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**M.A. English**

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**Part II**

**Course II**

**LITERARY CRITICISM AND THEORY**

**BLOCK**

**I**

**Classical and Neo-Classical Criticism**



**School of Distance Education  
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# **LITERARY CRITICISM AND THEORY**

## **BLOCK I**

### **CLASSICAL AND NEO-CLASSICAL CRITICISM**

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## INTRODUCTION TO THE COURSE

Welcome to this course on Literary Criticism and Theory – you are going to explore texts that deal with works of art and literature and also with the very idea of the production of texts in a certain culture. This is most probably the first time that you are going to analyze discourse that concerns the appreciation, understanding and examining of “literary” texts; till now you have simply read poems, plays or fiction as primary texts which did not offer you the principles of analyzing those texts. This course will introduce you to the major developments that have taken place in the Western tradition; developments that have sought to provide a frame for understanding or appreciating literary works at a point of time.

“Criticism” comes from the Greek root KRINEI that signified ‘to judge’ and the word KRITIKOS meant ‘a judge of literature’. This word has been in use since the fourth century in Greek, and in English the word “criticism” signifying the “study and analysis of literary writing” originated in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> As students of literature, we have always largely depended on critics to tell us what a text meant, we have believed that one needs a certain point of view or “frame” to explain and understand what a particular text signified. This is where the term “theory” assumes importance; we can understand and interpret a literary text only when we have a “framework” of ideas in our mind. While criticism offered judgment and interpretation earlier, literary theory formed the bedrock of intellectual assumptions that mould our interpretation and therefore now the term is used for this area of study.

One can have no criticism if there weren't a theory behind; cultures construct these frames according to the demands of the time and according to the power structures in operation. You would see when you read the texts of critical theory that all of them aspire to make you look at the world and the text in a particular way – the way that conforms to the ruling structures of power in a community. You are told how to read a text and how to

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<sup>1</sup> M.S.Nagarajan in English Literary Criticism and Theory: An Introductory History (Orient Longman, 2006) discusses the evolution of these terms.

look for meaning in a certain manner. In fact, you might have noticed that the same literary text yields different meanings when read through different frames. What Shakespeare meant to the audience in Elizabethan England is not the same as what he means to contemporary readers. Feminist scholars or New Historicists have disentangled different strands of meaning in Shakespeare plays because they have asked different questions. Even when you do not know “theory”, a text changes its meanings at different points of time in your life. Consider the recent readings of the play The Tempest, which you studied in your course on Shakespeare in Part I, and you will understand what I am hinting at; the notion of colonization and subjugation of a people and imposing another language in a distant land yields completely different meanings if read through Postcolonial theory, and this is how theory operates in framing questions for a literary text.

In fact, the editors of the Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism remind us of the impossibility of having an “antitheorist” position in relation to literature; they say that “it itself presupposes a definition of literature, and it promotes a certain way of scrutinizing literature. In other words, -the antitheory position turns out to rely on unexamined, and debatable- theories of literature and criticism. What theory demonstrates, in this case and in others, is that there is no position free of theory, not even the one called ‘common sense’.<sup>2</sup> You would very often find scholars who assume that they are reading literature “objectively”- without any relationship with the world in which they live. Most often, this is a way of evading questions of ideology and politics and limiting literature within a very restricted domain. After all, reading is an act that is intimately networked to our communities and its rituals; don’t assume that you are beyond the invisible lines constructed by society.

You should certainly be aware of the term “politics” in relation to your literary studies; that word has become over-burdened with meanings associated with it. When we talk of politics in literature, we are looking at it from a much wider perspective of choices and

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<sup>2</sup> Vincent Leitch et al Ed. The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism. New York: W.W.Norton and Company, 2001. Introduction to Theory and Criticism. p. 1.

options that the readers exercise in deciding the meaning of a text. Contemporary research has demonstrated that hardly ever do we deploy literary texts without a programme in mind. You would read everything that has been written in a culture if you did not have to fit into a particular way of looking at the world – all curricula and syllabuses are formed with specific ideas to be incorporated into the student's mind. At any historical period, there are different voices that speak, either for, or against, or resisting the dominant system. We are supposed to read and learn from the ones that fit into the dominant ideology of the community that we live in. You should be aware that this does not mean that there were no contrary voices; most often, it is simply out of your reach for various reasons.

