
Unit 5: SIR PHILIP SIDNEY: AN APOLOGY FOR POETRY OR THE DEFENCE OF POESY

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5.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to read about English criticism during the time of the Renaissance

- discuss Sidney as one of the greatest English critics
- trace the importance *An Apology of Poetry* in terms of the various issues raised by Sidney
- discuss the major concepts dealt with by Sidney in the text
- identify the relevance and influence of Sidney's doctrine in the history of English criticism

5.2 INTRODUCTION

This is the last unit of this Block. In this unit, you will be introduced to English criticism during the Renaissance through a discussion of Philip Sidney's *An Apology for Poetry*. Although Sidney is best known as a critic of the Renaissance period, he was also a great poet, a creative writer, a noble and virtuous man. He is also one who embodies the

aristocratic ideals of the Renaissance man, by virtue of his being a courtier, soldier, statesman, amateur scholar, and a legendary figure in his time. Author of the first English sonnet sequence, *Astrophel and Stella*, he was also the first to write literary criticism in English. In 1579, a Puritan minister named Stephen Gosson published *The School of Abuse* in which he attacked the theatres, dedicating it, without permission, “to the right noble Gentleman, Master Philip Sidney, Esquire”. Sidney was outraged by this act of dedication and countered the following year with his defence *An Apology for Poetry*, sometimes called *A Defence of Poetry* (1580-81). However, *An Apology* enjoys significance far beyond its occasion for its synthesis of the Renaissance understanding of classical literary theory, which set the terms of literary debate in England for the next two centuries, and for its formidable handling of its genre—the defence of poetry, which Sidney adapted from classical and medieval models. You will find that the *Apology* is virtually confined to what we may call the ‘philosophy of poetry’, that is, the nature of poetry, its main kinds and its peculiar function in relation to the actual life of society. He tries to interpret and evaluate poets like Chaucer and Spenser. Of Chaucer, he appreciates ‘Troilus and Criseyde’, and in Spenser, he is full of praise for ‘Shepherd’s Calendar’. According to Sidney, his contemporaries did not care for the three unities – Time, Place and Action prescribed by the classical critics. Secondly, Sidney is also unhappy over the blending of Tragedy and Comedy. When you finish reading this unit, you will see that Sidney through his essay displays his awareness of classical literature as well as the tradition of criticism.

5.3 ENGLISH CRITICISM IN THE TIME OF THE RENAISSANCE

No critical work worth mentioning appeared in England till the middle of the 16th century. It was only after the Renaissance, when the classical Greek and Latin treatises on criticism were made available to English scholars as they began to apply their minds to criticism in general. The first critics to do so were the three Cambridge friends Sir

John Cheke, Roger Ascham, and Thomas Wilson. On the one hand, they were devoted scholars of the Classics, on the other; they were equally devoted to the native English tradition like the poetry of Chaucer. Thus, you should note that in their critical discussion, two things become apparent: On the one hand, they adore the classics as model for guidance, and on the other, they advocate the purity of the native tongue from foreign influences like Latin, French and Italian. One may also argue that the birth of Renaissance criticism begins with the recovery of classical texts, most notably, Giorgio Valla's Latin translation of Aristotle's *Poetics*. The work of Aristotle, especially *Poetics*, was the most important influence upon literary criticism until the late 18th century. Lodovico Castelvetro was one of the most influential Renaissance critics who wrote commentaries on Aristotle's *Poetics* in 1570.


English criticism, during the 16th and 17th centuries, passed through many distinct stages of development, which may be seen as the following:

- a. The first stage was characterised by a purely rhetorical study of literature, probably beginning with Leonard Coxe's *Arte or Crafte of Rhetoryke* (1524), a handbook for young students. This was followed by Wilson's *Arte of Rhetorike* (1553), a more extensive and certainly more original text than Coxe's. Warton calls it "the first book or system of criticism in our language." It was at this time that English writers for the first time began to appreciate form and style to be the distinguishing features of literature. This appreciation led to the formation of an English prose style.
- b. The second stage of English criticism—a period of classification and especially of metrical studies—commences with Gascoigne's *Notes of Instruction concerning the making of Verse*, published in 1575. Besides this brief pamphlet, this stage also includes Puttenham's *Arte of English Poesie*, the first systematic classification of poetic forms and subjects, and of Rhetorical figures; Bullokar's *Brief Grammar*, the first systematic treatise on English grammar; and Harvey's *Letters* and Webbe's *Discourse of*

English Poetrie, the first systematic attempts to introduce classical metres into English poetry. This stage was characterised by the study and classification of the practical questions of language and versification. The study of the verse-forms introduced into England from Italy helped materially to perfect the external side of English poetry. The Italian prosodists thus became the masters of the English students of this era.

