idea of ‘sympathy’ for farmers as being ever so slightly condescending; in contemporary theory, the act of exoticising a conceptualised other is considered false, and not reflective of original object (such as in Orientalism).

### Summary of the Unit

- The Romantic period is best described by the awakening of sensibility: sensation over perception, capacity for refined emotion, sensitivity to nature, sympathy for human suffering, impression and individualism.

- The awakening of this sensibility was due to several factors: a love of liberty and independence, translation of Longinus into French, the French Revolution and the American War of Independence, as well as the efforts of certain vocal men of genius, like Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth.

- The characteristics of Romanticism are: a disdain for Neoclassical rules of judgement, a concerned with the fundamentals of poetry, imagination and emotion, an emphasis on pleasure, and an emphasis on creativity.
The criticism of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, one of England’s greatest poets, is mostly contained in his Lectures on Shakespeare and Other Poets (1811–1812) and Biographia Literaria (1817).

In the Shakespeare lectures, Coleridge formulated the dictum that the aim of poetry is pleasure, and the idea that every work of art is an organic, unified whole—ideas that were developed further in Biographia Literaria. Biographia Literaria was influenced by the ideas of William Wordsworth, associationism, psychology and German (Kantian) idealism.

Coleridge, unlike Wordsworth, made a distinction between imagination (primary and secondary, the latter of which was the main creative faculty) and fancy.

With regard to morality, Coleridge felt that pinpointing moral truth as the ultimate end of poetry is an utopian ideal; in an imperfect world, pleasure itself can be its ultimate end.

The organic unity of a poem must be achieved mechanically, namely with every part serving the whole.

The criticism of William Wordsworth, Coleridge’s contemporary and friend, is contained in his Preface to The Lyrical Ballads, which was the first account of the process of poetic creation, and which also served as the unofficial manifesto of Romanticism.

Some of the ideas in the Preface include the equation of poetic language and everyday (rustic) language; a plea for sympathy with ‘poor’ everyday folk; the equation of prose and verse; the end of poetry as being the deliverance of pleasure; the poet as being equal with the common man but with slightly honed talents; and that good poetry is ‘the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings’.

The last point pertains to the process of poetic creation, which according to Wordsworth takes place over four stages: observation, recollection, contemplation and imaginative excitement of past emotions.

Poetic taste is achieved when the reader cooperates with the poet to be transported into an exalted state.

Like Sir Philip Sidney before him, Percy Bysshe Shelley also wrote a Defence of Poetry in response to an attack on poetry.
• This time, the attack came from Thomas Love Peacock in his *Four Ages of Poetry*, who claimed that the Romantic phase was the 'brass age' of poetry, and actively undergoing decay from the 'golden age' of the ancients; on the whole, he felt that poetry was useless.

• Shelley structures his response much like Sidney did; he begins with defining poetry as 'the expression of the imagination', and claims it is superior to not only other branches of human knowledge, but also other fields of art.

• Shelley then claims that poetry alone, unlike other branches of human knowledge, can make a distinction between what is moral and immoral; this is achieved by Aristotelian *katharsis* and an appreciation of beauty.

• He felt that if poetry is undergoing decay, it is only because society itself is in decline; having said that, however, he also believed that poetry is the embodiment of the 'best' of any given age, even if that 'best' is, in relative terms, not very good.

• Ends by claiming that poets are the "unacknowledged legislators of the world."

### Additional References


Exercise 1
1. What Classical figure was most influential upon the Romantic age?
2. According to Samuel Taylor Coleridge, what is the ultimate aim of poetry?
3. Explain the difference between imagination and fancy, according to Coleridge.
4. Explain William Wordsworth’s notion of sympathy.
5. Describe Percy Bysshe Shelley’s stance on Plato’s utopia, and on poiesis/mimesis.

Answers for Exercise 1
1. Longinus
2. Pleasure
3. Primary imagination is when receives sensory perceptions from the outside world; secondary imagination is the faculty that shapes sense-perceptions into objects of beauty; fancy can combine elements into beautiful objects, but lacks the imagination’s unity.
4. An imaginative empathy with the poor, and the pastoral; the subject of poetry could be found in their lives, and the medium in their language.
5. Shelley says that Plato’s utopia is in itself immoral since it allows for women (lust) and goods (greed, materialism); he also claims that instead of poetry being a twice removed copy of the Ideal, poetry is the expression of the ideal.
UNIT 8
CRITICISM OF THE 19th CENTURY AND BEYOND I:
VISSARION BELINSKY, THE THREE RADICALS &
MATTHEW ARNOLD

Unit Introduction

1. With rapid scientific progress and industrialisation taking place in the middle of the 19th century, there was a marked shift in intellectual and cultural trends.
2. As a reaction against the individualism of the Romantic period, there was also a marked shift towards more social perspectives on literature; this is evident in the theories of Vissarion Belinsky and the Three Radicals.
3. Matthew Arnold’s criticism can also be seen as a clash between Romantic excess and Neoclassical rigidity, taking place in a more modern, callous context.

Unit Objectives

1. To further evidence the idea of continuity (chronological and thematic) in literary theory, as an ongoing activity that is based on preceding thought.
2. To introduce literary critical activity taking place in 19th century Europe and beyond; focusing in this case on Vissarion Belinsky, the Three Radicals and Matthew Arnold.
3. To provide students with an understanding of the theories that continue to shape and influence literary theory in the present day.
Main Points

TOPIC 1: MODERNISM (MID 19c. – PRESENT)
1.1 General characteristics

- Romanticism gave way to Realism from 1830 onwards
- One of the (very few) similarities between Romanticism and Realism is the emphasis on the particular, or the characteristic, as opposed to Neoclassical universalism.
- In literature and in criticism, there was a shift away from individual subjectivity to a more social perspective; it must be noted that this shift was simultaneous in both fields, and not directly correlated.
- Rather, there was a general shift in the intellectual trends of the time; this was due to:
  - The rising prestige of science
  - The declining role of religion
  - The age of Charles Darwin (biology), Thomas Edison (science), Karl Marx (sociology, economics) and Sigmund Freud (psychology);
- The realist age was also characterised by the rise of the novel:
  - The novel had not acquired the status of poetry, and thus was more accessible to the growing middle class (as opposed to the literati)
  - The production of novels was based on a royalties system (no patronage)
  - There was no distinction between lowbrow and highbrow
  - No novelist-critics comparable to Romantic poet-critics

TOPIC 2: VISSARION BELINSKY (1811-1848)
2.1 About Vissarion Belinsky

- In 19th century Russia, feudalism was being threatened by modern ideas from Western Europe
- Critics and novelists developed a sense of social mission
- There was also heavy censorship from the Czarist regime

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Belinsky moved away from Romanticism towards more social theories. He believed that it was important to shape Russia's national literature (being an extension of Russia's national destiny), not by looking into the past, but the future. Writers must actively mould this new literature: 'A work of art is lifeless if it depicts life only to depict it'; realism is a point of departure from which the writer must ideally provide social impact. However, this representation of life must bear the mark of history; the more connected a work is with its historical context, the better. In addition, he also believed that content was more important than style. On the whole, he values the socio-political outlook of the artist.

TOPIC 3: THE THREE RADICALS: NIKOLAI CHERNYSHEVSKY (1828-1889), NIKOLAI DOBRNYUHOV, (1836-1861), AND DIMITRI PISAREV (1840-1868)

3.1 The Three Radicals: Nikolai Chernyshevsky, Nikolai Dobrolyubov, Dimitri Pisarev
- Nikolai Chernyshevsky, Nikolai Dobrolyubov, Dimitri Pisarev were self-proclaimed followers of Belinsky.
- They shared his concern for Russia's national destiny and the socio-political outlook. Chernyshevsky even founded the populist movement Narodism and wrote the influential What is To Be Done? in 1862), but took it to its logical conclusion.
- Belinsky favoured content over style; the Three Radicals did away with aesthetics altogether; they believed that art is subjective, nature is more 'real'.
- Their revolutionary stance had profound impact upon the young Vladimir Lenin; critics have claimed that What Is To Be Done was more influential upon the Russian Revolution than Karl Marx's Capital.
- Their ideas also had profound influence on postmodernism thought: the ideas of the critic as social theorist, and a text beyond the influence of the author.
TOPIC 4: MATTHEW ARNOLD (1822-1888)

4.1 About Matthew Arnold

- England under Queen Victoria (the Victorian age) was especially proud of itself; its economic, political and scientific advances were unsurpassed by the rest of Europe.
- This contrast is even more apparent when set against 19th century Russia, who had no middle class to speak of; this would explain Arnold’s conservatism as opposed to the radicalism or revolutionary nature of the Russian critics.
- The mid-Victorian era in England set itself against the Romantics; the Romantics’ emphasis on individuality had forsaken the social element of culture, and their excesses had turned into social degeneration.
- And given the decline of religion in general, literature sought to take its place as a beacon of morality; for a lack of a better term, this was ‘art for life’s sake’
- Generally, this new emphasis on morality recalls Neoclassicism, but it was not as backward-looking, plus the genius of the Romantics was not overlooked.
- And it can be said to be situated between both currents, best embodied by Arnold himself.
- Arnold’s primary struggle was to reconcile the Romanticism of his youth with his strict father’s inculcation of the Classics within him.
- However, he noticed that because of the advances of 19th century England, and the self-interestedness of the Romantics, society began to surrender to amorality and materialism.
- Culture was being sacrificed to machinery: “The idea of perfection as an inward condition of the mind and spirit is at variance with the mechanical and material civilisation in esteem with us” (Culture and Anarchy 26).
- Culture was also being sacrificed to self-centredness: Arnold rallied against the ‘strong individualism, our hatred of all limits to the unrestrained swing of the individual’s personality, our maxim of every man for himself’ (ibid.).
- Unlike the three radicals, Arnold thought that cold, hard science was insufficient to construct the worldview of his age, or at least take the place
of the arts; this was because the natural tendency of the human mind is to unify, and science only dealt out disparate and disjointed facts

- Arnold proposed to fill the spiritual void with literature—that it should take the place of a religion in decline, or at least induce the quasi-religious solemnity associated with religion
- And literature, like religion, should be timeless: it must emphasise 'elementary, permanent feelings' against provincialism or individual inclination (akin to the Neoclassical emphasis on universality)
- Reading literature thus becomes not an individualised end in itself (as opposed to the Romantic idea of pleasure in itself), but to affect large-scale social improvement
- However, literature is to serve this social function not by becoming more socially purposive, but by remaining literary; it should reject all external political and practical ideas
- Arnold also placed emphasis on morality in literature, though not entirely in the Neoclassical sense; instead of preaching a particular moral, literature should be conducive towards a general capacity for morality: "a poetry of revolt against moral ideas is a poetry of revolt against life; a poetry of indifference towards moral ideas is a poetry of indifference towards life" ("Wordsworth" 202)
- This moral/religious mood of solemnity can be found in certain infallible touchstones of literature; these infallible touchstones are marked by a grand style (content and style) (akin to Longinus' concept of the sublime)
- These touchstones, such as select passages from Homer or Dante, function as markers of quality; instead of some abstract definition of what makes good literature, these touchstones serve as 'proof' of quality

Observations/Views/Opinions

- The modern age was too diverse in its outlook to form any one general opinion of it, or to be homogenised under a singular mode of thought
• This was partly to do with the final deconstruction of older modes of thought, with the four leading figures of the age: Charles Darwin knocked down the scaffold of religion with his theory of human evolution, Thomas Edison’s harnessing of electricity extended the working day and aided industrialisation, Karl Marx explained the socioeconomic forces that govern society, and Sigmund Freud explained the inner workings of the human mind
• Whether or not one takes what the four figures said as gospel, they did begin a trend: the deconstruction of ideas/modes of thought previously taken as a given, to find an ulterior truth hidden from visible reality
• This, of course, is standard practice in literary studies today, where any truth can seemingly be broken down into even more atomised pieces
• The realist novel was a genre favoured by many Marxist thinkers, before and after Lenin; Friedrich Engels, for instance, had a liking for the novels of Balzac, even if Balzac’s was personally a French royalist
• Of course, the social impact of literature was not an entirely new idea; it is an extension of the debate that took place since Plato, when he described poetry as being able to sway young minds into iniquity; there was also the emphasis on *utile et dulce* for Horace and many of the later Neoclassicists

Summary of the Unit

• From about 1830, Romanticism gave way to Realism, which was entirely more social in its construct
• This was due to general shifts in the intellectual trends of the time: the rising prestige of science and the declining role of religion; plus it was also the age of Charles Darwin, Thomas Edison, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud
• The Realist age was also characterised by the rise of the novel, which like the printing press during the Renaissance, took culture away from the sole dominion of the literati and spread it to the masses
• The Russian critics of the 19th century (Vissarion Belinsky and the Three Radicals) greatly emphasised the social responsibility of literature (as being
able to shape the destiny of the country, due in a large part to the social conditions of the country at the time

- Their philosophies actually did shape the future of the country, given that they were great inspirations for the young Vladimir Lenin
- In England, Matthew Arnold was torn between the excesses of Romanticism and the lifelessness of Neoclassicism and modern science; coupled with the decline of religion, he saw literature as a means to fill the spiritual void
- This religious status of literature would be replaced, according to Arnold, by certain infallible touchstones of literature, that were able to provide a certain contemplative, moral solemnity

Additional References


Exercise 1
1. What position did the Three Radicals hold on literary aesthetics?
2. What, according to Vissarion Belinsky, was the ultimate point of a realist text?
3. Did Belinsky believe that a text should be removed from its historical context or embrace it?
4. What is an infallible touchstone?
5. What did Matthew Arnold intend to substitute religion (which was fading in significance at the time)

Answers for Exercise 1
1. The Three Radicals wanted to do away with literary aesthetics altogether, preferring content over style
2. Social impact
3. Embrace it; he believed that the more a work is connected to its historical context, the better it is
4. Certain passages of Classical literature that marked by a grand style
5. Literature; even if it could not become a religion unto itself, it should at least induce a solemn spirituality through its consumption
UNIT 9
RISE OF LITERARY CRITICISM IN AMERICA:
TRANSCENDENTALISM, RALPH WALDO EMERSON,
EDGAR ALLAN POE & WALT WHITMAN

Unit Introduction

1. The arrival of English Romanticism in America, coupled with the Puritanism dominant at the time, gave rise to the Transcendentalists.
2. The Transcendentalists intended to create a new literature and spirituality that incorporated Romantic ideas of intuition and individuality.
3. The mixture of Romanticism and Puritanism affected Edgar Allan Poe in a completely different way, but it was his criticism that was to have great impact upon the French Symbolist movement.

