

**MILESTONES
OF
LITERARY CRITICISM**

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Contents

	Page
Chapter I. Introduction	1
Chapter II. Plato	
Plato's Theory of Poetry	5
From Plato's <i>Republic</i> , Book X	11
Chapter III. Aristotle	
Aristotle's Theory of Imitation	23
Aristotle's <i>Poetics</i>	33
Chapter IV. Sir Philip Sidney	
Sidney's Defense of Poetry	65
" <i>An Apology for Poetry</i> "	71
Chapter V. John Dryden	
Dryden's Essay of Dramatic Poesy	107
" <i>An Essay of Dramatic Poesy</i> "	115
Select Bibliography	137

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

There are two kinds of criticism :

1. Theoretical Criticism.
2. Practical Criticism.

Theoretical criticism provides the laws and principles according to which a work of art is made. It is the body of critical principles, prevalent in every age, that govern the creation of literature. As such, it can be said that theoretical criticism deals with the theory of literature, or the general abstract principles rather than with a particular author or work. The theory of literature, however, varies from one age to another according to the taste of the age, its body of ideas and its conception of the nature and function of art. Nevertheless, we can group the varying attitudes of literary theory into two main headings :

1. *The Theory of Imitation* which regards art as an imitation of nature. This theory prevailed from the time of the Greek until the 18th century.
2. *The Theory of Imagination* which regards art as purely the creation of the artist's mind.

Practical criticism attempts to analyse a particular work of art to show how successfully the writer managed to convey feelings, impressions and ideas to the reader. A good piece of practical criticism is that which analyses the structure and texture of a particular poem, story or drama to show how it is made, whether its textural components are functional or not within the overall scheme or structure, and the relation of the part to the whole.

Literary criticism, theoretical or practical, attempts to answer three basic questions :

1. What is art?
2. How art is made?
3. What is its function or value?

In an attempt to answer the first question, the "classical attitude defines literature as an "imitation of nature." By this the artist imitates external reality or gives in his work a "picture" which reproduces nature or creates something which equates nature. But here the question arises what do we mean by nature? The classical theory of art is concerned with defining *nature*, i.e. with the conception of the kind of reality which the artist sets out to imitate.

The Classical Attitude

According to the classical attitude, the universe works according to fixed laws and principles that govern man's life and the phenomena of nature. Thus ours is a *harmonious* universe based on the principle of order. This ordered harmonious movement is the *essence* of the universe, and the true essence of nature. In imitating nature, therefore, an artist does not reproduce literal aspects of external reality, a phenomenon, but creates in the work of art an ordered harmonious structure which equates the order of nature.

The very concept of imitation in the classical attitude presupposes that reality exists *outside* the mind of the artist. Thus, in classicism the concentration is more on the work of art than on the artist, the literary object rather than the creative mind. In order to understand the classical conception of "imitation," the following points should be taken into consideration :

1. Imitation does *not* mean literal copying of external reality.
2. Imitation is an attempt to give a "picture" which equates nature or becomes a *counterpart* of it.
3. The objects of imitation should be the unchangeable and permanent forms of nature, including lasting and general human emotions which are not influenced by environment, social or political change.
4. Each kind of art uses its own medium of imitation in order to give a *living* imitation. Thus, music, for instance, uses sound, painting uses colour, and literature uses words. All kinds of imitation, however, depend on the principle of *harmony*.

The Romantic Attitude

By the end of the 18th century, the classical attitude started to lose force. While the classicists believed in reason, a new attitude developed about that time which glorified "feeling." Thus, instead of concentrating on nature, the new attitude started to lay more emphasis on the personality, genius and power of feeling of the creative artist, the maker himself rather than the work made. Thus, the Romantic attitude consists of the following :

1. Reality does not lie outside the creative mind of the artist, but it is the artist's *imagination* which reconstructs the disparate and fragmentary reality into a unified whole.
2. Art is not an expression of "reason" but of "feeling."
3. Consequently, spontaneity, originality and power of feeling are essential qualities of good art.
4. Art is a form of self-expression.

The Romantic attitude continued throughout the 19th and, to some extent, the 20th centuries.

Chapter II

PLATO

■ Plato's Theory of Poetry ■ From Plato's *Republic*, Book X