- c. The third stage is characterised by the period of philosophical and apologetic criticism as exemplified by Sir Philip Sidney's *Defence of Poesy*, published posthumously in 1595, though probably written about 1583. Harington's *Apologie of Poetrie*, Daniel's *Defence of Ryme*, and a few others, are also contemporary treatises. These works, as their titles indicate, are all defenses or apologies, and were called forth by the attacks of the Puritans on poetry, especially dramatic poetry, and the attacks of the classicists on English versification and rhyme. Sidney's contemporaries had studied the general theory of poetry, not for the purpose of enunciating rules or dogmas of criticism, but chiefly in order to defend the poetic art, and to understand its fundamental principles.
- d. The fourth stage of English criticism, of which Ben Jonson is the main exponent, occupies the first half of the 17th century. The period that preceded it was in general romantic in its tendencies. The literary criticism of the Renaissance developed classical ideas of unity of form and content into literary neoclassicism, proclaiming literature as central to culture, entrusting the poet and the author with a responsibility to preserve a long literary tradition which grew directly from the recovery of classic texts and notably from Giorgio Valla's translation of Aristotle's *Poetics* into Latin in 1498. By 1549, the text of *Poetics* had been rendered into Italian as well. From this period until the later part of the 18th century, Aristotle was once again the most imposing presence behind literary theory. The most influential of Renaissance critic was

probably Lodovico Castelvetro, whose 1570 commentary on Aristotle's *Poetics* encouraged the writing of tightly structured plays.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Mention the two main characteristics of English criticism during the Renaissance.

Q 2: What makes Renaissance criticism an important area for the students of English literature?

5.4 SIDNEY: THE CRITIC

Sir Philip Sidney (1554-1586) was one of the most eminent poets of the Elizabethan period. His influence can be seen throughout the history of English literary criticism because of *The Defence of Poesie*, which is also frequently referred to by its other title, *An Apology for Poetry*. In *An Apology for Poetry* he both explores the core concepts and answers to earlier criticism of poetry. The text itself deals with three major topics: the dignity or power of poetry, the general critique of poetry, and an examination of the current state of English literature.

His Life :

Sidney's father was Sir Henry Sidney and his mother was Lady Mary Dudley who was the daughter of the Duke of Northumberland. The eldest of three sons and four daughters, he was born in 1554. Philip Sidney entered Shrewsbury School on Oct 17, 1564 where he befriended Fulke Greville, his future biographer. Sidney made the second great friendship of his youth with Edward Dyer, a man of quality. From 1568 to 1571, Sidney went to Christ Church, Oxford, but he left without a degree in the spring of 1571, probably because of an outbreak of Plague. In the following year, he left England for a three-year visit to the continent to complete his education. During that time, he travelled through many countries namely, France, Germany, Italy and Austria.

On May 31, 1575, he returned to England as an 'eminent courtier'. However, his fervent interest in Protestantism became an obstacle in his diplomatic career. Though for a short period, he was also dismissed from the court as he had a conflict with the Queen. And it was during this period that his connection with the literary life of his time began. It appears to have been initiated by his introduction in July 1578, to Gabriel Harvey who introduced him to Spenser. Spenser dedicated his "Shepherd's Calendar" to Sidney. Their acquaintance soon ripened into intimacy. Subsequently, they were joined by Sidney's old college friends, Fulke Greville and Edward Dyer, and a literary society was formed which they called the 'Areopagus'. During this time, he wrote the long pastoral romance *Arcadia*.

One of the most important works by Sidney was his famous sonnet sequence namely, *Astrophel and Stella* ("Star lover and Star"). Composed in 1576, it consisted of 108 sonnets and 11 songs. Most of the sonnets in this collection are influenced by Petrarchan conventions — the abject lover laments the coldness of his beloved woman, even though he is so true of love and her neglect causes him so much anguish. The critical writings of Sidney were published after his death under the two titles—"The Defence of Poesy" and "An Apology for Poetry".

In 1585, he made a covert attempt to join Sir Francis Drake's expedition to Cadiz without Queen Elizabeth's permission. His enthusiasm for the Protestant struggle was given a free rein when he was appointed governor of Flushing in the Netherlands. He conducted a successful raid on Spanish forces near Axel in July 1586. In 1586 Sidney, along with his younger brother Robert Sidney, another poet in this family of poets, joined Sir John Norris in the Battle of Zutphen, and was shot in the thigh and died twenty-six days later, at the age of 31. His death was mourned by the Queen as well as her subjects. It is said that the Londoners who came out to see the funeral procession cried out "Farewell, the worthiest knight that lived."

Sidney's body was returned to London and buried in St. Paul's Cathedral on 16th February 1587. He had become for many English people the epitome of a courtier—learned and politic, but at the same time, generous, brave, and impulsive. Never more than a marginal figure in the politics of his time, he was memorialised as the flower of English manhood in Edmund Spenser's "Astrophel", one of the greatest English Renaissance elegies.