Unit Objectives

1. To further evidence the idea of continuity (chronological and thematic) in literary theory, as an ongoing activity that is based on preceding thought.
2. To introduce literary critical activity taking place in 19th century American and beyond; focusing, in this case, on the Transcendentalists, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Edgar Allan Poe and Walt Whitman.
3. To provide students with an understanding of the theories that continue to shape and influence literary theory in the present day.
TOPIC 1: TRANSCENDENTALISM (EARLY TO MID 19c.)

1.1 Background

- Romanticism spread from country to country in the beginning of the 19th century, and the ideas of German literary theorists (mostly by way of Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s appropriation of Immanuel Kant’s Idealism in his criticism).
- As we will examine in greater detail in the next unit, the 19th century is a complex one in terms of literary development; where previously in the module we used the term poetry to be synonymous with literature, poetry was now something distinct from the novel (which embraced realism).
- Simplistically, it can be said that for most of the century, the Romantic trend was kept alive in poetry (that culminated in Symbolism), while the novel embarked upon its own realist path (that culminated in Naturalism).
- America at the time was dominated by a Puritan ethos, which had not the effect of strangling the Romantic trend, but amplifying it.
- Since the Transcendentalist movement originated in New England, it was a reaction against the puritanical rationality of the Unitarian church, which was emphasised at Harvard University, and the intellectual exclusivity of the university.
- Literary critical activity during this period was akin to that practiced during the Medieval age, where scripture was examined through literary analysis (mostly exegetical, where God’s creation was seen as signs to be read).
- But this literary analysis was highly rational; the Transcendentalists were looking for a new way to view religion and spirituality, oddly enough through a more spiritual lens (less rational, more intuitive, more sensory), that sometimes drew upon non-Christian sources.
- The spiritual hunger of the age gave rise to a new evangelical Christianity, but it also gave rise to an intuitive, experiential, passionate and more than rational perspective.

1.2 The Transcendentalists

- George Putnam, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Frederick Henry Hedge
- founded the Transcendental Club in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1836
- Transcendentalism was influenced by three strands of thought more than any other: Vedic thought, German Idealism and English Romanticism (often, but not always, through each other, i.e.: Vedic thought by way of German Idealism, by way of English Romanticism)
- In general, the term *transcendentalism* comes from Kant’s usage of the term: knowledge that is not concerned with objects per se, but the means whereby that object is known, is transcendental
- Transcendentalism’s aims are slightly vague and very varied, seemingly focusing, at times, on utopian social change, socialism and individualism
- Given that the principles of Transcendentalism were vague, they often contained many (albeit very minor) contradictions
  - For instance, Transcendentalists emphasise the Romantic celebration of the *individual*, and *intuition*; however, this intuition is not arrived at via the senses, but rather from an inner, spiritual essence
  - And where the Transcendentalists seemingly owe a lot to their European forbears, the movement was very much *nationalistic*; somewhat akin to Belinsky (though by *completely* different means) their aim was to create a uniquely American body of literature that was distinct from intellectual trends and literary forms prevalent in Europe
- At the most basic level, Transcendentalism was a search for truth: not arrived at by rationality, but by intuition
- In the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson: ‘We will walk on our own feet; we will work with our own hands; we will speak our own minds...A nation of men will for the first time exist, because each believes himself inspired by the Divine Soul which also inspires all men’
- In addition, the Transcendentalists also became involved with social reform (specifically the abolition of slavery, and women’s rights)
- Despite some Transcendentalists still being ‘Euro-chauvinists’ (believing that people of European descent were superior to others), they also believed that on some level all people had access to divine inspiration and sought and loved freedom and knowledge and truth
TOPIC 2: RALPH WALDO EMERSON (1803-1882)

2.1 About

- Tracing the ideas of Coleridge and Carlyle back to German Idealism, Emerson helped develop Transcendentalism.
- He believed that all outward appearances of Nature were manifestations of the universal Over-soul: ‘the world is mind precipitated’
- The poet then is the individual who encounters, head-on, the Over-soul
- Like a Romantic. Emerson places little value on poetry as an object of linguistic creation

2.2 Romantic influence

- He takes Coleridge’s organic theory of the poem to a new logical conclusion
  - Where Coleridge took the Kantian view of imagination being an esemplastic power (the poet re-creating nature as the projection of his or her own inward soul), Emerson believed that whereby the poet’s experience entirely determines the content of the poem, and the content entirely determines the form of the poem
- Emerson’s importance as a critic lies in his notion of how nature may be read
  - As noted above, in Puritan typology (as with medieval Christianity) the world was God’s book to be read—this is a symbolic relationship
  - Given Emerson’s New England religious background, and the influence English Romanticism had on him, the notion of the symbol was emphasised
  - Substituting God with the Over-soul, Emerson claims that ‘Nature offers all her creatures to the poet as a picture language. Being used as a type, a second wonderful value appears in the object, much better than its first value’
  - As we will see in the next unit, the symbol was of major importance to the French Symbolists (hence their name); importantly, like the Symbolists, Emerson also did not exclude manmade artefacts from his conception of Nature (albeit to differing degrees)
Also like the Symbolists (and here, unlike the Puritans), he believed that there was no one-to-one correlation between the symbol and what it symbolised: the inherent meaning in any symbol was fluxional.

2.3 ‘The Poet’

- It was mentioned above that one of the defining traits of Transcendentalism was its nationalism.
- This is evident in Emerson’s essay “The Poet” (1844), in which he emphasises the need for a new national poet to write about the country, many aspects of which ‘are yet unsung’.
- From the text: “Wherever snow falls or water flows or birds fly, wherever day and night meet in twilight, wherever the blue heaven is hung by clouds or sown with stars, wherever are forms with transparent boundaries, wherever are outlets into celestial space, wherever is danger, and awe, and love, there is Beauty, plenteous as rain, shed for thee, and though thou shouldest walk the world over, thou shalt not be able to find a condition inopportune or ignoble” (219)
- As we will see below, Walt Whitman (who worshipped Emerson) believed that he was the poet Emerson sought for.

**TOPIC 3: EDGAR ALLAN POE (1809-1849)**

3.1 About

- The mixture of Romanticism and Puritanism affected the novelist Edgar Allan Poe in a completely different way than Emerson.
- Poe reacted strongly against the Puritan insistence that literature should be didactic or morally instructional.
- In this sense, Poe was similar to the Romantics: where they believed that a moral capacity can be cultivated through pleasure (as in pleasure arising from sense-perceptions of different objects), Poe believed that morality could be induced by stimulating his readers’ mental, emotional and spiritual faculties through texts of absolute integrity.
- All in all, neither the Romantics nor Poe believed that literature had a responsibility to be preach morality.
But aside from this similarity, Poe disagreed with the Romantic conception of the process of poetic/literary creation.

- Where the Romantics prized inspiration and spontaneity, Poe was a firm believer in craft ("cautious selections and rejections").
- To him, poetic creation should be something impersonal, detached and almost mathematical.
- As he states: "With me poetry has been not a purpose, but a passion; and the passions should be held in reverence; they must not—they cannot at will be excited, with an eye to the paltry compensations. The more paltry commendations, of mankind" (Preface to "The Raven") ii;

- This was not only due Poe being both a poet and a short story writer; both are addressed in his theory of composition.
- The writer/poet should aim at creating a singular, total psychological and/or spiritual effect upon the reader.
- This is reminiscent of the Classical notion of not mixing genres (for fear of diluting the ultimate purpose of a text).

In terms of criticism, Poe believed that the author’s personal details should be left aside in any judgement of a text, and the text itself should be the be-all and end-all of criticism.

- This anticipates the New (textual) Criticism that was to emerge later in the history of literary criticism, whereby the text is interpreted as being self-contained.

**TOPIC 4: WALT WHITMAN (1819-1892)**

**4.1 About**

- Whitman was born a generation later than Emerson, but considered himself ‘the poet’ that the former called for; some critics have commented that if Whitman were born earlier, and had gone to Harvard, then he too would be a Transcendentalist.
- Whitman does exhibit many characteristics of Transcendentalist thought in his poetry, such as his equation of the self and the universe, and the usage of nature as symbol, but probably most notably in his nationalism.
4.2 The self

- Interestingly, Whitman sent an early copy of his *Leaves of Grass* (1855) to Emerson; in a letter accompanying the text, Whitman notes that individuality is the 'new Moral American continent'.
- *Leaves of Grass* praised the divinity of the self, of the common individual; this refers precisely the common American individual who Whitman felt were excluded by the Eurocentric literature of his day (much in the same way that the Transcendentalists reacted against Harvard’s exclusivist intellectualism).
- Whitman promoted himself as the poet of democracy and the common man.
- Whitman’s concept of the self is of major importance in his work: 'the self was the true meaning and centre of all existence, and that reality was not separate of different from the self'; thus, in Whitman's view, *the self* contains elements of the individual and the universal.
- This dichotomy of the self, much like Emerson’s notion of the Over-soul, is spiritual: Whitman argued that the spark of divinity (the universal) is in all.
- Some critics argue that Whitman intended to begin a new religion and promoted his readers’ spiritual development by offering them an orderly vision linking religion with contemporary ideas on American culture.
- What Whitman intended was 'to give something to our literature which will be our own; with neither foreign spirit, nor imagery nor form, but adapted to our case, grown out of our associations, boldly portraying the West, strengthening and intensifying the nation's soul, and finding the entire foundations of its birth and growth in our own country.'

Observations/Views/Opinions

- Above, it is noted that since the principles of Transcendentalism are vague, they often contained minor contradictions.
- For instance, Transcendentalists emphasise the Romantic celebration of the individual, and intuition.
However, this intuition is arrived at an inner, spiritual essence; this spiritual essence or spiritual self is hard to define, but can probably best be understood with reference to Whitman and Vedic thought—the spark of divinity is in all, and the innate self is a manifestation of the universal.

Another minor contradiction is in the fact that the Transcendentalists seemingly owe a lot to their European forbears, the movement was very much nationalistic; the aim of the Transcendentalists was to create a uniquely American body of literature that was distinct from intellectual trends and literary forms prevalent in Europe.

This contradictory nationalism is probably most evident in Whitman.

Whitman was first recognized as a major poet in the United Kingdom, the very nation whose literature he sought a separation from; this even extended onto the British, non-Emersonian influences, who he turned to for inspiration.

Many have noted the resemblances between his visionary poetry and that of William Blake, Percy Bysshe Shelley and William Wordsworth.

Another interesting thing to note is that beyond the similarity between the Transcendentalist and Symbolist symbol, American literature was in turn influential upon the French Symbolist movement.

After publishing his first novel, Charles Baudelaire was involved with translating the works of Poe into the French.

Baudelaire states that in Poe ‘there is no tiresome snivelling; but everywhere and at all times an indefatigable enthusiasm in seeking the ideal’.

Baudelaire found in Poe a kindred spirit, whose concept of ideal beauty (in Baudelaire’s words, ‘the lost Eden’) was informed by a dark melancholy and regret.
Summary of the Unit

- The ideas of the German Idealists accompanied the migration of the ideas of the English Romantics to America
- America was at the time dominated by a Puritan ethos, which was both moralistic and rationalistic
- Transcendentalism was a reaction against the Unitarian church (which sought to apply strict rationalism to religion, at the expense of feeling) and the intellectualism of Harvard (which was exclusivist, at the expense of the common man)
- The Transcendentalists were looking for a new spirituality that was less rational, more intuitive and more sensory; this tied in well with the English Romantic, German Idealist and Indian Vedic texts that the Transcendentalists consumed
- George Putnam, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Frederick Henry Hedge founded the Transcendental Club in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1836
- The term transcendentalist comes from Immanuel Kant’s usage of the term to refer to knowledge related to the means whereby an object is known
- The Transcendentalists emphasise the Romantic celebration of the individual and intuition (instead of rationality); but instead of arriving at intuition via the senses, the Transcendentalists believed in arriving at intuition via an inner, spiritual essence or self
- The movement was also very nationalistic, in terms of creating a spirituality and literature that was uniquely American
- The Transcendentalists were also involved with many utopian social struggles at the time (chiefly the abolition of slavery and women’s rights) which was underscored by their belief in equality
- Emerson believed that all outward appearances of Nature were manifestations of an universal Over-soul
- This related back to both the Romantic influence (in terms of the German idealism that Coleridge adopted in his criticism) and Puritan typology (where the world is read as a symbol for a deeper truth)
Where his usage of Coleridge is concerned, Emerson believed that the poet’s experience of nature entirely determined the content of a poem, and in turn, entirely determined the form.

With regard to the poet, Emerson envisioned the appearance of a new national poet to compose a literature that was uniquely American (which turned out to be self-fulfilling, in that Walt Whitman "took up the task after reading Emerson"

The mixture of Romanticism and Puritanism affected Edgar Allan Poe in a completely different way.

Poe reacted against the didacticism of the Puritans, instead opting for the gradual construction of moral fortitude via stimuli—"his readers’ mental, emotional and spiritual faculties (akin to the Romantics)"

However, he disagreed with the Romantic conception of the process of poetic/literary creation, emphasising instead impersonality and detachment.

In Poe’s theory of composition, the poet should aim at creating literature that has a singular and total psychological or spiritual effect on the reader.

Whitman saw himself as the national poet that Emerson called for.

A lot of his early poetry was Transcendentalist in nature, especially in his equation of the self with the universal.

Whitman’s conception of the self (which is still subject to continuous debate) is what he calls the ”new moral American continent”.

Importantly, Whitman not only praises the divinity of the self (which contains both elements of the individual and the universal), but the self of the common individual; this can be understood in terms of Whitman seeing himself as the poet of democracy and the common man.

This dichotomy of the self is spiritual: Whitman argued that the spark of divinity (the universal) is in all...
Additional References


Exercise 1

1. What two dominant modes of thought in New England were the Transcendentalists reacting against?
2. What did the Transcendentalists inherit from the English Romantics?
3. Explain the similarities between Ralph Waldo Emerson’s view of poetic creation, and that of Samuel Taylor Coleridge
4. Explain Edgar Allan Poe’s conception of morality in literature
5. What were the characteristics of Walt Whitman’s conception of the self?
Answers for Exercise 1

1. The rationalist Unitarian church and the intellectualism of Harvard University

2. The Romantic celebration of the individual and intuition; the latter however, is arrived at not through the sense, but through the innate, spiritual self

3. Coleridge used in his criticism the Kantian view of imagination being an esemplastic power, where the poet re-creates nature as the projection of his or her own inward soul; Emerson believed in the same general idealism, but insisted instead that the poet’s experience entirely determines the content of the poem, and the content entirely determines the form of the poem

4. Poe believed that a moral capacity can be cultivated through stimulating a reader’s mental, emotional and spiritual faculties through texts of absolute integrity

5. The self was the true meaning and centre of all existence, and contains elements both of the individual and the universal
UNIT 10
CRITICISM OF THE 19TH CENTURY AND BEYOND II:
NATURALISM, SYMBOLISM AND BRITISH AESTHETICISM

Unit Introduction

1. The realist novel was taken to its logical conclusion with Naturalism, which took an even more detached, 'scientific' look at the human condition.
2. The aesthetic strand carried over from British Romanticism evolved into Symbolism.
3. Symbolism was then taken to its logical conclusion by the British Aesthetes, who promoted the maxim of 'art for art's sake'.