In this course, you would get acquainted with the texts of English literary criticism and theory, and we will begin with Plato who supplies the foundations of Western knowledge systems. Remember that you will read only selected parts of the ideas of major critics and not their entire work or thought. We will simply discuss some basic ideas that form the bedrock of the work of critics who were speaking at a particular historical period. You can also read them on your own if you want and get yourself familiar with other ideas in their work. This is your first encounter with critics who were commenting on the process of art or literature and you are free to read as much as you want. We are simply introducing you to major ideas that have dominated the area in criticism in the Western (English) world. There are many other ways to look at/read the world, and do not assume that these are the final explanations available to interpret reality.

I am sure you know that artists and critics have always tried to explain and interpret their work. What is it that they are doing, what should they represent in their works, why is representation necessary to understand the culture, what is there in language that suffuses a life in their representations – are questions that have provoked thinkers to meditate on the process of creation or representation. Some human beings are gifted with the ability to use language to represent ideas and understandings that shape our readings of the world; they are artists who are poets, novelists, playwrights and people who have a better command of language. If

some ordinary person wants to compose even a small poem, he or she would have immense difficulties in formulating his ideas; whereas an artist has the ability to play around with linguistic material and experience, he/she can invest the text with meanings that are not very clearly associated in reality. This is what differentiates an artist from a commoner – and this is what makes them capable of commenting on the process of creation.

Remember however, that all such assumptions and ideas are the products of history – they are circumscribed by the period or time that they belong to. All human beings, not only critics or artists, look at the world through the lenses of their own times; it is almost impossible to locate oneself in a different historical period which had its own constraints and compulsions. All our efforts to understand or analyze the world are framed within this domain – meaning is made in terms of the world that we live in; we try to explain things in terms of networks that operate in our world. You will see that all critics speculate on creativity and representation in terms of their time and their world, they try to figure out the character of a representation in relation to the demands of their society. While commenting on the nature of representation, they sometimes assume universality, they imagine that their ideas will hold true at all times and in all spaces. This however, hardly happens; all ideas are circumscribed by the limits of time and place, they speak most efficiently of the world they live in and the reality they encounter.

You have to remember one important idea when you decide on a particular view of things; I have simply given you my approach to the subject which also happens to be the approach of a majority of thinkers at present. You need to be aware of the fact that there will always be a very small percentage of people who will think otherwise and differ; there are bound to be critics who might still adhere to Matthew Arnold's view of a detached criticism in which you judge texts for what (according to Arnold) they actually are and profess the ideal position of "disinterestedness" while reading texts. While I do agree that this position does have the possibility of existing, I also believe that it has come under serious scrutiny and challenge. You are free to choose your path in deciding. The greatest reward of contemporary critical theory is that it offers you

the freedom to choose and does not make you conform to any specific programme of study.

In reading Literary Theory and Criticism, you should remember one important thing; these texts deal with foundational ideas and are not imaginative or fictional discourses. Therefore, you are not supposed to write long, elaborate essays on them, you will have to learn to deal with the thoughts and ideas in a precise, exact manner. Answers and assessments therefore, are not going to be judged in terms of the length, but in terms of your grasp of the ideas presented in the text. So, please do not expect this course to be like your other courses, where you are dealing with creative writing.

Please remember that we are only familiarizing you with some major ideas of the critics chosen; you are free to read as much as you like from their works (or from other critics) out of your own interest and of course, for your own benefit.

Many of the critical texts discussed in this course are available in the following anthologies.

Enright, D.J and Ernst De Chickera, ed. *English Critical Texts: 16<sup>th</sup> Century to 20<sup>th</sup> Century*. London: Oxford University Press, 1962.

Ramaswami, S and V.S. Seturaman, ed. *The English Critical Tradition*. In two volumes. Madras: Macmillan, 1977-78.

Seturaman, V.S., ed. *Contemporary Criticism: An Anthology*. Madras: Macmillan, 1989.

Information on the websites on which the texts are available is provided under “References and Suggested Reading” at the end of each Unit.



## INTRODUCTION TO THE BLOCK

In this block, you will read about the works of Classical, Renaissance and Neo-classical critics. While the beginnings are traced to the writings of Plato and his disciples, English criticism proper begins during the Renaissance with the writings of Sir Philip Sidney. John Dryden and Alexander Pope are the two important critics of the Neo-classical period in England and we have tried to familiarize you with some of their works. The last or fourth unit deals with three more critics of this phase: Johnson, Aphra Behn and Joseph Addison are unique in their approach and understanding of literature. Behn is also most probably the first woman critic to write in English.