LET US KNOW

The Battle of Zutphen was a confrontation of the Eighty Years War on 22 September 1586, near Zutphen (Warnsveld), the Netherlands. It was fought

between forces of the United Provinces of the Netherlands, aided by the English, against the Spanish, who sought to regain the Northern Netherlands. It ended in a victory for Spain. Important English soldiers included Robert Devereux, 2nd Earl of Essex, Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, Peregrine Bertie, George Whetstone, Henry Unton, and Robert Sidney, whose brother, Philip Sidney, was mortally wounded during the battle and died in Arnhem at the age of 31.

'The Eighty Years' War': The Eighty Years' War, or Dutch War of Independence (1568–1648), began as a revolt of the Seventeen Provinces against Philip II of Spain, the sovereign of the Habsburg Netherlands.

His Works :

The time in which Sidney lived was marked by vigour and thoroughness, chivalry and love of adventure. Sidney's first important literary work was the result of a temporary retirement from the world of politics in which he had meddled somewhat too boldly. "The Countess of Pembroke's *Arcadia*", also known as *Arcadia*, is by far Sidney's most ambitious work. His style here is little affected by the prevailing taste for **Euphuism**. It is not improbable that Lyly's *Euphues* (1579), suggested to

Sidney the notion of writing a romance in a somewhat similar style. However, unlike *Euphues*, *Arcadia* has no direct didactic purpose. Throughout, it suffers from the over-straining, which is characteristic of most Elizabethan prose. The work enjoyed great popularity for more than a century after its publication.

It is however, the form of the sonnet with which Sidney's name is most closely connected. In *Arcadia*, and later in the *Astrophel and Stella*, he showed that it is peculiarly suited to the genius of English language, though perhaps not in its severer Petrarchan form. The first of the famous English sonnet sequences, *Astrophel and Stella* was probably composed in the early 1580s containing 108 sonnets and 11 songs. In this sonnet sequence, Sidney partially nativised the key features of his Italian Petrarch sonnet form. His experiments with rhyme scheme freed the English sonnet from the strict rhyming requirements of the Italian form. Incidentally, although not a realistic autobiography, *Stella* is modelled on Penelope Devereux, who was supposed to marry Sidney but was then forced to marry Lord Rich. The autobiographical element is evident and the sonnets express Sidney's own desires, regrets, and conflicts of conscience, which resulted from the social pressures and moral restraints of his time.

The Apologie for Poetrie is a philosophical treatise, which touches on questions of form, of technique and of matter in poetry. It is generally believed that Stephen Gosson's "School of Abuse" that was dedicated to Sidney in 1579, was the driving force to write this treatise. Gosson's book may be taken as representative of Sidney's narrower Puritanical standpoint which condemns all that beautifies and all that gives value to the present life. In perfectly simple and straightforward language, which has enriched the history of English prose, Sidney gives us an account of his thought. In his essay, Sidney has assimilated many classical and as well as Italian maxims on fiction. The essence of his *defence* is that poetry, by combining the vivacity of history with a moral focus of philosophy is more effective.

The Lady of May is one of Sidney's lesser-known works, a masque written and performed for Queen Elizabeth in 1578 or 1579. It is a one-act play and is notable for its allegorical content relating to Queen Elizabeth I, for whom the first production was performed at the Earl of Leicester's country estate at Wanstead. Queen Elizabeth was asked to mediate the outcome of the masque itself. The plot is about selection and marriage. The May Lady asks the Queen to judge her two suitors, Therion and Espilus. A schoolmaster Rombus moderated the debate. At the end, the Queen favoured Espilus, and the entertainment ends with dancing.

Thus, we can conclude that Sidney showed his powers as one of the great thinkers and prose-writers of England.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 3: Discuss the literary significance of Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella*.

Q 4: Discuss the context following which Sidney wrote *An Apology for Poetry*.

5.5 SIDNEY'S AN APOLOGY FOR POETRY

The importance of *An Apology For Poetry* is great since it exhibits not only the temper of the generation, which actually produced the first fruits of the greatest Elizabethan poetry but also the enthusiasm of the successive generations. As already stated, it was occasioned by an attack on poetry entitled *The School of Abuse* (1579) by a Puritan minister, Stephen Gosson, who had indicted poetry on four grounds:

- (a) That men could employ his time more usefully than in poetry
- (b) That poetry is the mother of lies
- (c) That poetry is the nurse of abuse
- (d) Plato had rightly banished the poets from his ideal Commonwealth

In his *Apology*, Sidney rejects Gosson's Protestant attack on courtly pleasure and defends poetry as a virtuous activity for the aristocracy. He replies to each one of the charges drawing heavily from the ancient classics and the Italian writers of the Renaissance, most particularly on Homer, Plato, Aristotle, and Plutarch among the Greeks, Cicero, Virgil, Horace and Ovid among the Romans, and Minturo, Scaliger, and Castelvetro, among the Italians. The issues such as the value and function of poetry, the nature of imitation and the concept of nature are raised in his reply.