Unit Objectives

1. To further evidence the idea of continuity (chronological and thematic) in literary theory, as an ongoing activity that is based on preceding thought.
2. To introduce literary critical activity taking place in 19th century Europe and beyond; focusing, in this case, on the Naturalists, Symbolists and the British Aesthetes.
3. To provide students with an understanding of the theories that continue to shape and influence literary theory in the present day.
TOPIC 1 : POST-REALISM

1.1 About Naturalism and Symbolism

- For the first time in France, culture became allied with national failure, instead of national superiority (this identification with national failure is the adoption of a contrary, and by extension, reactionary, position)
  - France lost its predominance in Europe after the Franco-Prussian war in 1870
  - Paris lost its predominance in France after the crushing of the Paris Commune in 1871
- Naturalism and Symbolism are polar opposites:
  - Naturalism is a biological/social form of realism (one’s heredity and social environment determines one’s station in life)
  - Symbolism is an idealistic escape from realism, where the verse is characterised by symbols and abstractions in its language
- Naturalism is usually present in novels, Symbolism in poems
- Despite being ideological opposites, both movements existed simultaneously; this can be attributed to a reaction against the bourgeoisie (middle/upper middle class)
  - Naturalists allied themselves with the lower classes, and Symbolists allied themselves with the aristocracy
  - However, both belonged to the same social class: the intelligentsia (highly educated; non-materialistic—comparable to the clergy during the middle ages, or modern day academicians, writers, artists etc.)
  - Both saw themselves as reactionary: against the clean, safe art of the bourgeoisie

TOPIC 2 : NATURALISM, ÉMILE ZOLA (1840-1902), GUSTAVE FLAUBERT (1821-1880)

2.1 About Naturalism

- French Realism was always more advanced than in other European countries; but the French Realists (such as Honoré de Balzac) only concerned themselves with real subject matter; their prose was still characterised by style
• 'Style' in this case would be a deliberate moulding of the real into the Classic structure of a story, containing elements of suspense, contrived plots, and happy endings

• Zola took Realism to its logical conclusion; made Naturalism into the first deliberate, self-conscious programme in literature (as opposed to a movement)

• Naturalism was, in a sense, more real than Realism; it sought to be a scientific (or entomological) text, where the lives of real people are recorded without bias, omission, or judgement; like a scientist observing and recording the life of an insect

• They felt that it was their duty to present life as it really is, regardless of whether aspects of life are too ugly or sordid to mention

• Like scientists, the laboratory experiments (the novel) are conducted (written) objectively to 'prove' a theory/hypothesis

• In the case of the Naturalists, it was both biological and social determinism (inspired by Darwin's publication of The Origin of Species in 1859)

• This despite biological and social determinism being polar opposites in science; biological determinism states that an organism's behaviour is entirely pre-determined by its genetic makeup; whereas social determinism argues instead for the organism's social environment

TOPIC 3: SYMBOLISM: THÉOPHILE GAUTHIER (1811-1872), CHARLES BAUDELAIRE (1821-1867), STÉPHANE MALLARMÉ (1842-1898), PAUL VALÉRY (1871-1945)

3.1 About Symbolism

• Romanticism arrived late in France, and when it did, it became a different beast altogether

• Symbolism can be seen as a sort of middle ground between British/German Romanticism, and British Aestheticsism (thereby having a great impact on Modernism)

  • Where Romanticism was obsessed with nature, the Symbolists were concerned with artifice (French Symbolism can be seen as being influenced by the rise of the city)
• Nature is lacking; art can surpass nature because it is more 'true', more 'beautiful' and more 'powerful'; as Gautier claimed: 'Whatever is not well made does not exist'
• Where Romanticism is concerned with the individuality of the author, the prime object of the Symbolists was the linguistic aspect of the verse itself
• And where Romanticism emphasised emotions; Symbolism emphasises authorial detachment
• The poet as dandy: a well-educated, refined (but not necessarily rich) man of culture and decadence, who only participates in society as an observer, and not a participant proper; thus, he is free and aloof from social, moral and political obligations, and even the march of history; contrast this with the Renaissance Man
• Gautier proposed the concept of l'art pour l'art (art for art's sake)
• Art is free of moral obligations, social utility, and a strict adherence to the real
• Baudelaire's concern for artifice was not as great as Gautier's, because he believed in a sort of quasi-religious truth hiding beneath reality as we see it
• Visible reality is governed by a universal correspondence and symbolism—oddly enough a methodology used by interpreters of the Bible in the Middle Ages
• A note on Gautier and Baudelaire:
  • Their works were influential to both the Symbolists and Aesthetes (this is why in some cases, they are referred to as the latter); dandyism and l'art pour l'art are concepts that are usually associated with Aestheticism
  • However, both these concepts are important to the Symbolists as well, but more in essence: what the later Symbolists derived from Gautier and Baudelaire was the elevation of art and artifice above nature (l'art pour l'art), the detachment of the poet from society (dandyism), and most importantly, a truth of meaning hiding behind external appearances (symbol)
• Mallarmé and Valéry took this symbolic relationship between what is seen and what is true proposed by Baudelaire and transposed it onto the poem proper.

• The hidden or ulterior meanings do not take the one-to-one relationship of the traditional symbol and symbolised (i.e.: flower as a symbol of love); for the Symbolists.

• The ulterior meaning is self-generating: imagine the word flower as a pebble tossed into the river, and the ulterior meanings as the ripples spreading outward.

• The words function as triggers to set off a chain of implied relationships, which the reader must divine for himself.

• Examine this excerpt from Arthur Rimbaud’s *Une Saison en Enfer* (A Season in Hell, 1873) as an example:

  “O God - the clock of life stopped but a moment ago. I am no longer within the world. - Theology is accurate; hell is certainly down below - and heaven is up on high. - Ecstasy, nightmare, sleep, in a nest of flames...
  I will tear the veils from every mystery: mysteries of religion or of nature, death, birth, the future, the past, cosmogony, and nothingness. I am a master of phantasmagoria...
  Every talent is mine! - There is no one here, and there is someone: I wouldn’t want to waste my treasure. - Shall I give you Afric chants, belly dancers? Shall I disappear, shall I begin an attempt to discover the Ring? Shall I? I will manufacture gold, and medicines.
  Put your faith in me, then. Faith comforts, it guides and heals. Come unto me all of you, - even the little children - let me console you, let me pour out my heart for you - my miraculous heart! - Poor men, poor labourers! I do not ask for prayers; give me only your trust, and I will be happy” (42)

• Verse written in the manner of the above excerpt is hard to read; a fact acknowledged by the Symbolists themselves, who made their poetry not for ‘the crowd’: ‘What matter if it be closed to the majority, if its ultimate expressions remain the luxury of a small number, provided that with the few elect, whose divine realm it is, it reaches the highest degree of splendour and purity!”
And a language that purposefully obscures meaning (from which the reader is supposed to draw his own conclusions) cannot possibly impart morality

With regard to this special use of language, the Symbolists saw themselves as saviours somewhat of language that had been ‘soiled’ by its use as a ‘medium essentially practical’

Given that the language of the poem itself is the object, and that the reader takes an active role in the transference of meaning, the whole authority of the author is undermined

TOPIC 4: BRITISH AESTHETICISM: WALTER PATER (1839-1894), OSCAR WILDE (1854-1900)

4.1 About British Aestheticism

- British Aestheticism was inspired in turn by the French Symbolists; they share the same:
  - Contempt of bourgeois morality, and the moral function of literature
  - Contempt for the utilitarian/social function of literature
  - Contempt for 'real' depictions of life
  - Exaltation of art (and artifice) above nature
  - Preference for reader-response criticism

- Simplistically put, Aestheticism is a more superficial form of Symbolism; they share most of the same values; what is different between the two movements is a matter of degree only

- The most important difference between the two is the focus on language in Symbolism, which is almost absent for Aestheticism

- However, they draw heavily from Gautier and Baudelaire, more than the later Symbolists ('l'art pour l'art, cult of the dandy); Wilde especially drew from Joris-Karl Huysmans’ A rebours for his Picture of Dorian Gray

- The major difference between the Aesthetes and the Symbolists lie in their very names:
  - For the Symbolists, style was linguistic, and a means to an end; the end being communicating a symbol that carried multifarious meanings; the personal style of the author was secondary to the ultimate linguistic effect of the text itself
- For the Aesthetes, style (beauty) was the be-all and end-all; the personal style of the author was more important than the linguistic text alone; any meaning was secondary.
- In short, Symbolism = symbol, as Aestheticism = aesthetics.
- The difference can be reduced to a matter of degree: the Aesthetes were more preoccupied with artifice than the Symbolists; with dandyism pushed to the forefront.
- The secondarity of meaning is visible in Pater’s emphasis upon impressionistic criticism:
  - There is no objective meaning to be obtained from the text.
  - There are only individual responses to individual works.
  - All responses are equally valid; they only differ in terms of quality.
  - Criticism becomes an act of creation in itself; a search for patterns and meaning at the expense of the author’s intentions.

Observations/Views/Opinions

- The atomisation of truth extended into author as the sole authority of a text as well; as Valéry states: “There is no true meaning of a text—no author’s authority... Once published, a text is like an apparatus that anyone may use as he will and according to his ability: it is not certain that the one who constructed it can use it better than another” (in Brock, 110).
- This has now become one of the most recognisable traits of post/modernist theory, in which the text, once written, exists independently of its author.
- The dandy is also sometimes used in synonymy with flâneur: a flâneur is someone who walks around the city in order to experience it.
- This is significant not only in the elevation of the city (an artifice, as opposed to nature) as the prime artistic object, but also in the detachment from everyday social affairs; the flâneur is an observer, and not a participant.
Summary of the Unit

- In the Naturalism of Émile Zola, there was a distinct 'worship' of scientific progress, in that scientific principles could be applied onto the writing of literature, working outwards from the hypothesis that the character of man is due entirely to his social and biological heredity
- Where Naturalism sided with the lower classes against the bourgeoisie, Symbolism sided with the aristocrats
- Symbolism was an extension of Romanticism, where Neoclassical rules were fully deconstructed; there was no longer any need to defend literature from accusations of charges immorality, since the Symbolists practiced art for its own sake, with complete disregard of any notions of social responsibility
- The Symbolists would have great influence upon the British Aesthetes, who took its underlying philosophy of art-for-art's sake to its logical conclusion, in the exaltation of the dandy

Additional References

Exercise 1

1. What two factors are thought to shape human behaviour according to the Naturalists?
2. What is the difference between Realism and Naturalism?
3. Describe the Symbolist view of l’art pour l’art
4. Did the Symbolists prefer nature or artifice?
5. What are some of the characteristics of Aestheticism?

Answers for Exercise 1

1. Social and biological heredity
2. Realism was marked by a sense of social mission; Naturalism aimed to examine humanity from the detached standpoint of a scientist
3. Art should be free of any obligations to be moral, socially purposeful, or imitative of the real; art should be undertaken for its own sake, with an emphasis on artifice
4. Artifice; the Symbolists believed that nature was lacking, since artifice was more true, more beautiful and more powerful
5. Contempt of bourgeois morality, and the moral function of literature; contempt for the utilitarian/social function of literature; contempt for ‘real’ depictions of life; exaltation of art (and artifice) above nature; preference for reader-response criticism
UNIT 11

Unit Introduction

1. Certain historical phenomena put an end to Naturalism and Symbolism
2. These phenomena include the anxiety surrounding the fin de siècle and World War I, which eroded belief in both the above schools of thought; this led to greater experimentation in literature
3. Combining this sense of experimentation and Classicism was T. S. Eliot, who in many ways can be seen as an ‘end point’ of the continuity of the literary critical tradition, before it became even more atomised and evolved into Theory

Unit Objectives

1. To further evidence the idea of continuity (chronological and thematic) in literary theory, as an ongoing activity that is based on preceding thought
2. To introduce literary critical activity taking place in 19th century Europe and beyond; focusing, in this case, on the Modernists and T. S. Eliot
3. To provide students with an understanding of the theories that continue to shape and influence literary theory in the present day
TOPIC 1: MODERNISM AND THE AVANT-GARDE

1.1 About Modernism

- The outbreak of WWI halted the march of Naturalism and Symbolism (and Aestheticism); the Naturalist faith in science and human rationality was diminished, since human beings were engaged in irrational bloodshed
- The Symbolist and Aesthetic aloofness from the events of daily life became harder to justify; it became all the more immoral to focus on abstractions when the conditions of daily life became more unbearable
- However, elements of both schools remained:
  - Poetry (formerly a Symbolist domain) begun to deal with raw reality
  - Novels began to adopt symbolism
- As with the Russian critics prior to the Revolution, there was a sense of change in the air, and a sense that a new literature had to be created from scratch

- This arose in a multiplicity of –isms (like Naturalism before it, which had been the first self-conscious literary movement)
- One effect of post-WWI was the atomisation of culture; there were no longer any major and long-lasting sweeping literary movements like Romanticism or Realism; hence the rise of heavy experimentalism
- The atomisation of culture also implies cultural relativity, where a single, monolithic valuation of high culture was no longer possible; 'lower brow' works (in literature, films and music) began to rise in prominence
- Another effect was the avant-garde, where writing literature of high quality was no longer the point, only literature ahead of its time
- The 'classless' role of the intelligentsia and the literati became more solidified

1.2 Fin de siècle

- Although WWI was the prime catalyst of change, the roots of modernism (specifically the avant-garde) can be traced back to the fin de siècle (turn of the century) outlook
- The dandyism and/or decadence of the Symbolists and the Aesthetes can be attributed to the anticipation of the fin de siècle
- Characterised by a sense that the art of the new century has to evolve (underscored by a sense of despair and anxiety), art during this age became
further immersed in escapist aestheticism and decadence; escapist’ in the sense that holding a mirror to reality during the new century would be ultimately pointless, since reality itself was bound to change

**TOPIC 2: T. S. ELIOT (1888-1965)**

2.1 About T. S. Eliot

- Eliot was a writer-critic; as a critic he champions the cause of his own kind of writing (akin to the Romantic poet-critics), but he is also characterised by a will-to-respect (akin to the Neoclassicists)
- In a modernist age that was defined by the revolutionary experimentalism, Eliot's writing was experimental, but he styled himself as a defender of Classical virtues
- Like modernists (and the Symbolists/Aesthetes before him) Eliot argues for *auctorialis impersonality*—the poet disappears as the poem takes over: ‘The poem’s existence is somewhere between the writer and the reader; it has a reality which is not simply the reality of what the writer is trying to express’
- Eliot goes against the Romantic dictum of injecting *emotion*: the emotion that the reader will glean from the poem is not necessarily the same emotion that the writer includes
- If the writer wishes to convey emotion, he can do so by way of the *objective correlative*
  - “The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an ‘objective correlative’; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked” (“Hamlet and His Problems” 7)
  - The objective correlative is a close cousin of the symbol (the concrete standing for the non-concrete); but unlike the symbol, there is no one-to-one correspondence
- Eliot also rejects the idea of poetry as an instructional tool; poetry is poetry and philosophy is philosophy; the underlying morals of an author should be understood by the reader, but not necessarily accepted
What Eliot is chiefly concerned with is *fusion*; the fusion of many disparate emotions, elements, thoughts, experiences, and even the influence of dead poets (this is Eliot attempting to assert his conservatism over a radical idea).