One important fact about these critics is that you will have to read their original writings, there is no way in which you can skip that and form an opinion about them. You need to read the original writings compulsorily along with the lessons, and there is no exception to this.



## **Unit 1**

### **Introduction to Classical Criticism**

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# Unit 1

## INTRODUCTION TO CLASSICAL CRITICISM

### 1.0 Objectives

This Unit takes you to the beginnings of Western literary criticism, viz. classical criticism. After an introduction to the terms “classic” and “classical” the Unit briefly examines the work of the ancient Greek critics, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle (all belonging to the pre-Christian era), the Roman critic Horace (who belonged to the first century B.C.) and the Greek critic Longinus (1<sup>st</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> c. A.D.). The Unit concludes with a note on the contemporary relevance of all these ancient critics.

### 1.1 Introduction

If literature is about words used in imagined contexts, criticism is about more words used to describe how we talk about the imagined contexts. In that sense criticism has an artistic function not dissimilar to literature which is to interpret life in its infinite diversity. The Italian novelist Elsa Morante in one of her diaries says that “to invent...is to remember.” The filmmaker Fellini in his 1973 movie *Amarcord* (“I remember”) recreates his hometown Rimini as Borgo – the setting for a boy’s coming of age in a small conservative town with its relentless contradictions. In inventing his boyhood through the film, Fellini is also remembering his own past. While he is deeply critical of the past he belongs to, he cannot help but remember it with a poignant irony. Fellini over here is the creator as well as the critic.

In the book *Culture and Value*, the philosopher of language Wittgenstein makes the statement, “We are engaged in a struggle with language” (13). The distinction between a creator of a text and a critic has to emerge in a struggle with being able to define what we mean by an author, or text or critic for that matter. The *struggle to define* underlies how we use language.

Notions such as “classical” and “neo-classical” carry within them a struggle with the language we use to describe what we consider to be classical or not. The struggle is magnified when we attach the term “criticism” to it. Is a “classic” song the same as a “classical” song? As critics we’re philosophers of language and in Wittgenstein’s terms “clarity” must be the goal of the philosopher because that’s the whole point of language: *use*. How we use a

word to refer to an object or a situation! Fellini's *Amarcord* is a classic movie with classical overtones. The latter because it's a commentary on institutionalized religion as embodied in the Roman Catholic Church. The word "classical" has a collective character when we use it to talk about institutions such as the Catholic Church.

However, the association of the term "classical" with tradition is as problematic as its association with the individual genius of Plato or Aristotle. If symmetry or order is the essence of the classical, the need for such symmetry is an awareness of what is missing in a social and political order that is engaged in a struggle for meaning. The words "classical" and "criticism" are not *presumed* innocent and the phrase "classical criticism" begs more questions than provides straightforward answers. Is "classical" an age one can locate in terms of a historical time-frame—for example, the "classical" poet Virgil (70 BCE – 90 BCE) was a farmer's son at the court of the emperor Augustus--- or a notion that can be used across time and space – T. S. Eliot is a modernist poet who explores "classical" themes in his work?

The central issue is not whether the classical is an aesthetic term to identify the parameters of the beautiful in a literary work or a political term to identify the parameters of a social order or how to establish a society and a government that reflects the concerns of common people. *The central issue of classical criticism is to discover or unravel the strategies that writers use to arrive at a definition of order – whether it is aesthetic or political.* In simpler terms what we intend to examine is: how do we speak of the world around us without actually being affected by the times in which we live. The point of criticism is to establish a relationship between "us" in the present with "those" in the past. In the process we attribute a social and ethical value to the subject in question.

To evaluate a work of art is no doubt the job of the critic. In the time-frame in which we live where we're conditioned by phrases such as "Think globally and act locally" – not very explicit phrases actually-- what we need in fact is what Nietzsche in his book *Ecce Homo* speaks of as a "revaluation of all values". "In a *revaluation of all values*, in freeing himself from all moral values, in saying 'yes' to and placing trust in everything that has hitherto been forbidden, despised, condemned. This *yes-saying* book pours out its light, its love, its delicacy over nothing but bad things, it gives them back their 'soul', their good conscience, the lofty right and *prerogative* of existence. Morality is not attacked, it just no longer

comes into consideration... This book closes with an ‘Or?’—it is the only book to close with an ‘Or?’...” (61-62).