Towards the beginning of the text, Sidney observes that poetry has fallen from its status as the highest estimation of learning to be the laughing stock of children. Thus, he advances certain reasons to defend 'poor poetry'. His defence is based on chronology, the authority of ancient tradition, the relation of poetry to nature, the function of poetry as imitation, the status of poetry among the various disciplines of learning and the relationship of poetry to truth and morality. He brings forward an argument which colours the whole treatise, that is, poetry has ever been "the first light-giver to ignorance" in the noblest nations and languages that are known. He points out that the first Greek philosophers Thales, Empedocles, Parmenides and Pythagoras expressed their visions in verse. Even Plato used poetic devices like dialogue and description of setting and circumstance to adorn his philosophy. Sidney points out that the historians such as Herodotus have borrowed the 'fashion' and 'weight' of poetry. A poet was called 'vates' by the Romans, which means "a diviner, for-seer, or prophet". To Sidney, this definition of poet was reasonable as shown by the fact that "Psalms" of David is a 'divine poem', whereby prophecy is expressed in a poetic manner. Therefore, poetry should be highly valued and it does not deserve the ridiculous estimation into which it has lapsed.

Sidney then discusses the Greek definition of poetry. The Greek origin of the English word 'poet' is 'poiein', which means 'to make'. He provides his own view of the connection between poetry and nature when he says that every art has the works of nature for its principal object. He

gives the examples of the astronomers who observed the stars as ordered in nature, the geometrician and arithmetician who examine the diverse sorts of quantities as ordered in nature, the natural philosopher who examines physical nature, the moral philosopher who considers the natural virtues, vices and passions of men; the grammarian, Rhetorician and logician who expound the rules of speech, persuasion and reasoning respectively as based on nature. His point is that unlike each of these disciplines, which depend on some aspects of nature, the poet is not restricted by Nature:

“Onely the Poet, disdayning to be tied to any such subiection, lifted up with the vigour of his owne invention, dooth growe in effect another nature, in making things either better than Nature bringeth forth, or, quite anewe, formes such as never were in Nature, as the *Heroes, Demigods, Cyclops, Chimeras, Furies*, and such like . . . feely ranging onely within the Zodiack of his owne wit.” (Sidney, 8)

Commenting on the creative powers of the poet, Sidney further states:

“Nature never set forth the earth in so rich tapistry as divers Poets have done, neither with so plesant rivers, fruitful trees, sweet smelling flowers, nor whatsoever els may make the too much loved earth more lovely. Her world is brasen, the Poets only deliver a golden.” (Sidney, 8)

Thus, for Sidney, poetry is higher than nature. However, he also holds poetry as an art of ‘imitation’, its chief function being to teach and delight. Imitation does not mean mere copying or a reproduction of facts. It means representing or transmuting of the real and actual, and sometimes creating something entirely new. In the section devoted to the divisions or kinds of mimetic poetry and their practitioners, Sidney conceives three types: **Divine poets** like David and Solomon who imitate the “inconceivable excellences of God,” **Pagan poets** like Orpheus, Amphion, and Home rare; and poets who imitate “matter philosophical” of which there are four subtypes (moral, natural, astronomical, and historical); and **Right poets**. Sidney is primarily concerned with the Right poets as he states: “these third be they which

most properly do imitate to teach and delight; and, to imitate, borrow nothing of what is, hath been, or shall be: but range, only reined with learned discretion, into the divine consideration of what may be, and should be."Hence, the poet is free from the dependence on nature at least in two ways: Firstly, he is not restricted to any given subject matter, any given sphere of nature. Secondly, his "imitation" does not actually reproduce anything in nature, since his concern is not with actuality but with portrayals of probability and of idealised situations.

Sidney's whole defence lies in his proof that poetry brings about an end. He sets off the Right poet against other masters of "earthly learning" who claim to lead men to "virtuous action", an ancient contest developed at length in Aristotle's *Poetics*. The poet's principal competitors in this regard are two: the moral philosopher and the historian. In the promotion of virtue, both philosophy and history play their parts. Philosophy deals with its theoretical aspects and teaches virtue by precept. History teaches practical virtue by drawing concrete examples from life. However, poetry gives both precepts and practical examples. Both philosophy and history are thus, one-sided. Philosophy, being based on abstractions, is 'hard of utterance and mystery to be conceived.' It cannot be a proper guide for youth. On the other hand, the historian is tied to empirical facts that his example draws no necessary consequence. Sidney cites a third possible contender, the lawyer. However, he rapidly dismisses the claims of the lawyer, since the lawyer merely imposes upon people to follow the outward form of virtue without changing their inward disposition.