Eliot goes on to say that the more elements fused and condensed within a poem, the better; essentially, the poet's mind is a passive receptacle for elements to pass through and fuse.

Eliot sometimes contradicts himself in his emphasis upon language: the act of fusion as deliberate act/language taking over and writing through the poet.

From that contradiction stems his model of the *dissociation of sensibility*, where Neoclassical verse was exemplified by thought over feeling, and Romantic verse by feeling over thought, the poetry of 17th century Metaphysicals (Baroque) "seems for more than a moment to gather up and to digest into its art all the experience of the human mind" ("Andrew Marvell" 147).

**Observations/Views/Opinions**

- It must be kept in mind that the *fin de siècle* period also overlapped with the *Belle Époque* ("Beautiful Era" or Golden Age); the time period of the *Belle Époque* is from the late 19th century to the onset of WWI (this also overlapped the Victorian and Edwardian periods in England).
- The age was characterised by peace and affluence, a growing chasm between the poor and the rich, and the growth of bohemianism.
- *Fin de siècle* anxiety must not be confused with the *Belle Époque*, for they are not synonymous; the latter takes place over a lengthier period, and which includes the period during which Naturalism and Symbolism reached their heights.
- As such, there is no overriding trend during the period; the period encompasses both the period during which 'classical' Victorian novels were written, and the more modern, experimental *early* works of James Joyce and Franz Kafka.
Summary of the Unit

- The outbreak of World War I saw the final vestiges of belief in human rationality and science finally diminished.
- Culture, קיון no longer worked under a single, defining trend from the middle of the 19th century, became even more atomised.
- Being avant-garde began to be a new indicator of quality; instead of being adherent to a Classical tradition, a work could be evaluated by how futuristic and experimental it was.
- And where during the earlier stages of the Belle Époque, works could be classified as ‘highbrow’ or ‘lowlbrow’, the modern period (especially after WWI) saw this distinction diminished.
- This went hand in hand with the disintegration of class differences during the Belle Époque; though of course not total, class differences between members of society became less marked after the war (relative to say, the Victorian era), with the ‘classlessness’ of the intelligentsia becoming more solidified.
- With seemingly nowhere left to turn to, given that every truth could now be deconstructed, the Ancient-leaning T. S. Eliot emerged to tie in the Classics with modern cultural anxiety.
- By way of fusing everyday elements with the influence of the Classics (who were reduced to sensory stimuli), and through the use of the objective correlative, Eliot posited that language (with all its cultural and historical baggage) could actually write through the poet.
Additional References


Exercise 1

1. What major world event signalled the end of the *Belle Époque*?
2. What is the most visible characteristic of *fin de siècle* literature?
3. What does the 'atomisation of culture' mean?
4. Was T. S. Eliot modern, or was he a Classicist?
5. What is an objective correlative?
Answers for Exercise 1

1. World War I

2. The exaltation of the avant-garde, and a greater sense of experimentation

3. Culture that becomes more differentiated, and is no longer governed by a singular trend

4. By and large, he is modern, for his style of writing was highly experimental; as much as his 'will-to-respect' of the ancients was very heightened, this is integrated into his poetry as referential symbols

5. A set of objects/situations/chain of events that become the 'formula' of a particular emotion; when the perception of these objects enter the mind through the senses, the emotion that they represent is immediately evoked
UNIT 12
ROLE AND FUNCTION OF CREATIVE WRITERS IN SOCIETY:
CREATIVE WRITERS AS SOCIAL AND LITERARY CRITICS

Unit Introduction

1. It is all too easy to view the artist as being transcendent, and detachable from his or her social context.
2. But this view does not take into account that social forces do play a role in shaping the artist, in terms of his or her self-fashioning.
3. There are a multitude of views concerning the writer’s role in society, from the expectation of him or her being a moral guide, to a mere entertainer.

Unit Objectives

1. To provide differing viewpoints on the role and function of writers in society.
2. To put the preceding chapters of this module in context of an ongoing literary debate on the degree to which social forces act upon a writer.
3. To put the preceding chapters of this module in context of an ongoing literary debate on the moral nature of literature.
TOPIC 1: THE WRITER AND SOCIETY

1.1 Social context

- Creative writers, poets and artists are commonly held to be individuals whose artistic vision transcends societal concerns.
- It is also commonly believed that the proper study of literature is the study of its universality, as opposed to its particularity—as in, not limited to the time and place concerns surrounding its production, or its setting.
- The example we used in the first unit was William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*.
- It is sometimes believed that to study Shakespeare’s works, because of his resounding genius, against an English, 17th century backdrop would be reductive of said genius.
- But is this limited to works of genius? What about other authors and texts? Who is to decide which authors or texts are detachable from their social/historical context? Is the detachment between author and society only valid for acclaimed, timeless geniuses? Or can ‘lesser’ writers be granted the same distinction?
- Another common opinion is that a writer becomes more socially purposive when his or her social backdrop is one that contains great socio-political injustices.
- For instance, Junot Díaz’ *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2008) is in many ways a ‘universal’ story, but because Díaz is of Dominican origin, and because he specializes in the immigrant experience, the novel is also an extended critique of the dictatorial rule of Rafael Trujillo in the Dominican Republic.
- The contrasting opinion (which has gained popularity over time) is that any writer—be they literary greats, or unknown authors writing in fringe genres—cannot fully be detachable from his or her social/historical context, for the simple reason that he or she is not distinct from society.
- The very role of the ‘writer’ is a socially established one, in terms of it being a profession; thus, in the same way one would not view a baker or a barber as ‘transcending’ society, one should not separate a writer from his or her context.
- The trouble with detachment is that it views the author as an autonomous force, and society as an undifferentiated external force.
• Writers (just like bakers and barbers) are individuals within society, and form their individuality in relation to other members of that society.

• As an example, take a hypothetical writer who is a misanthrope and maintains opinions that fly in the face of everything that is popular.

• This writer is still shaped by society, since his misanthropy is a reaction to other people (in that he has to be amongst people before he can decide that he does not like them), and his opinions are formed in relation to what is popular.

• Thus, the self cannot fully be separated from a social context.

• Part of the reason why this type of thinking is sometimes considered reductive when encountered with literary greats is that society is viewed as something static, monolithic and singular.

• In reality, however, any given society is composed of different groups whose interests, opportunities and attitudes interact in many ways, in accordance to complex power relations.

• Of course, there may be dominant ideologies existing within a particular society at a particular time, but that does not discount the fact that there exist possibilities that these ideologies may be changed by agents living within the prevailing ideology in a state of discontent.

• If the reverse were true, then there would be no ideological change or social reformations over time at all.

• Through a close examination of artistic and cultural mores of any given era, the critic can discern in a text emphases on some customary structures, and oppositions to others.

• Artists cannot always be given the honour of being visionaries foreseeing some universal, timeless good, while exposing and critiquing some universal, timeless injustice.

• What we do usually find instead in revolutionary writers is that they are reacting to or against certain ideological emphases prevalent in their particular societies.

• In short, as much as reading social context into a writer like Shakespeare would be reductive of his genius, removing all social context that formed that genius in the first place would be reductive of social forces.
1.2 Self-fashioning

- Self-fashioning is a term introduced by Stephen Greenblatt in 1980, to describe the process of constructing one's identity and public persona according to a set of socially acceptable standards.

- Although Greenblatt used the term to refer to the fashioning of the self during the Renaissance—particularly how noble men and women wished to be depicted in portraits of the time—this idea is applicable in most social contexts.

- In relation to the text, Greenblatt argues that in the 16th century, there was an increased self-consciousness about the fashioning of human identity as an almost artistic process.

- In this way, Renaissance literature is not a set of autonomous texts, but rather embodying, to various degrees, the cultural mores of that age.

- The writer's self-image is fashioned through his or her writing; this image is fashioned in relation to the writer's social standing, his or her fellow writers, his or her audience, his or her critics, etc.

- All of this is evidence against taking the overtly myopic view of viewing individual genius as something 'pure' and unhindered by context.

- At the same time, however, this is not to detract from the genius of great writers.

- To attribute everything to social conditions would also be reductive; if every writer in a specific age were acted upon by the same general social forces, then their writing would be of generally similar quality.

- This, of course, is not the case; the range of social forces acting upon the individual are varied, complex, and different from one individual to the next.

- For this reason, it is more appropriate to view the social forces that act upon the individual writer as informing his or her writing, as opposed to constructing it entirely.

1.3 The poet-critic

- The poet-critic, or writer-critic, is someone who is both an active poet/writer and a critic.
The trend gained prominence in the Renaissance, but has existed throughout the history of literature, since one would imagine writers themselves being the best arbiters of the act of writing.

However, poet-critics usually come under great criticism, for they usually seem to champion their own style of writing; in other words, speaking for no one but themselves.

The critic Northrop Frye claims that poets (especially in the modern age) made bad critics since they were too obsessed by their own processes; or as the contemporary poet-critic David Wheatley states, “there is a temptation to read the hyphen [in the term poet-critic] as a subtraction sign” (in Stamino, “The Plight of the Poet-critic”).

Of course, this is not entirely true, since most of the critics examined throughout this module were poets themselves.

Critics that championed their own cause studied in this module include Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Wordsworth, Oscar Wilde and T. S. Eliot, to name but a few.

The position of the poet-critic has become more complex with the onset of Theory; as Carmine Stamino claims, “theory discredited the probative force that powered the poet-critic’s prose. Standing on postmodern ground for their higher surmises, academia outgrew aesthetic evaluations; artistic merit, as a concept, became an ideological fairy tale. What eventually filtered down to street level—if the industry-wide outbreaks of shock at negative reviews are any guide—was a hypersensitivity to strong opinions and the taste-correcting urge lurking inside. Show us somebody dedicated to sifting out the best from the merely good, and we’ll show you somebody with a hidden motive” (“The Plight of the Poet-critic”)

**TOPIC 2: THE ROLE OF THE WRITER**

- Some argue that a writer’s role in society is to act as a sort of moral guide; to rally against the indifference and ignorance which doom society.
- For instance, George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* (1945) purposefully showcases the flaws and injustices in Stalinism, or Martin Amis’ *Money: A Suicide Note*
(1984) as purposefully showcasing the flaws and injustices occurring in late capitalism

- But in a work like Shakespeare’s *Othello* (1603), is Shakespeare critiquing the racism of Venetian society during the Renaissance, or is he telling a universal story of jealousy gone awry whose main character happens to be a Moor?

- It is also argued that the chief mission of the writer is to struggle for peace and the uplifting of society in which he or she lives, since any given society’s intellectual and cultural climate are in some way determined by literature and art.

- Carl Jung states that ‘the poet’s work must meet the spiritual needs of his society’, while Italo Calvino notes that the impact an important book ‘can have on the general struggle to progress is to raise the struggle to a higher level of awareness, to add to its instruments of knowledge, of foresight, of imagination, of concentration, etc.’

- As noted throughout the module, one very major difference between the various literary theories over the course of literary history is whether art should be socially (or morally) purposive, or whether it should be left alone to be an amoral, neutral form of entertainment.

- Using only the critics presented in this module, we can make the distinction quite clearly: on the ‘moralistic’ side, we have Horace and the Neoclassicists, and on the ‘amoralistic’ side, we have Longinus, the Romantics, the Symbolists and the Aesthetes.

- It should be qualified that this division is simplistic, and used for illustrative purposes only.

- All of the above quotes become interesting in the wake of the ‘amoralistic’ camp; because this social and/or moral role of literature has been stressed throughout the ages (from Plato), they believe that the writer should not be expected to preach a moralistic message; whether he or she does so or not should be a choice, not an imperative.

- In this light, the stance of the Romantics should also be reiterated; they (especially Coleridge and Wordsworth) believed, somewhat like Aristotle, that good literature was inherently moral, since it arouses sensory refinement.
Some take the 'moralistic' angle to the logical conclusion; critics like Matthew Arnold and Ralph Waldo Emerson believe that literature should become, in effect, a sort of religion.

Observations/Views/Opinions

- The role of the writer, of course, is held differently from society to society.
- As A. S. Maulucci notes, 'In Western and Eastern European countries, as well as in Russia and many Latin American nations, the role of the literary writer is more clearly defined than in the US. Poets and novelists abroad take on the role of intellectual leaders, and as such they give serious thought to what they contribute to their culture and the effect their work will have on their society. For most American novelists and poets today, however, intellectual leadership and social relevance do not appear to be primary concerns, and yet our serious literary writers must be more than mere entertainers' ("The Role of the Writer in America")
- While the above excerpt may contain simple generalisations, it nevertheless addresses the fact that the profession of writing is of differing degrees of importance in different societies.
- This goes back to the common (albeit, slightly condescending) belief mentioned above that writers whose social contexts contain glaring socio-political injustices (war, famine, poverty, etc.) should be writing about the subject.
- The other side of the coin, as it were, to this opinion is that writers living in times of peace and prosperity are free to write on any subject they wish, however 'trivial'.
- In an anecdote from the cultural critic Slavoj Žižek, he notes that there was a time when the suitability of him delivering a lecture on Alfred Hitchcock was brought up by a member of the audience, who stated that Žižek should instead be addressing the social strife in Yugoslavia; Žižek reacted angrily to this, feeling that it was a condescending view.
- All in all, the idea that a writer cannot be removed from his or her social context must take into account the complexity of the context itself.
- As convenient as it is to do so, this social context cannot be viewed as a singular, monolithic construct.