According to Sidney, Poetry provides perfect pictures of virtue, which are far more effective than the mere definitions of philosophy. It is poetry which brings to life all the virtues, vices, and passions, and hence the "feigned images" of poetry have "more force in teaching" than the "regular instruction" of philosophy. **Poetry is superior to Philosophy** in the sense that it has the power to move and to give incentive for virtuous action. It presents moral lessons in a very attractive form. Things, which in themselves are horrible as cruel battles, unnatural monsters, are

made delightful in poetic imitation. The poet does not begin with obscure definitions which load the memory with doubtfulness, 'but he cometh to you with words sent in delightful proportion, either accompanied with, or prepared for the well enchanting skill of music; and with a tale forsooth he cometh unto you, with a tale which holdeth children from play, and old men from the chimney corner.' Poetry also gives imaginary examples, which are more instructive than the real examples of History. Since the historian is tied to reality, he is not at liberty to present the ideal pattern of people or events, whereas the poet can frame his example to that which is most reasonable. Moreover, what the historian can relate in terms of true events, the poet can make his own imitation, "beautifying it both for further teaching, and more delighting".

Sidney here emphasises the poet's freedom, which allows him to choose his material and to frame it in an ideal pattern. His tone is persistent in attempting to overturn the conventional hierarchy of knowledge. The poet, of course, "standeth for the highest form in the school of learning" because he is the moderator between the philosopher and the historian. Through the art of mimesis, the poet unites in one event the philosopher's precept and the historian's example. Rephrasing his earlier argument on fore-conceit and image, Sidney proclaims that the poet gives "a perfect picture" of something. He then lists exemplary precepts that poets encode in speaking pictures: anger, wisdom, temperance, valour, friendship, remorse, pride, cruelty, and ambition. However, the greatest of these is "the most excellent determination of goodness," as in **Xenophon's** "feigning" of the prince in Cyrus, in **Virgil's** fashioning of a virtuous man in Aeneas and in Sir **Thomas More's** representation of an entire commonwealth in his *Utopia* (1516). The reference to the Catholic Thomas More prompts a brief digression in which Sidney states a general tenet of mimesis he had not made before—if the poetic artefact is flawed, the fault lies with the poet, not with poetry. Having made this point, he cites from the practices of Jesus, who provided his teachings in lively stories.

Sidney now undertakes to defend the various genres of poetry that shows clearly the moral and theological functions he assigns to this art. He considers heroic poetry to be the best and most accomplished kind of poetry since it both “instructeth the mind” and “most inflameth the mind with desire to be worthy”. The function of poetry for Sidney is threefold: to teach people the substance of virtue; to move people to virtuous action; and, underlying these two functions, to impress upon people the transitory and worthless nature of worldly affairs. The poet is historian and moral philosopher, but above all, preacher and theologian. A common complaint against poetry is that it is bound up with ‘rhyming and versing’. But verse is not essential for poetry. Verse is used for convenience. It produces verbal harmony and lends itself easily to memorising. It is the only fit speech for music. It adds to words a sensuous and emotional quality. Some more serious objections to poetry (as raised by Gosson in his school of abuse) as Sidney observes are:

- (a) There being many other more fruitful knowledge, a man might better spend his time in them than in this;
- (b) Poetry is the mother of lies
- (c) It is the nurse of abuse, infecting us with many pestilent desires; and,
- (d) Plato had banished poets from his ideal republic.

Sidney places his defence like the following:

1. Sidney dismisses the first charge by saying that since poetry “teacheth and moveth to virtue”, there can be no “more fruitful knowledge” than this.
2. His answer to the second objection that poets are liars is that of all writers under the sun the poet is the least liar. The Astronomer, the Geometrician, the Historian, and others, all make false statements. However, the poet “nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth”, his aim being “to tell not what is or is not, but what should or should not be.” Therefore, what he presents is not fact but fiction embodying truth of an ideal kind.

3. The third charge against poetry is that its entire species are infected with love themes and amorous conceits, which have a demoralising effect on readers. To this charge, Sidney replies that poetry does not abuse man's wit, man's wit abuse poetry. Even the word of God, says Sidney, when abused, can breed heresy and blasphemy.
4. Sidney is rather perplexed at the last charge, that is, Plato was right when he rejected poetry. In fact, Plato warned men not against poetry but against its abuse by his contemporary poets who filled the world with wrong opinions about the Gods. So, Plato's objection was directed against the theological concepts. In *Ion*, Plato gives high and rightly divine commendation to poetry. His description of the poet as 'a light winged and sacred thing' in that dialogue reveals his attitude to poetry. In fact, by attributing unto poetry a very inspiring of a divine force, Plato was making a claim for poetry, which he for his part could not endorse. Sidney also cites the authority of many great figures who admired poetry, including Aristotle, Alexander, Plutarch and Caesar.

Sidney ends his text with a lamentation over the impoverished state to which poetry has declined in England. He thinks that it is so because poetry has come to be represented by 'base men with servile wits' or to men who, however studious, are not born poets. Another cause is the want of serious cultivation of the Poetic Art. Three things necessary for producing good poetry Art, Imitation, and Exercise, according to Sidney are lacking in the present generation of poets. After this, he deals with the low repute into which poetry had fallen in England, attributing it partly to a sort of lethargy in the people and partly to the inferiority of the poets. Sidney says that few good poems have been produced in England since Chaucer. Chaucer did marvellously well in 'Troilus and Cressida' or 'The Mirror of Magistrates' which contains some beautiful passages. Earl of Surrey's lyrics also deserve praise. Spenser's 'The Shepherds Calendar' is worth reading. Thus, he reviews the state of poetry in England from Chaucer to his own time. Regarding drama,

Sidney argued that tragedy should be tied to the laws of poetry and not of history. A dramatist should have liberty to frame the history to his own tragic convenience. The dramatists should know the difference between reporting and representing. They should straightway plunge into the principal point of action, which they want to represent in their play. There should be no mingling of tragedies and comedies. The proper aim of comedy is to afford delightful teaching, not mere coarse amusement. Comedy should not only amuse but morally instruct. After discussing comedy and tragedy, he proceeds to lyric poetry, to style and diction. Lastly, he proceeds to prosody, dwelling on the great advantage possessed by the English language. Sidney concludes with an attribution of poetry to veneration and honour, with a semi-humorous blessing on those who love and appreciate it and a semi-humorous denunciation of those who are insensible of its charms and its importance. He concludes by admonishing the reader no more to scorn this sacred art.



LET US KNOW

You should note that Stephen Gosson's attack draws heavily on Plato's objections to poetry. So, Sidney's *Apology* reads like a reply to the *Republic*.

Though his classicism is filtered through the Italian humanists of the 14th and 15th century, Sidney relies particularly on Aristotle's *Poetics* and Horace's *Ars Poetica*. His remarks on the state of the English language and poetry would define the significant literary issues for later English critics including that of John Dryden and Aphra Behn in the 17th century and Samuel Johnson in the 18th

Therefore, you find that *An Apology for Poetry* is a classic statement of Renaissance literary criticism primarily because of its scope, its typicality, and its grace and clarity. Unlike his English contemporary George Puttenham, Sidney displays little interest in formulating the technical rules of poetry and Rhetoric; he treats the subject of poetry much more broadly. Though structured as a classical

oration with the standard seven parts (exordium; proposition, division, examination, refutation, digression, peroration); Sidney's text is more usefully understood as treating three major topics.

The first part defends the dignity of poetry demonstrating its superiority to philosophy and history. Along the way, Sidney discusses the ethics of genres; ranging from pastoral, elegy; and satire to comedy, tragedy, and epic.

The second part deals with the specific objections raised against poetry, in particular the charge that the poet is a liar.

The third part of the essay examines the current state of English literature. Here Sidney offers some critical comments on diction, poetic figures, meter, rhyme, rhythm, and the English vernacular compared to other languages. Of particular interest is Sidney's pointed criticism of the English drama for failing to adhere to the unities of time and place sketched in Aristotle's *Poetics*.

A fundamental aesthetic problem of the late 16th century concerns the object and purpose of representation. Sidney's definition of poetry sets an agenda for the discussion of poetry that brings together many of the learned commonplaces of Renaissance criticism: the nature of imitation, the problem of defining nature, and the injunction that poetry serve moral ends.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

- Q 5:** What are the four grounds on which Stephen Gosson had indicted poetry?
- Q 6:** Mention the three different types of poets as discussed by Sidney while expressing his idea of imitation in *An Apology for Poetry*.
- Q 7:** How does Sidney defend the idea of poetry against the attacks raised by Gosson?
- Q 8:** "Sidney's text is more usefully understood as treating three major topics". Discuss.

5.6 IMPORTANT CONCEPTS OF THE TEXT

The following are the important concepts dealt by Sidney in his Apology.

Importance of Poetry:

In the discussion of Sidney's *An Apology* M. A. R. Habib states that toward the beginning of the text Sidney observes that poetry has fallen from its status as "the highest estimation of learning" to "be the laughing stock of children." He produces a wide range of arguments in defence of "poor poetry" based on chronology, the authority of ancient tradition, the relation of poetry to nature, the function of poetry as imitation, the status of poetry among the various disciplines of learning, and the relationship of poetry to truth and morality. Sidney's initial argument is that poetry was the first form in which knowledge had been expressed, the "first light giver to ignorance," as bodied forth by poets such as Musaeus, Homer, and Hesiod, Livius, Ennius, Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch. In addition, the first Greek philosophers Thales, Empedocles, Parmenides, and Pythagoras, Sidney points out, expressed their vision in verse. Even Plato used poetic devices such as dialogue and description of setting and circumstance to adorn his philosophy. Again, historians such as Herodotus too had borrowed the "fashion" and the "weight" of poetry. Sidney concludes here "neither philosopher nor historiographer could at the first have entered into the gates of popular judgments, if they had not taken a great passport of poetry." His point is that an essential prerequisite of knowledge is pleasure in learning; and it is poetry that has made each of these varieties of knowledge – scientific, moral, philosophical, and political – accessible by expressing them in pleasurable forms. While he acknowledges that poetry is a "divine gift" and dependent on genius, he actually laments the fact that these would-be poets ignore the need to labour at their craft, a craft whose principles must be "art, imitation, and exercise" He concludes by asking the reader not to scorn poetry. Instead, he entreats the readers to believe that "there are many