Summary of the Unit

- Creative artists are sometimes believed to be individuals whose artistic vision transcends societal concerns, and that the proper study of literature is the study of its universality, as opposed to its particularity; this is particularly held to be true of 'great' writers.
- Another common opinion is that a writer becomes (or should become) more socially purposive when his or her social backdrop is one that contains great socio-political injustices.
- The contrasting opinion is that any writer cannot be fully detached from his or her social/historical context, because he or she is not distinct from society.
- The very role of the ‘writer’ is a socially established one, in terms of it being a profession.
- If the writer and the context are seen as detached, then the writer is seen as an autonomous force, and society as an undifferentiated external force; this cannot be wholly true.
- All individuals within society form their individuality in relation to other members of that society.
- Also, society is not something static, monolithic and singular; any given society is composed of different groups whose interests, opportunities and attitudes interact in many ways, in accordance to complex power relations.
- While there may be dominant ideologies existing within a particular society at a particular time, it does not discount the fact that there exist possibilities that these ideologies may be changed by agents living within the prevailing ideology—or there would be no ideological change or social reformations over time at all.
• Through a close examination of artistic and cultural mores of any given era, the critic can discern in a text emphases on some customary structures, and oppositions to others.

• Artists cannot always be given the honour of being visionaries addressing universal good and chastising universal evil.

• In short, as much as reading social context into a writer would be reductive of his or her autonomy, removing all social context that formed that genius in the first place would be reductive of social forces.

• Self-fashioning is the process of constructing one’s identity and public persona according to a set of socially acceptable standards.

• In relation to literature, any given text is not fully autonomous, but embodies, to various degrees, the cultural mores of that age.

• The writer’s self-image is fashioned through his or her writing; this image is fashioned in relation to the writer’s social standing, his or her fellow writers, his or her audience, his or her critics, etc.

• But to attribute everything to social conditions would also be reductive; if every writer in a specific age were acted upon by the same general social forces, then their writing would be of generally similar quality.

• The range of social forces acting upon the individual are varied, complex, and different from one individual to the next.

• The poet-critic trend gained prominence in the Renaissance, but has existed throughout the history of literature.

• However, poet-critics usually come under great criticism, for they usually seem to champion their own style of writing.

• The position of the poet-critic has become more complex with the popularity of Theory in academic circles (which is usually by nature social), and the relegation into the fringes of aesthetic literary approaches.

• Some argue that a writer’s role in society is to act as a sort of moral guide; to rally against the indifference and ignorance which doom society, and to struggle for peace and the uplifting of society, since the intellectual/cultural climate of any given society is influenced by its art.

• As noted throughout the module, one very major difference between the various literary theories over the course of literary history is whether or not art should be socially (or morally) purposive.
• In this module alone, a simplistic 'list' of 'moralistic' and 'amoralistic' critics can be made.
• With regard to the 'amoralistic' camp, because this social and/or moral role of literature has been stressed throughout the ages, they believe that the writer should not be expected to preach a moralistic message.

Additional References

Exercise 1
1. Why is it misleading to consider the artist as being detachable from his or her social context?
2. What is a poet-critic?
3. Why are poet-critics sometimes considered unreliable?
4. Why is claiming that a genius is partly shaped by social forces considered reductive?
5. Why is it misleading to view society as something singular and monolithic?

Answers for Exercise 1
1. This view ignores the simple fact social contexts shape all individuals (including artists) in some way.
2. Someone who is both an active poet/writer and a critic.
3. They are too obsessed with advancing their own form of writing as the right way.
4. It detract from his or her genius, and is allied to the notion of society being something static, monolithic and singular.
5. This view does not take into account the fact that any society is composed of different groups whose interests, opportunities and attitudes interact in many ways, in complex power relations.
UNIT 13
EVALUATION OF POINTS OF VIEW ARISING FROM CHANGING AESTHETICS: LITERARY STYLE AND FORM

Unit Introduction

1. Literary form and style have changed throughout the course of literary history.
2. Style, the way in which themes are presented, is sometimes considered more important than those themes themselves, but stylistic manoeuvring is possible only within the confines of form.
3. The changing literary aesthetics are due to certain factors, such as the altering socioeconomic landscape, pioneering precursors of form and style, as well as the need to find a suitable style to express the concerns of the age.

Unit Objectives

1. To define the term literary aesthetics, specifically with regard to style and form.
2. To provide reasons explaining the evolution of literary aesthetics over the course of literary history.
3. To situate the discussion on literary aesthetics within the context of the contents of the module.
TOPIC 1: WHAT ARE STYLE AND FORM?

1.1 Literary style

- Before we explore literary style through the ages, it is first necessary to define exactly what we mean by style, and why it is regarded as being important.

- Style is the choice and arrangement of words which conveys the author's meaning, and imparts a sense of aesthetic quality.

- Style (the manner in which literature is written) is sometimes argued as being more important than its substance (the actual thematic content).

- It is considered to be the ingredient of a text which is wholly the writer's own; where themes can be (and are) reworked, the style in which a writer writes is what actually sticks in the memory.

- Examine these excerpts from William Matthew's essay "Literary Style":
  - "Facts may be forgotten, learning may grow commonplace, startling truths dwindle into mere truisms, but a grand or beautiful style can never lose its freshness or its charm. Even works of transcendent intellectual merit may fail of high success through lack of this property; while works of second and even third-rate value—works which swarm with precocious errors, with false statements and bad logic—may obtain a passport to futurity through the witchery of style" (7-8)
  - "In works of art, or pure literature, the style is even more important than the thought, for the reason that the style is the artistic part, the only thing in which the writer can show originality. The raw material out of which essays, poems and novels are made, is limited in quantity, and easily exhausted. The number of human passions upon which changes can be rung is very small, and the situations to which their play gives rise may be counted on the fingers. Love returned and love unrequited, jealousy and envy, pride, avarice, generosity and revenge, are the hinges upon which all poems and romances turn, and these passions have been the same ever since Adam. I live, I love—I am happy, I am wretched—I was once young—I must die—are very simple ideas, of which no one can claim a copyright; yet out of those few root-ideas has flowed all the poetry the world knows, and all that it ever will know" (9)
This is not to say that originality of content is not important; precursors of original ideas (or those who deliberately flout long-standing taboos) are remembered for doing so; having said that, however, it is the manner in which they actually present those original ideas, and not necessarily the ideas themselves, that causes them to be remembered throughout history.

For instance, Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* (1934) is famously remembered for its lurid and graphic descriptions of sexual encounters, which flew in the face of American censorship for at least three decades after its publication; but the reason why it is remembered as a 20th century Classic is not so much the luridness itself (which seems commonplace now) but the way in which that luridness was presented.

As we can see in the second excerpt, there are in reality a finite amount of themes that any writer can possibly address in his or her writing ("I live, I love—I am happy, I am wretched—I was once young—I must die—"); it is up to the author's ingenuity to inject common themes with life, through his or her style.

As an example, the singer and author Nick Cave said in an interview in 2001 that the entire subject matter of all his songs revolve around three outstanding themes: 'God, love and death'; given that he has written well over 200 songs, two novels and a movie screenplay in his career, it would then follow that he can only differentiate all these different works by altering the presentation of the same three themes.

1.2 Literary form

- For ease of understanding, we can take the term *literary form* to be roughly similar to that of *literary genre*.

- And given that form refers to 'outward appearance' we can take form to encompass the varieties of literature that can commonly be found, such as the novel, the poem, the play, etc.

- But implicit in the term *literary form* (as opposed to the mere classification of genre) is an understanding of the mechanics of this outward appearance—its function, its ability to describe a situation, its inherent objectivity/subjectivity, etc.
• As noted above, there are finite things to the can be said, but an almost infinite number of ways in which it can be said.

• The critic Kenneth Burke makes the distinction between ‘situations’ and ‘strategies’
  • “Poetry [is] the adopting of various strategies for the encompassing of situations. These strategies size up the situations, name their structure and outstanding ingredients, and name them in a way that contains an attitude towards them.” (1)

• Burke also makes more distinctions within a singular poetic act:
  • The dream: the unconscious or subconscious factors in a poem
  • Prayer: the communicative functions of a poem, which can lead to reader to participate in his poem in so far as his poem has a public communicative structure

• Chart: the realistic sizing up of situations

• In this way, we can see style as a subset of form; to a large extent, the form a writer chooses to write in dictates his or her expression; his or her style is a manoeuvring act within those boundaries.

• This also takes into account writers who experiment with form and style; a writer such as James Joyce may subvert certain long-held notions of what a novel should be, and introduce new elements within the novel form, but he is still, to a large extent, working within the confines of the novel form.

• In the same way, those who choose to write religious poems, fantasy novel, popular limericks, or closet plays, are bound by certain conventions of form.

• Lee Erickson in The Economy of Literary Form (2000) makes a correlation between economic factors (the economy of the literary marketplace) and the preference of certain forms in certain periods of time.

• For instance, he notes that one of the reasons why literature in the Romantic and Victorian periods are so distinct was because the periodicals became more profitable and popular; and because these periodicals were mainly filled with novel excerpts and critical essays, the popularity of poetry began to dwindle.

• We shall examine some of these changes below.
TOPIC 2: EVOLVING AESTHETICS

2.1 Classical Antiquity

- The rhetoricians before Plato and Aristotle had already identified style as an important component of public speeches; they had honed into an art theories on the mixture of rhetorical devices and factual statements to make public speeches more effective.

- Plato and Aristotle criticism of literature was mostly based on lyric and dramatic poetry, with an emphasis on the latter, since the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides were held as the finest examples of the dramatic genre.

- We know from earlier in the module that Plato thought poetry as being better than dramatic poetry, for while the former as least aspires towards philosophical truths, the latter played to the baser instincts of the audience.

- This is an important distinction: the very nature of drama (unless something is written as a closet play) presupposes audience immediacy—in terms of audience reception not being gauged by sales or critical reception at some distant point in the future, but the real-time reception of the audience itself.

- There is also the seemingly obvious point of literature identifying itself as such; if, as Plato says, lyric poetry aspires towards philosophical truth, he still regards literary discourse as being flawed when viewed in relation to philosophy, for the former is not by nature a logical mode of discourse.

- Aristotle's description of the characteristics of good drama is also an indicator of literary form; the notion of the organic poem, the tragic hero, and the three unities are what he believed made literary presentation more effective.

- We know from the module that Longinus was primarily a stylistic critic; his notion of the sublime is an indicator of an epic, grand style (and not necessarily grand content); this is most evident in Homer, where even banal passages are narrated in a larger-than-life manner, self-consciously elevating its action to an epic level.

- Longinus' inclusion of the Bible in his criticism is also significant, since the 'biblical style' (the style of writing in the Bible) is now recognisable as the prime tool to make a text seem loftier in the delivery of its content, and to inject a sense of epic grandeur.
2.2. The Middle Ages and the Renaissance

- Arguably more than in any other period, the epics produced during the Middle Ages show the greatest usage of the epic style, since the subject matter of most of these tales revolve around epic tussles between demi-gods and kings
- Examine these opening lines from Beowulf:
  - "Lo, praise of the prowess of people-kings
    of spear-armed Danes, in days long sped,
    we have heard, and what honor the athelings won!
    Oft Scyld the Sceafing from squadroned foes,
    from many a tribe, the mead-bench tore,
    aying the earls. Since erst he lay
    friendless, a foundling, fate repaid him:
    for he waxed under weal, in wealth he threw,
    till before him the folk, both far and near,
    who house by the whale-path, heard his mandate,
    gave him gifts: a good king he!" (1)
- We know that writers in the Renaissance had ready-made ‘guidebooks’ (mostly from Aristotle, by way of Horace) on how to compose good, effective literature; this (as was the case with the Neoclassicists after them) was the notion of form and style taken to their logical conclusions—literature that resembles ancient literature in its appearance will undoubtedly be good literature
- We also know that perhaps the most famous figure to disprove this notion is William Shakespeare, who like Christopher Marlowe, but unlike his more learned contemporary Ben Jonson, deviated from this singular notion of ‘classical literature = good literature’
- The point made earlier about Plato’s distinction between dramatic and lyric poetry (and audience immediacy) is an important point with regard to Shakespeare’s mixing of genres, and the insertion of sometimes vulgar humour and excessive violence; these are commonly believed to have been designed to appease his audience, who were not only composed of noblemen and women only, but also ‘commoners’; we will return to this point in relation to the novel below
This is also an important point with regards to the introduction of the printing press by Johannes Gutenberg; with the printing press, the designated audience of literature was no longer the noble class, since writers could now make a living off their own writing by selling it to the masses, as opposed to relying on the patronage of the ruling class.

But arguably the most glaring evidence of the 'old' and the 'new' is in Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote*; Alonso Quixano (Don Quixote) thinks himself a knight, after reading many books of medieval chivalry, and affects a tone of speech that is relatively haughty and befitting of a medieval epic, in relation to the peasant farmer Sancho Panza, who tries to mimic Quixote's speech mannerisms, but often fails (to comic effect).

The novel is in itself a proto-modernist one, with many layers of self-reflexivity (given that the second part is written with reference to a fake sequel that was published without Cervantes' knowledge) but is clearly designed for mass consumption; what is important in Cervantes' novel is that there is a self-conscious parody of a medieval romance in terms of the characters' speech patterns.

This element of parody (an element of satire) is arguably one of the most telling traits of a characteristic style; we see in modern texts that are parodies of a past era certain stylistic patterns that can denote it as such (i.e.: the use of archaic pronouns in a deliberately satirical movie such as Sam Raimi's *Army of Darkness*, 1997; the use of formal English in the Victorian 'Mr. Cholmondley-Warner and Grayson' sketches on the comedy television programme *Harry Enfield and Chums*, 1990).

2.3 The Neoclassical period

In the previous unit, we made the simplistic distinction between the 'moralistic' and 'amoralistic' camps within literary theory; it must also be stated that this debate went hand in hand with a debate on form and style as well—even if it may seem trivial by modern standards.