mysteries contained in poetry, which of purpose were written darkly, least by profane wits, it should be abused". In addition, he curses those who are possessed of "so earth-creeping a mind that it cannot lift itself up, to look to the sky of poetry". In *An Apology*, poetry is elevated to that sacred status: in its very nature it is opposed to worldliness and "earth creeping" concerns.

Nature of Imitation:

Although the principle of imitation reigned unchallenged in literary criticism from the Renaissance to the end of the 18th century, not all critics meant the same thing by *imitation*, nor did they necessarily agree on the existing notion of imitation. At the centre of the controversy over imitation was a debate about nature itself—what constituted nature and, what was the status of representations of reality? Like the third-century philosopher Plotinus, Sidney uses the Platonic theory of Forms to refute criticism against poetry. Sidney held that the nature poets imitated the ideal, and not the material. During the Renaissance, the ideal of nature was God's cosmological plan. Sidney perhaps best represents this viewpoint when he argues that the Right poets "imitate to teach and delight, and to imitate, borrow nothing of what is, hath been, or, shall be, but range only reined with learned discretion into the divine consideration of what, may be and should be." This view of imitation is based on a religious belief in providential design; because the universe is the product of divine wisdom. Hence, the purpose of the poet is ultimately to affirm the rule of justice. In the next century, this view of nature runs head on into the scientific revolution, and the debate is recast in Dryden's *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* and elsewhere.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 9: What are the major concepts of Sidney in his *Apology*?

Q 10: What kind of argument on poetry does Sidney in his *Apology* provide?

5.7 RECEPTION OF SIDNEY AS A CRITIC

Sidney's influence was largely found in the works of his successors. Most importantly, he had left an impact in several of the literary genres like the sonnet form, chivalric romance, pastoral poems, tragedy and tragi-comedy. His *Arcadia* had a great impact in many leading playwrights like Shakespeare, Beaumont and Fletcher, etc. The real identity of Sidney's "Stella" triggered a fascination among the critics. Also, the part played by his sister in translating the Psalms was also inquired by the later critics. The "antiquarian movement" of the early 19th century played a massive role in bringing about a renewed interest on Sidney. As an example Thomas Zouch's *Memoir of Sir Philip Sidney* may be cited for it was instrumental in bringing Sidney's life and philosophical, as well as his literary inclinations and interests to a wide exposure.

It seems that Sidney is basically a creative writer compelled to become a critic to reply to Stephen Gosson's vindication of poetry. Being a creative writer Sidney wanted to encourage both poetry and drama to be developed. His posterity often considers him to be an important critic of the Renaissance mainly because he was not only an innovator but also one who helped in the dispersion of cultural tradition. Following his innovative cravings, he introduced many literary forms or techniques in the English literary traditions. In fact, it was Sidney who was credited to be the first writer of England who reflected on the significance of Aristotle's famous book, *Poetics* and threw light on Renaissance criticism of Italy. In fact, "he helped to popularise Hellenistic romance and Italian poetic style, and his treatment of Machiavellian politics and Epicurean philosophy are among the earliest in English literature. Other writers of the age may have been greater, but none could inspire the movement in literature and the arts" during the Elizabethan period. (<http://bibs.slu.edu/sidney/history.html>)

Sidney's contribution to literary criticism opened up future prospects for writers. Of the many influences Sidney exerted upon the

writers of the succeeding age, we must note in particular “A Defence of Poetry” by Percy Bysshe Shelley. Another writer belonging to the Romantic age whose work showed strong influence of Sidney was S. T. Coleridge in his treatise titled “On Poesy or Art”. Sidney’s perspectives on poetry and poets as well as his use of metaphoric language influenced several critics in the latter age. One of the significant themes or ideas represented in *An Apology* is “portraiture”. His main point is that poetry is an “arte of imitation . . . that is to say, a representing, counterfetting, or figuring foorth: to speake metaphorically, a speaking picture: with this end to teach and delight” (Sidney, 10). In fact, Sidney also influenced the metaphysical poets like John Donne.



5.8 LET US SUM UP

After reading this unit, you must have realised the important role played by Sir Philip Sidney in the history of English literary criticism. His *An Apology for Poetry* written in a 16th century is concerned mainly about the aesthetic problems regarding the object and purpose of poetic representation. It is in many ways a seminal text of literary criticism. It is not only a defence but also one of the most acclaimed treatises on poetics of its time. While its ideas are not original, it represents the first synthesis in the English language of the various strands and concerns of Renaissance literary criticism, drawing on Aristotle, Horace, and more recent writers such as Boccaccio and Julius Caesar Scaliger. It raised issues – such as the value and function of poetry, the nature of imitation, and the concept of nature – which were to concern literary critics in numerous languages until the late 18th century. Sidney’s writing of the *Apology* as a defence of poetry was occasioned by an attack on poetry entitled *The School of Abuse* published in 1579 by a Puritan minister, Stephen Gosson. As you have already read, Sidney rejected Gosson’s Protestant attack on courtly pleasure, effectively defending poetry as a virtuous activity.



5.9 FURTHER READING

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Web Resource:

<http://bibs.slu.edu/sidney/history.html>



5.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q No 1: On the one hand, the Renaissance critics were devoted scholars of the Classics, on the other, they were equally devoted to the native English tradition like the poetry of Chaucer... ..on the other hand, they adored the classics as model for guidance, and on the other, they advocated the purity of the native tongue from foreign influences like Latin, French and Italian.

Ans to Q No 2: The main concerns of Renaissance has been the revival of interests in classical Greek and Latin criticism... ..it was also the time in which English writers were concerned over the appreciation of form and style as the distinguishing features of literature... ..it was also the time for the first systematic classification of poetic forms and subjects... ..this period is also marked by an emergence of philosophical and apologetic criticism.

Ans to Q No 3: The sonnet cycle *Astrophel and Stella* is the first Elizabethan sonnet sequences... ..It includes 108 sonnets and 11 songs... ..most of the sonnets are influenced by Petrarchan conventions in which the abject lover laments the coldness of the lady he peruses... ..this sonnet sequence is autobiographical as Stella is modelled on Penelope Devereux, who was supposed to marry Sidney.

Ans to Q No 4: The *Apology* is an answer to Stephen Gosson, who dedicated his “School of Abuse” to Sidney in 1579, without taking his consent... ..Gosson presented a puritanical standpoint which condemns all the beauties of present life... ..Sidney argues that poetry is more effective than either history or philosophy in rousing its readers to virtue.

Ans to Q No 5: That men could employ his time more usefully than in poetry... ..that poetry is the mother of lies... ..that poetry is the nurse of abuse... ..Plato had rightly banished the poets from his ideal commonwealth.

Ans to Q No 6: Divine poets who imitate the “inconceivable excellences of God”... ..Pagan poets who imitate “matter philosophical”... ..and Right poets who imitate to teach and delight.

Ans to Q No 7: There can be no “more fruitful knowledge” than we derive from poetry... ..what a poet presents is not fact but fiction embodying truth of an ideal kind... ..poetry does not abuse man’s wit, it is man’s wit that abuses poetry... ..Plato was right when he rejected poetry because he warned men not against poetry but against its abuse by his contemporary poets.

Ans to Q No 8: Sidney's demonstration of the superiority of poetry to philosophy and history... ..Sidney's reply to the specific charges the poet as a liar.... ..Sidney's observation on the current state of English literature.

Ans to Q No 9: Sidney proposes that poetry should be seen as "the highest estimation of learning" and defends it for being a rich tradition... ..Nature of Imitation: Sidney argues that "right poets" "imitate to teach and delight, and to imitate, borrow nothing of what is, hath been, or, shall be, but range only reined with learned discretion into the divine consideration of what, may be and should be."

Ans to Q No 10: That poetry has fallen from its status as "the highest estimation of learning" to "be the laughing stock of children"... .."poor poetry" is based on chronology, the authority of ancient tradition, the relation of poetry to nature, the function of poetry as imitation.. ...on the other hand, Sidney viewed that poetry was the first form in which knowledge had been expressed as practised by poets such as Musaeus, Homer, Hesiod, Livius, Ennius, Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch.



5.11 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

- Q 1:** Discuss briefly the Puritan objections against poetry and Sidney's defence of it. What significance does it hold in the context of the critical discussion of poetry during the Renaissance?
- Q 2:** How does Sidney interpret poetry in his age? Substantiate your answer with reference to the different stands that he takes in the text of *An Apology for Poetry*?
- Q 3:** Who is a true poet according to Sidney? Does his view reflect his own upbringing as a poet of the Elizabethan age?

- Q 4:** In what ways does Sidney stick to the doctrine of poetry as imitation? Discuss with reference to Sidney's preoccupation with classical masters like Plato and Aristotle.
- Q 5:** How does Sidney refute the main accusations against poetry? Who, according to Sidney, is a true poet?
- Q 6:** What, according to you, is the importance of Sidney's criticism? How did it influence the future generations of English critics?
- Q 7:** How does Sidney extol the cause of poetry during his time? Elaborate with examples from the text.
- Q 8:** Write a note on the reception of Sidney as a critic.

* * *

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