It may help in this regard to think of literary form and style behaving like *language*; when allowed to settle and manifest in a geographical location for an extended period of time, they will inevitably develop certain characteristics that differentiate it from the source.
This is most evident in John Dryden; we know that one after effect of the Renaissance was the emergence of a dual trend in literature, the 'French' Neoclassical strain and the 'Italian' experimental strain. The 'French' and 'Italian' strains had become slightly convoluted in Elizabethan England (in a large part, due to Shakespeare), which is the very premise of Dryden's Essay on Dramatick Poesie.

Aside from the debate on whether Classical or modern drama was more inherently moral, the four characters (Eugenius, Crites, Lisideius and Neander) in the Essay debate on the relative merits of French and English drama, as well as the merits of rhyme and blank verse.

Neander, who represented Dryden himself, states that the strict adherence to Classicism in French drama resulted in plays that were cramped stylistically, but that English drama, being more lax in its homage to Classical style, allowed for more humour and variety in terms of audience effect.

Neander also states that tragicomedy (which was a primarily English phenomenon, since Aristotle cautioned against the mixing of genres within the same play) was not absurd, and allowed the tragic and comedic elements to play off one another.

And while it may seem odd to say so in light of modern sensibilities, Neander claims that plays containing long speeches are more suited to the French than to the English, since the English are a more masculine people.

Neander also extended the debate popular during the Renaissance on whether blank verse (which relied upon the accents of words to form its metre) or Classical verse (which relied upon the number of syllables to form its metre) was preferable; Neander claims that the Elizabethan poets had taken blank verse to its heights, so rhyme to determine word placement in a poem was more suited to Restoration sensibilities.

2.4 The English Romantic period

One very stark feature of Romantic poetry was its seemingly naked simplicity.

Examine these lines from William Blake's "And Did Those Feet in Ancient Time" (1804; commonly referred to as "Jerusalem") for instance:
- "And did those feet in ancient time
  Walk upon England's mountain green
  And was the holy Lamb of God,
  On England's pleasant pastures seen!"
- Part of the reason that the poetry of the Romantic era was written in a
  manner different from the preceding one was the influence of the proto-
  Romantic poet Robert Burns (1759-1796), and the 'Romantic manifesto' of
  William Wordsworth (his Preface to the Lyrical Ballads, 1798)
- In the Preface, as we noted earlier in the moocie, Wordsworth makes a
  plea for sympathy with everyday pastoral folk, and goes so far as to
  sanction a style of writing that mimics their use of language, because they
  convey their emotions more sincerely and directly
- As Coleridge noted, to Wordsworth’s dismay, the latter’s poetry hardly
  reflected this
- Nevertheless the sentiment of poetry being for the enjoyment and
  enlightenment for all men and women, as opposed to the noble or
  intellectual class, endured

2.5 The 19th century and beyond
- The 19th century provided many instances in which literary aesthetics
  changed altogether
- The first was the industrialisation of publishing; if since the Renaissance
  books could be mass produced and reach a wider audience, and thereby
  changing its designated audience irrevocably, then the industrialisation of
  publishing had the same effect, but on a much larger scale
- It is also in this period of mass publishing that a royalties system became
  feasible, which did away with the patronage of the noble class altogether;
  given this mass market situation, the distinction between highbrow and
  lowbrow literature began to fade
- The 19th century also saw the novel come into prominence; as it is with
  today’s reading market, prose novels are generally meant for mass
  consumption, while poetry is relegated into a specialised interest somewhat
With critics like Vissarion Belinsky calling for literature to have a greater social function, realism took on even greater importance, with its primary vehicle being the novel.

We can make a generalisations about prose and verse forms here; where the poem by nature frames everyday life in a heavily stylised state, the novel, by means of its descriptive qualities, could frame everyday life in a more 'realistic' fashion.

This distinction was, of course, taken to its logical conclusion with Naturalism and Symbolism; and fittingly enough, the respective vehicles for these movements were the novel and the poem.

We know from earlier in the module that Naturalism took the association between a descriptive means of delivery and everyday life to a new level, by making the observation of brutal reality a quasi-scientific task.

The Naturalist novelist was, in effect, writing a literary tract on sociology, in an attempt to prove the thesis that man’s nature is governed by his heredity and his environment.

The best example of this is in the movement’s most notable practitioner, Émile Zola, who attempted with his Rougon-Macquart series to categorise various social types (in fictional characters spanning four generations of the Rougon-Macquart family tree).

As he himself stated, ‘In one word, his [Honoré de Balzac] work wants to be the mirror of the contemporary society. My work, mine, will be something else entirely. The scope will be narrower. I don’t want to describe the contemporary society, but a single family, showing how the race is modified by the environment... My big task is to be strictly naturalist, strictly physiologist.’

Whereas the Symbolist poet, in seeing themselves as descendants of the Romantics (though not exactly similar), used poetry to escape from brutal everyday reality and the commonness of nature, a rebellious sentiment made even more stark by the dense use of symbols and abstractions.

Another important fact to keep in mind in terms of the choice of form is that both the Naturalists and Symbolists objected to the clean art of the bourgeoisie, and allied themselves with the lower classes and the...
aristocrats respectively; this makes the choice of the novel by the Naturalists and the poem by the Symbolists more understandable.

- The best way to view the importance of form in this regard would be to ask: would the Naturalists have been more or less successful in carrying out their task if they wrote primarily in verse instead of prose? And would the Symbolists have achieved their aims if they wrote novels instead of poems?

- We also know that fin de siècle anxiety brought about greater experimentation in literature; this experimentation (not only in terms of content, but in terms of form and style) became even more apparent after World War I, as an expression of a new nihilism.

- The modern novel overtook the realist novel as the main expression of the age; one of the most visible features of the modern novel is the stream-of-consciousness technique (which in itself is usually an expression of neuroses, and continues to be employed in this day and age) used by James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, T. S. Eliot, William Faulkner and countless others.

**Observations/Views/Opinions**

- We have seen from the above that the changing literary aesthetics over the ages is a result of several factors:
  - The desire to find a suitable form and style that is able to express the prevalent attitudes of the age
  - Socioeconomic factors which affect the designated audience of a given text (who the text is written for), and in doing so, informs the way literature is written
  - Literary precursors, whose pioneering texts become influential
  - An analogy with all of the above can be made with the change in musical genres in 1960s America and the UK
  - After the initial thrust of cookie-cutter British pop music (the bands who made up the 'British Invasion' of rock music in America) in the early 1960s, changing social realities—characterised by civil rights movements, the
increased use of narcotics, the sexual revolution and the Vietnam War—forced many of these bands to search for new means of expression.

- Many bands (like the Rolling Stones) turned back to the Delta blues that influenced them in the first place; bands like The Kinks turned back to traditional British folk music; bands like Pink Floyd turned to progressive rock; while The Beatles embraced psychedelia, Indian esotericism, British folk and lastly American roots music.

Summary of the Unit

- Style is the choice and arrangement of words within a text that conveys the author’s meaning, and imparts a sense of aesthetic quality.
- Style is sometimes argued as being more important than its substance, and is considered to be the ingredient of a text which truly belongs to the writer: themes can be and are reworked, the style in which a writer writes is what actually sticks in the memory.
- Precursors of original ideas are remembered throughout the ages; but it is the manner in which they actually present those original ideas, and not necessarily the ideas themselves, that causes them to be remembered throughout history.
- There are in reality a finite amount of themes that any writer can possibly address in his or her writing; it is up to authors’ ingenuity to bring these common themes to life, through their style.
- Form refers to the ‘outward appearance’ of a text; we can take form to encompass the varieties of literature that can commonly be found, such as the novel, the poem, the play, etc.
- Understood in the term literary form (as opposed to the mere classification of genre) is an understanding of the mechanics of its function, its ability to describe a situation, its inherent objectivity/subjectivity, etc.
- We can see style as a subset of form: the form a writer chooses to write in dictates the boundaries of his or her expression; his or her style is a manoeuvring act within those boundaries.
• There is also a correlation between economic factors and the preference of certain forms in certain periods of time

• In Antiquity, the rhetoricians had already identified style as an important component of public speeches; they had honed into art theories on the mixture of rhetorical devices and factual statements to make public speeches more effective

• Plato thought lyric poetry as being better than dramatic poetry, for while the former as least aspires towards philosophical truths, the latter played to the baser instincts of the audience

• The very nature of drama presupposes audience immediacy, in terms of audience reception

• There is also the point of literature identifying itself as such; if, as Plato says, lyric poetry aspires towards philosophical truth, he still regards literary discourse as being flawed when viewed in relation to philosophy, for the former is not by nature a logical mode of discourse

• Aristotle’s description of the characteristics of good drama is also an indicator of literary form; the notion of the organic poem, the tragic hero, and the three unities are what he believed made literary presentation more effective

• Longinus was primarily a stylistic critic; his notion of the sublime is an indicator of an epic, grand style and not necessarily grand content

• Arguably more than in any other period, the epics produced during the Middle Ages show the greatest usage of the epic style, since the subject matter of most of these tales revolve around epic tussles between demi-gods and kings

• Writers in the Renaissance used Aristotle (by way of Horace) as a guide on how to compose good, effective literature; with the belief that literature that resembles ancient literature will undoubtedly be good literature

• Perhaps the most famous figure to disprove this notion is William Shakespeare; with regard to his mixing of genres, and the usage of sometimes base humour and excessive violence, they are commonly believed to have been designed to appease his audience, who were comprised in part of ‘commoners’
• With the invention of the printing press, the designated audience of literature was no longer the noble class, since writers could now make a living off their own writing by selling it to the masses, as opposed to relying on the patronage of the ruling class.

• Literary form and style, in this way, behaves like a language; when allowed to settle and manifest in a geographical location for an extended period of time, they will inevitably develop certain characteristics that differentiate it from the source.

• The ‘French’ and ‘Italian’ strains that emerged during the Renaissance had become slightly convoluted in Elizabethan England, which is the premise of Dryden’s Essay on Dramatick Poesie, wherein the four characters (Eugenius, Crites, Lisideius and Neander) debate on the relative merits of French and English drama, as well as the merits of rhyme and blank verse.

• One very stark feature of Romantic poetry was its seemingly naked simplicity.

• Part of the reason that the poetry of the Romantic era was written in a manner different from the preceding one was the influence of the proto-Romantic poet Robert Burns, and the William Wordsworth’s Preface to the Lyrical Ballads.

• In the Preface, Wordsworth makes a plea for sympathy with everyday pastoral folk, and goes so far as to sanction a style of writing that mimics their use of language, because they convey their emotions more sincerely and directly.

• In the 19th century publishing was industrialised; books could be mass produced and reach a wider audience, and thereby changing its designated audience irrevocably.

• It is also in this period that a royalties system became feasible, which did away with the patronage of the noble class altogether; given this mass market situation, the distinction between highbrow and lowbrow literature began to fade.

• The 19th century also saw the novel come into prominence; as it is with today’s reading market, prose novels are generally meant for mass consumption, while poetry is relegated into a specialised interest.
With the need for literature to have a greater social function, realism took on even greater importance, with its primary vehicle being the novel

Where poetry by nature frames everyday life in a heavily stylised state, the novel could frame everyday life in a more ‘realistic’ fashion

This distinction was, of course, taken to its logical conclusion with Naturalism and Symbolism, who used as their main vehicles of expression the novel and the poem respectively

Another important fact to keep in mind in terms of the choice of form is that both the Naturalists and Symbolists objected to the clean art of the bourgeoisie, and allied themselves with the lower classes and the aristocrats respectively, making the choice of the novel by the Naturalists and the poem by the Symbolists more understandable

*Fin de siècle* anxiety brought about greater experimentation in literature; this experimentation (not only in terms of content, but in terms of form and style) became even more apparent after World War I, as an expression of a new nihilism

The modern novel overtook the realist novel as the main expression of the age; one of the most visible features of the modern novel is the stream-of-consciousness technique

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**Additional References**


Exercise 1

1. What is style?
2. In what way is style a subset of form?
3. If literary forms are indeed dictated in part by economic factors, what effect did the industrialisation of publishing have on literary aesthetics?
4. What does audience immediacy refer to?
5. In what way does literary form behave like language?
Answers for Exercise 1

1. Style is the choice and arrangement of words which conveys the author’s meaning, and impacts a sense of aesthetic quality.

2. In that a writer’s style is his or her manoeuvring within the confines of a particular form.

3. The industrialisation of publishing allowed books to be produced en masse and reach a wider audience; this changed its designated audience irrevocably, and allowed a royalties system to become feasible.

4. The audience’s relation to a work of art; the ‘distance’ between the reader and the writer is greater in a published work than it is in a performed dramatic piece.

5. In that if a particular form is allowed to settle and manifest itself in a given locality over an extended period of time, it will inevitably develop certain characteristics that differentiate it from the source.
UNIT 14
EXPLORATIONS OF RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN
LITERATURE AND SOCIETY: NATION BUILDING AND
LITERARY DEVELOPMENT

Unit Introduction

1. In this unit, the terms nationalism and nation-building will be defined in the context of literature
2. Various authors throughout history have used literature as a tool for taking a particular nation out of the throes of a social malady, or the rule of oppressors
3. However, we will primarily be examining authors from the 18th century and beyond, since the concept of ‘nation’ as we know it only came into existence during that period

Unit Objectives

1. To define the terms nationalism and nation-building in the context of literary history
2. To evidence the idea that throughout history, literary activity is commonly used as a tool for social reform
3. To provide students with an understanding of the theories that continue to shape and influence literary theory in the present day
TOPIC 1: NATIONALISM

1.1 Nationalism

- It is vital in this unit to qualify nationalism in the context of this unit
- In a more positive (and somewhat tautological) light, the term nationalism can refer to the largely innocuous connection of an individual to his or her native homeland, which aids in his or her formation of a distinct social identity
- It is stated in a previous unit that individuals, writers included, are inexorably linked to the societies in which they live
- This includes both the active love or passive, ambivalent attachment that an individual feels towards his or her own particular society; of course, in both cases, it is often easier to identify oneself as being part of a society when that notion of society has pre-defined boundaries
- But the way in which the politics of differentiation works, when taken to its logical conclusion, is by exclusiveness; by stating that ‘I am a citizen of country x’ one is also stating that ‘I am not a citizen of country y’, and by stating that ‘being a citizen of country x is good’ one is implying that ‘those who are not from country x are the other’
- This is why of late the term nationalism is sometimes taken as a far-right wing buzzword, given that the xenophobic ideologies of Fascism and National Socialism are extreme examples of the nationalist logic

1.2 The nation

- Of course, the term nationalism, in the strictest sense, presupposes the formation of the nation-state, even if the sentiment of being loyal to any communal or ‘national’ structure (such as a kingdom, town, region, duchy, etc.) is effectively the same
- Because the sentiment is the same, arguing when exactly nations actually became nations in the modern sense of the word would be mere semantics; for ease of understanding in this unit, we will use the ‘modernist position’, which according to Philip Schwyzer is that a nation is a nation only “when it becomes possible as well as desirable for a large proportion of the population and a wide range of social classes to experience and act on nationalist sentiments” (9)
• For instance, while a self-conscious English (Tudor) nationalism came into full force during Elizabethan age—in which poets like Sir Philip Sidney and William Shakespeare played a very important part—it was a very exclusive, aristocratic affair.

• As Schwyzter states: "In the sixteenth century, there were many people of all ranks and stations willing to kill or die for their religion, for their traditional lord, for customary rights, or for pay—few if any were willing to make similar sacrifices for an imagined transhistorical community, be it nominated England, Wales, or Britain" (ibid.)

• So while the sentiment can be the same, it takes a sort of psychological leap to think of oneself as fighting for a nation, rather than for any other reason.

• Thus, the modernist position above can only refer to sentiments expressed after the American (1775–1783) and the French (1789–1799) Revolutions.

1.3 Nation-building

• Nationalism, in the sense the term is used in this unit, will refer to nation-building, where literature is seen as a powerful tool to shape a country’s future progress.

• Implicit in this notion is that the expression of nationalistic love is an idealistic one, based on what a country can be, instead of what a country is.

• Also, since we are using the term in this context, it is important to further distinguish between writers/theorists who feel an active sense of love to their native homeland, and writers/theorists who actively see literary activities as being able to shape a national identity.

• For instance, we know that John Dryden expressed the notion that English and French drama should be treated as separate entities, since either was suited to the innate temperament of its people (with English people being more ‘masculine’ as a whole).

• But Dryden in this sense is describing what an existing literary trend is; when one theorises about what a national literature (in terms of nation-
building) should function as, or what it should resemble, one is prescribing what literature should be.

- It is also important to distinguish between writers/theorists who actively desire to shape the national identity of their nation, and those who actually did so, unwittingly.

- For instance, Ortega y Gasset posited that 'Quixotism'—with an uppercase 'Q', which is the romantic, idealistic and quixotic chivalry practised by Don Quixote—is the original Spanish religion (in the sense that it has shaped the national character more than Catholicism).

- The former sentiments where writers attempt to shape the literature of a nation, presupposes that a given nation is undergoing some sort of transitional period—due to it being a new nation, marked by oppression by a foreign state, or under a widespread social malady.

- This would explain why there is an upsurge of nationalist literature in nations in the throes of post-independence anxiety; for instance, in the ex-British colonies of Asia and Africa.

- It must be stated here that the logic of exclusiveness is given a 'pass' in popular opinion where newly independent nations are concerned; a revolt against the literary vestiges of the former colonial masters is seen as legitimate, even when the same differentiating logic (strictly applied and allowing no room for sentiment) that informs xenophobia is applied.

- For instance, some postcolonial writers such as Chinua Achebe (Nigeria) and Muhammad Hj. Salleh (Malaysia) made conscious decisions to no longer write their works in English, which is the language of their former colonial masters.

- To a lesser extent, the postcolonial writer may also choose to not adopt literary forms and sensibilities imparted after decades of colonial rule.

- For instance, it is argued by some postcolonial critics that an emphasis on aesthetics as opposed to social purposiveness in literature is a colonial vestige.
TOPIC 2: NATION-BUILDING THROUGH THE AGES

2.1 The Renaissance and the Romantic Age

- Nationalism in England and Ireland is always closely associated with both class and religion.
- Edward Berry points out that the argument for a kind of national renewal through poetry put forward by Sir Philip Sidney is very much aristocratic form of nationalism tied to class interest, and specifically hostile to ‘base’ interventions.
- With regards to William Shakespeare, critics are not able to come to any definite conclusion about his nationalism.
- On the one hand, it is believed that he, like Sidney, is a willing participant in the ‘Tudor nationalism’ popular in England during the reign of Elizabeth I (the self-glorifying, aristocratic form on nationalism above); others argue that he is consistently doubtful about the ‘nobility’ of nationalistic wars and the effects of its participants.
- It must be noted that Tudor nationalism is very English-centric; it seeks to glorify England as the epicentre of the British empire (as differentiated from Scotland and Wales).
- In the Romantic age, Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803) was the most important influence upon the Sturm und Drang (‘Storm and Stress’) movement, which was a reaction against the overt rationality of French Neoclassicism.
- Herder’s vision was called the ‘collective individuality of society’; he believed that every culture had its own unique way of experiencing and thinking.
- And crucial to this way of thinking (and the most obvious differentiation of any one society from another) is a distinctive language/dialect; Herder states that ‘the language of a nation is its collective treasure, the source of its social wisdom and communal self-respect’.
- In a previous unit, we used the analogy of literature functioning as a language, with its own principles of growth and change; language is also inexorably tied to a particular society, and literature is inexorably tied to this language.
• In other words, Herder sees literature as the expression of a culture, and not an individual.

• Herder felt that the most pure expression of a culture is the folk-story; he was instrumental in encouraging the rediscovery of folk-poetry in Germany.

• Folklore developed as a representation of literary nationalism during this age; in the search for what constituted an ‘authentic’ national literature, folklore is often relied upon, as its source (i.e. poor folk) are considered (somewhat condescendingly), as being sources of untouched, ‘authentic’ soul.

• This, of course, presupposes the idea that a transhistorical, ‘authentic’ national soul does exist; sometimes, as we can see when a traditional cultural product is ‘officially’ granted the status of national art/heritage, the exercise becomes self-fulfilling in terms of the ‘authentic soul’ being transplanted onto said product.

• In Germany, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm (the Brothers Grimm) began collecting folk stories in 1807, which were labelled as authentically German.

• In fact, they were initially criticised because the first edition of their stories were insufficiently ‘German’ (the stories had too many similarities to French tales).

• It is also important to note that similar ventures into the country to find this ‘authentic’ soul occurred in many countries in Europe; to further add to the spirit of creating a national literature, the stories were often updated to suit modern syntax.

• We can draw parallels to this sentiment with William Wordsworth’s Romantic decree that the language and subject matter of literature should originate from pastoral England; to write in the manner of common folk (again, playing to the notion of common folk being ‘unsullied’ by outside influences), via Romantic sympathy, was an indicator of authenticity.

• All of the above points to the idea that finding (and often embellishing) the ‘authentic’ soul within a culture—in short, consciously drawing boundaries around what does and what does not constitute culture.
belonging to a nation—is to encourage nationalistic sentiment via constructing a national identity.

2.2 The 19th Century and beyond

- The above sentiment, that of using the notion of a transhistorical soul to inspire nationalist sentiment for future generations, is visible in the Irish poet William Butler Yeats’ poetry, who used imagery and subject matter from traditional Celtic folklore and myth.
- The use of Celtic imagery was intentional, as it was an attempt to distinguish Irish literature from the Western literary tradition, for instance in the usage of figures from Celtic mythology (most famously Cuchulain) in place the common usage of figures from Greek or Roman Antiquity.
- Like Wordsworth, Yeats also sees the ‘authentic’ spirit in Ireland’s pastoral reality; in “To Ireland in the Coming Times”, he connects the ideas of the pre-industrial pastoral life, Celtic mythology, and nationalistic spirit.
  - “Nor may I less be counted one
    With Davis, Mangan, Ferguson,
    Because, to him who ponders well,
    My rhymes more than their rhyming tell
    Of things discovered in the deep,
    Where only body’s laid asleep.
    For the elemental creatures go
    About my table to and fro,
    That hurry from unmeasured mind
    To rant and rage in flood and wind;
    Yet he who treads in measured ways
    May surely barter gaze for gaze.
    Man ever journeys on with them
    After the red-rose-bordered hem.
    Ah, faeries, dancing under the moon,
    A Druid land, a Druid tune!” (41)
• The American Transcendentalists were part of what later came to be known as the American Renaissance.

• In essays such as *Nature* (1836), *The American Scholar* (1837) and *Self-Reliance* (1841), Ralph Waldo Emerson both defines what he sees as the characteristics of American identity, as well as calls for other poets to represent these characteristics.

• Examine the excerpt from "The American Scholar":

  "The sort of the American freeman is already suspected to be timid, inactive, tame. Public and private avarice make the air we breathe thick and fat. The scholar is decent, indolent, complaisant. See already the tragic consequence. The mind of this country, taught to aim at low objects, eats upon itself. There is no work for any but the decorous and the complaisant. Young men of the fairest promise, who begin life upon our shores, inflated by the mountain winds, shined upon by all the stars of God, find the earth below not in unison with these—but are hindered from action by the disgust which the principles on which business is managed inspire, and turn drudges, or die of disgust—some of them suicides. What is the remedy? They did not yet see, and thousands of young men as hopeful now crowding to the barriers for the career, do not yet see, that, if the single man plant himself indomitably on his instincts, and there abide, the huge world will come round to him" (113-4)

• Emerson is calling for a literature that can celebrate the individualism, democracy and equality that he believes should be the bedrock of American life.

• It needs to be stated that Emerson's Transcendentalist view of the self needing to be conjoined to the universe feeds into this notion of American nationalism, where each individual must embody the better characteristics of the universal (with poets leading the pioneering charge).

• In calling for a nationalistic literature, and a nationalistic spirit, what Emerson is rallying against was not European tradition per se, but the American reliance on European tradition; what America needed was
'new lands, new men, new thoughts' to shape 'our own works and laws and worship'

- Henry David Thoreau, in expanding Emerson's Transcendentalism, was against the idea of government in general, but felt that the maladies of the nation were caused by the abandonment of 'purer sources of truth', namely the Bible and the American Constitution

- Walt Whitman, who as we noted earlier saw himself as Emerson's ideal poet, also extended the Transcendentalist notion of the relationship between self and the universe onto larger things, because it always allows for the inclusion of new ideas and new people (more so than some of the more Eurocentric Transcendentalists)

- We have noted in an earlier unit that the Russian critic Vissarion Belinsky had a vision of a progressive Russia, and saw literature as a means to achieve this end

- In a letter to the prominent writer Nikolai Gogol (who did not share Belinsky's views), Belinsky stated: "Yes, I loved you with all the passion which a man, bound by ties of blood to his native country, can love it, hope its glory, one of the great leaders on its path to consciousness, development and progress...[But] you failed to realise that Russia sees its salvation not in mysticism, nor asceticism, nor pietism, but in the success of civilisation, enlightenment and humanity" (in Greenfield 268)

- Belinsky also believed that what Russia needs was an 'awakening in the people of a sense of their human dignity' which had been lost for centuries under Tsarist rule, and that the country needed laws that abided with a modern conception of common sense and justice, and not the outdated laws of the Orthodox church

- Belinsky's more militant contemporaries, such as Alexander Herzen and the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin (who were contemptuous of the progressiveness of Western Europe) envisioned a time when a great revolution or some other 'purifying conflagration' that would restore Russia to its former glory

- The three radicals, Nikolai Chernyshevsky, Nikolai Dobrolyubov, and Dimitri Pisarev also shared the same sense of social mission as Belinsky
• They were also part of the raznochintsy, a term for those who did not fit part of any legal estate
• All three men believed that Russia could be saved by following the path of reason, science, philosophic materialism (as opposed to idealism) and an enlightened utilitarianism (or 'rational egoism') where the needs of the state and the individual are in tandem
• Due to both the nationalistic efforts of Otto von Bismarck in Germany, and the January Uprising (where insurgents in modern day Poland, Lithuania, Belarus, Latvia and the Ukraine attempted to fight a war against Russia for forced conscription into the Russian army), nationalism was prized as a higher virtue than liberalism
• All three men were also socialists, who believed that liberalism was less of a concern than feeding the starving masses and ensuring a situation where 'one class sucks another's blood'; as Belinsky had put it earlier, 'the people need potatoes, but not a constitution in the least'
• Of course, as has been noted in a previous unit, all of the above were influential upon Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, who brought upon in 1917 the 'purifying conflagration' that Herzen and Bakunin envisioned

Observations/Views/Opinions

• There are too many instances of nationalism amongst poets for them all to be included here; but what is important to remember is that calls for nationalism usually accompany some sort of social decline, which can only be halted by defining and re-defining exactly what it means to be a citizen of a country
• Given the nature of the course, the focus of this unit is skewed towards nationalism in Western countries over the ages, but it is also very interesting to examine the literature of postcolonial nations, specifically that written in the decades before independence
• This is especially so because the literature produced during this period necessarily includes modern sensibilities crafted by the colonial
masters themselves (which often leads to great anxiety about the forms that are representative of a national literature)

- The literature of postcolonial nations is also interesting because the constitution of a national literature is not merely an abstract idea, but in some cases, is one that becomes a governmental decree.
- Also, in many of the postcolonial nations, a similar search for an 'authentic', transhistorical soul as was conducted by European countries in the 1800s is very complex; this is because after centuries of imperialism, it is virtually impossible to reconnect to a pre-imperialist state of mind, which is buried too far beneath the national consciousness.

Summary of the Unit

- Viewed positively, nationalism refers to the connection of an individual to his or her native homeland, which aids in his or her formation of a distinct social identity.
- Individuals are inexorably linked (either actively or passively) to the societies in which they live; either way, it is often easier to identify oneself as being part of a society when that notion of society has predefined boundaries.
- Viewed negatively, the term nationalism is sometimes taken as a right wing buzzword, implying exclusiveness and xenophobia.
- The term nationalism also presupposes the formation of the nation-state, even if the sentiment of being loyal to any other communal or 'national' structure is effectively the same.
- There is a debate as to when exactly nations actually became nations in the modern sense of the word; the 'modernist position' is that a nation is a nation only when it becomes possible as well as desirable for a large proportion of the population and a wide range of social classes to experience and act on nationalist sentiments.
• In terms of nation-building, nationalism in literature is seen as a powerful tool to shape a country’s future progress; implicit in this notion is that the expression of nationalistic love is an idealistic one, based on what a country can be, instead of what a country is.

• It is also important to further distinguish between writers/theorists who seek an active sense of love to their native homeland, and writers/theorists who actively see literary activities as being able to shape a national identity.

• A further distinction between writers/theorists who actively desire to shape the national identity of their nation, and those who actually do so unconditionally, needs to be made.

• The former sentiment, where writers attempt to shape the literature of a nation, presupposes that a given nation is undergoing some sort of transitional period—due to it being a new nation, marked by oppression by a foreign state, or under a widespread social malady.

• This would explain why there is an upsurge of nationalist literature in nations in the throes of post-independence anxiety; this may be manifested in the rejection of the language and the literary forms made popular by imperialists.

• Nationalism in England and Ireland is always closely associated with both class and religion.

• National renewal through poetry was posited by Sir Philip Sidney to combat what he saw as widespread malaise; but it was an aristocratic position, intended to cure the maladies brought on by the ‘base’ common folk.

• Pinning down any definite nationalistic fervour in William Shakespeare is a lot harder; some believe that he, like Sidney, was a willing participant in the ‘Tudor nationalism’ popular in England during the reign of Elizabeth I; others argue that he is consistently doubtful about the ‘nobility’ of nationalistic wars and the effects of its participants.

• Johann Gottfried Herder, who was one of the most important influence upon the Sturm und Drang movement, believed in the ‘collective individuality of society’.
• Herder believed that every culture had its own unique way of experiencing and thinking, and that a work of literature is the expression of a culture, and not an individual.

• The 'purer' expression of a culture is the folk-story; in the search for what constituted an 'authentic' national literature, folklore is often relied upon, as its source (i.e. poor folk) are considered (somewhat condescendingly), as being sources of untouched, 'authentic' soul.

• This presupposes the idea that a transhistorical, 'authentic' national soul does exist.

• Inspired by the sentiment, the Brothers Grimm began collecting folk stories in 1807, which were labelled as authentically German.

• Similar ventures into the country to find this 'authentic' soul occurred in many countries in Europe; to further add to the spirit of creating a national literature, the stories were often updated to suit modern syntax.

• This parallels William Wordsworth's Romantic decree that to write in the manner of common folk, by way of Romantic sympathy, was an indicator of authenticity.

• The idea that finding (and often embellishing) the 'authentic' soul within a culture—in short, consciously drawing boundaries around what does and what does not constitute culture belonging to a nation—is to encourage nationalistic sentiment via constructing a national identity.

• The above sentiment is also visible in William Butler Yeats' poetry, with his use of imagery and subject matter from traditional Celtic folklore and myth.

• In the United States, Ralph Waldo Emerson both defines what he sees as the characteristics of American identity, as well as calls for other poets to represent these characteristics; the national literature must celebrate individualism, democracy and equality.

• In calling for a nationalistic literature, and a nationalistic spirit, what Emerson is rallying against is not European tradition per se, but the American reliance on European tradition; what America needed was 'new lands, new men, new thoughts' to shape 'our own works and laws and worship'.
- Henry David Thoreau felt that the maladies of the nation were caused by the abandonment of 'purer sources of truth', namely the Bible and the American Constitution
- Walt Whitman expanded the Transcendentalist notion of the relationship between self and the universe to a larger scale, because it allows for the inclusion of new ideas and new people
- In Russia, Vissarion Belinsky had a vision of a progressive Russia, and saw literature as a means to achieve this end
- He believed that Russia's 'salvation' cannot be found in 'mysticism, nor asceticism, nor pietism, but in the success of civilisation, enlightenment and humanity'
- Belinsky also believed that what Russia needs was an 'awakening in the people of a sense of their human dignity' which had been lost for centuries under Tsarist rule and decrees of the Orthodox church
- Alexander Herzen and Mikhail Bakunin envisioned a time when a great revolution would restore Russia to its former glory
- The three radicals, Nikolai Chernyshevsky, Nikolai Dobrolyubov, and Dimitri Pisarev also shared the same sense of social mission as Belinsky
- All three men believed that Russia could be saved by following the path of reason, science, philosophic materialism and rational egoism where the needs of the state and the individual are in tandem
- All three men were also socialists, who believed that liberalism was less of a concern than feeding the starving masses
- This sentiment came to its violent fruition in the October Revolution of 1917, led by Vladimir Ilyich Lenin

Additional References

Bell, Matthew. "Yeats, Nationalism and Myth." Writing@CSU. Web. 23 July 2010.


Exercise 1

1. What is the ‘modernist position’ on when a large communal grouping actually becomes a nation?

2. Why is it easier to view oneself as belonging to a nation instead of a particular society?

3. What does Johann Gottfried Herder mean when he refers to the ‘collective individuality of society’?

4. Why is the folk-story sometimes taken to be an authentic expression of a nation’s culture?

5. How did Vissarion Belinsky envision Russia’s progress?
Answers for Exercise 1

1. When a large proportion of the population from a wide range of social classes are able to experience and act on nationalist sentiments
2. A nation has defined boundaries, and usually a largely defined set of cultural values
3. Every culture had its own unique way of experiencing and thinking, and that a work of literature is the expression of that culture, and not so much an individual within that culture
4. It is believed that the folk-story emerges from a time where a culture is unsullied by outside influences
5. Through the success of civilisation, enlightenment and humanity, and not religious asceticism or mysticism
APPENDIX A
ASSIGNMENT GUIDE

Main Points

ASSIGNMENT QUESTION 1
Discuss the definition of mimesis and how this notion has been applied by literary scholars in a particular context and time

- Begin with a thesis statement outlining an interpretation that you think best defines mimesis (i.e.: "Mimesis is an artist's representation of reality...")
- This is because there are many possible interpretations of mimesis, and not all can be included in your assignment, due to space constraints
- For instance, one simple definition of mimesis is the imitation of reality; but as we have seen in the units above, the terms 'imitation' (passive copying/creative re-imagination) and 'reality' (the world as it is/the world as we see it/the world as it should be) are also open to interpretation
- Once you have chosen an angle, narrow your focus to one set of interpretations, and find critics/scholars who interpret the term in the same way
- Look for at least two critics/scholars from different contexts and times (different periods of history or different social circumstances)
- These critics can comprise those referenced in the units above, or those you know of from your own readings
- Keep in mind that the term mimesis itself is archaic; modern critics may not use it, which will complicate your search for references
- You can use other search terms that correspond with your interpretation of mimesis (note that not all of the terms are directly related to one another):
i.e.: realism, naturalism, imitation, meme, memetics, representation, magic realism, Russian formalism, socialism, etc.

- Below are a few possible interpretations of the term mimesis and critics associated to these interpretations; you may choose from the below to include in your assignment, or use any other interpretation that you come across
  - Mimesis as realism in literature (Eric Auerbach, Émile Zola, Henry James)
  - Mimesis as realism in film (Italian Neorealists, French New Wave cinema)
  - Mimesis as masking/exposing economic reality (Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels)
  - Mimesis as masking/exposing psychological reality (Sigmund Freud, Carl G. Jung)
  - Mimesis as memetics (Richard Dawkins)
  - Mimesis as representation (postcolonial, feminist theory)
  - Mimesis as artistic representation (Sir Philip Sidney, P. B. Shelley)

**ASSIGNMENT QUESTION 2**

*With reference to TWO Romantic era critics, discuss the influence of Longinus upon the prevalent attitude towards literature at the time*

- For this assignment question, pick two Romantic poets/critics, and discuss what elements of Longinus’ *On the Sublime* influenced their critical perspectives
- The English Romantics include Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Wordsworth, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Lord Byron, John Keats and William Blake
- Other Romantic poets/critics that you can use (some of whom are not covered in this module) include the German (Friedrich Schiller, Friedrich Schelling, Friedrich Schlegel, August Wilhelm Schlegel, Friedrich Schleiermacher, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe) and French Romantic poet-critics (Victor Hugo, Alexandre Dumas, Francois-René de Chateaubriand, Alfred de Vigny, Stendhal, and Théophile Gautier)
• With regards to the latter, there are many points of overlap between French Romanticism and French Symbolism which you may also explore.

• The major concepts of Longinus to think about include the sublime, the false sublime, transport and rapture.

• More implicit concepts that you can also address include abandonment of rules, elevated poetic language, epic scale of a work, individual genius, 'grace beyond the reach of art', as well as the preference for epic, flawed works as opposed to concise, well-crafted works.

• This excerpt from *On the Sublime* may be of some help:

  "Come, now, let us take some writer who is really immaculate and beyond reproach. Is it not worthwhile, on this very point, to raise the general question whether we ought to give the preference in poems and prose writings to grandeur with some attendant faults or to success which is moderate but altogether sound and free from error? Aye, and further, whether a greater number of excellences, or excellences higher in quality, would in literature rightly bear away the palm?...For my part, I am well aware that lofty genius is far removed from flawlessness; for invariable accuracy incurs the risk of pettiness, and in the sublime, as in great fortunes, there must be something which is overlooked. It may be necessarily the case that low and average natures remain as a rule free from falling and in greater safety because they never run a risk or seek to scale the heights, while great endowments prove insecure because of their very greatness. In the second place, I am not ignorant that it naturally happens that the worse side of human character is always the more easily recognized, and that the memory of errors remains indelible, while that of excellence quickly dies away. I have myself noted not a few errors on the part of Homer and other writers of the greatest distinction, and the slips they have made afford me anything but pleasure. Still I do not term them wilful errors, but rather oversights of a random and casual kind, due to neglect and introduced with all the heedlessness of genius. Consequently I do not waver in my view that excellences higher in quality, even if not sustained throughout, should
always on a comparison be voted the first place, because of their
sheer elevation of spirit, if for no other reason” (48)

ASSIGNMENT QUESTION 3
Write a hypothesis on the role of religion in the evolution of literature. Discuss
two historical or social contexts to support your hypothesis

- Begin by choosing one of the major religions, and then pick two contexts in
which that religion was influential upon the culture of a particular community
at a particular time
- Keep in mind that religion in this sense does not necessarily have to affect
literature directly
  - Writers do not necessarily need to be very religious men themselves, or
write about religious themes
  - The usual way in which religion penetrates literature is through the general
cultural outlook/worldview prevalent during a given social milieu
- You have two ways of approaching this subject: philosophically or socially
- Philosophically, you may examine the way in which the morality of a certain
religion is present in literature of a given period
  - For instance, definitions of what largely constitutes ‘goodness’ in popular
opinion today include the virtues of kindness, altruism, love, charity and
modesty; however, what constituted ‘goodness’ at the height of the
Roman empire include virtues such as honour, valour, might makes right; the
latter may be emphasised in pre-Christian epics of Antiquity
- Socially, you can examine how religion, when exerting a great influence upon
what is considered good and proper in polite society, impacts upon the kind of
literature produced
  - For instance, works that conform to religious norms, or are about religion,
are considered moral; more imaginative works may be considered
immoral, and are possibly banned
  - James Joyce’s Ulysses was banned for many years, but is almost
compulsory reading in undergraduate courses in universities today
- Religion is so prevalent that _almost any_ work is written as a reaction to a particular religion (either for or against), so you really must pick _very specific_ contexts.
- Some sample contexts (philosophical and social) that you can choose from include:
  - Victorian morality is very closely tied to the morality of the Church of England; this has had a number of effects on the literary world. It was Victorian morality, for instance, that outlawed homosexuality, which Oscar Wilde was convicted of; although he only spent two years in jail, it killed off his artistic temperament, and can be seen as halting the march of British aestheticism.
  - Salman Rushdie's _The Satanic Verses_ was banned in many Islamic countries; the Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran issued a _fatwa_ against him, which resulted in him taking refuge in England for a decade.
  - The rise of Christianity during the medieval ages greatly diminished literary activity, since Greco-Roman culture was seen as pagan and immoral; however, Chaucer's _Canterbury Tales_ and Dante's _The Divine Comedy_ were produced during this period, the latter having its entire design built upon a marriage of Christian theology and Greek mythology.
  - Henry Miller's _Tropic of Cancer_ was banned in 1960s America that was more influenced by a puritanical strain of Protestantism than it is today, even though the book was published 30 years earlier in France without any public outcry.
  - The first translations of ancient Hindu and Buddhist texts to appear in Europe affected the way the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer saw the world, which in turn influenced many other philosophers and writers, and contributed to the general nihilism of the modern age.

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ASSIGNMENT QUESTION 4
With reference to at least TWO major literary critics, discuss how their respective theories of literature fulfil the Apollonian/Dionysian dichotomy.

- However many literary critics you choose, be sure to make the case for both the Apollonian and Dionysian.

- First of all, familiarise yourself with the values associated with both sides, i.e.: contemplation/poetic frenzy, creation/destruction, sky/earth, civility/primal nature, reason/passion; see the Observations section in Unit 1 for a brief explanation.

- Then, look for said values in the theories of the critics of your choice (if the critics themselves make no specific reference to the dichotomy).
  - For instance: “With regard to the creative process, William Wordsworth encourages a collected and calm contemplation of emotions [Apollonian], whereas Plato suggests, albeit in a derogatory fashion, that poetic inspiration is driven by the passions [Dionysian].”

- Sometimes literary critics use different terms for the largely similar essential dichotomy, such as Sigmund Freud’s eros/thanatos (sex/death drives), or Matthew Arnold’s Hellenic/Hebraic (Greco-Roman/Judeo-Christian).

- If you decide to undertake this assignment question, it is advisable to read Friedrich Nietzsche’s The Birth of Tragedy, where he first puts forward this dichotomy in relation to drama.
  - For instance, Camille Paglia makes interesting use of this dichotomy in the Introduction to her Sexual Personae.
  - In the book, Paglia extends the dichotomy to cover sexuality and religion: for example, Man is essentially Apollonian (reason), and Woman Dionysian (passion); Judeo-Christian (“sky”) religions which have a singular male god-figure, whereas Eastern and primitive (“earth”) religions have numerous goddesses.

- Something to bear in mind is that the terms Apollonian/Dionysian are in a binary relationship—they are adjectives that to do not embody meaning by themselves, but only in relation to each other.
For example, in the binary opposition tall/short, the individual terms tall and short by themselves are arbitrary; ‘tall’ is not an absolute measure; someone or something can only be tall when it is ‘not short’ or when it is ‘less short than something’ and something can only be short when it is ‘not tall’

Similarly, nothing is Apollonian by itself, but only in contrast to something Dionysian or ‘less Apollonian’

To use the above example, Wordsworth’s contemplative creative process does not embody the Apollonian in itself, but is Apollonian in relation to Plato’s Dionysian divine inspiration, and vice versa. In other words, the process of poetic creation according to Wordsworth is more Apollonian than it is in Plato’s interpretation. In short, any given value is not absolutely Apollonian/Dionysian, but Apollonian/Dionysian in relation to (or in opposition to) another value

It is also possible, as stated in Unit 1, to look at the different eras in the history of literature and its criticism as a sort of pendulum swinging back and forth between the Apollonian/Dionysian

Related search terms include the Roman name of Dionysus, Bacchus; his followers, bacchanalia; bacchae and maenad

Additional References