If we’re *condemned* to choose, as the existential philosopher Sartre points out, then we’re condemned to reevaluate all values. We need to ask questions without expecting absolute answers. While we aim to reevaluate what it means to “think globally” or “act locally” we also dwell on a conception of the classical. The question is what Plato and Aristotle and to a lesser degree Horace and Longinus grappled with centuries ago.

In our discussion of classical criticism we’re bound to ask questions. What is meant by the classical in *this* context? What is the conception of the classical that emerges in *this* work? What is the worldview in which is contained a notion of *the* classical? These questions are meant to reevaluate our understanding of the parameters of classical criticism.

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**Activity A**

*What is the need to define the classical? How do we define the classical? What is the relevance of classical criticism to understanding texts in the present or why is it important to know classical criticism?*

**Discussion**

The need to define the classical is to bring to light those characteristics that identify what we mean by the classical. No literary term is clear unless we specify by means of definition what we exactly mean by the term. Therefore we define the classical as a period in literary and social history that broadly comprise the works of Plato and Aristotle in the Greek world and Horace and Longinus in the Latin world. Their works serve as a model to how we interpret texts or how we read and understand the meaning of a text. Classical criticism continues to throw light on works in the present because the questions posed by the classical masters are as relevant now as they were in the past. For instance is poetry a positive force in social life or do poets produce illusions that disturb the social order. To this day we need to know if creative artists are useful to a society or if they are a burden to the order unlike an engineer or a doctor who has utilitarian value that can in some sense be quantified. This question Plato asks in the *Republic* needs to be debated now as much as it did then.

## 1.2 Socrates (469-399 B.C.) and Plato (428/427–348/347 BC)

Although Plato will be remembered as a poet as much as a philosopher owing to his reader-friendly style of writing, interestingly he banished the poets from the ideal world of the Republic. Why did he do that? In one of his dialogues *Apology* Plato says: “I soon realized that poets do not compose their poems with knowledge, but by some inborn talent and by inspiration, like seers and prophets who also say many fine things without any understanding of what they say.” (*Plato* 22) Two points are made in the above statement – that poets do not compose their work with “knowledge” but with “inspiration” like “seers and prophets.” They cannot explain their work as well as even the “bystanders” They were not as wise as they thought about themselves. In the dialogue *Phaedo* Plato says: I realized that a poet, if he is to be a poet, must compose fables, not arguments. (*Plato* 53).

What is it about argument that makes it superior to a fable? In the dialogue *Ion* Socrates says: “For a poet is an airy thing, winged and holy, and he is not able to make poetry until he becomes inspired and goes out of his mind and his intellect is no longer in him” (942). “Intellect” is what the poets have to abandon before they make poems or say many lovely things about their subjects (as you do about Homer) but because it's by a divine gift-each poet is able to compose beautifully only that for which the Muse has aroused him...the god takes their intellect away from them when he uses them as his servants, as he does prophets and godly diviners, so that we who hear should know that *they* are not the ones who speak those verses that are of such high value, for their intellect is not in them: the god himself is the one who speaks, and he gives voice through them to us (*Plato* 942).

In the absence of intellect, the poet becomes someone dangerous to the ideal state that Plato creates in the Republic. As Socrates says: “poetry is likely to distort the thought of anyone who hears it, unless he has the knowledge of what it is really like, as a drug to counteract it” (*Plato* 1200). In the Allegory of the Cave the man who is trapped in the darkness along with other prisoners manages to enter the world of light. In the beginning he would be unable to believe that the “shadows” on the wall of the cave are nothing more than shadows of the objects that created them. “At first, he'd see shadows most easily, then images of men and other things in water, then the things themselves. Of these, he'd be able to study the things in the sky and the sky itself more easily at night, looking at the light of the stars and the moon, than during the day, looking

at the sun and the light of the sun” (*Plato* 1134). The conclusion that Socrates draws is as radical as the argument itself:

The visible realm should be likened to the prison dwelling, and the light of the fire inside it to the power of the sun. And if you interpret the upward journey and the study of things above as the upward journey of the soul to the intelligible realm, you'll grasp what I hope to convey, since that is what you wanted to hear about. Whether it's true or not, only the god knows. But this is how I see it: In the knowable realm, the form of the good is the last thing to be seen, and it is reached only with difficulty. Once one has seen it, however, one must conclude that it is the cause of all that is correct and beautiful in anything, that it produces both light and its source in the visible realm, and that in the intelligible realm it controls and provides truth and understanding, so that anyone who is to act sensibly in private or public must see it (*Plato* 1135).

With the intellect a person apprehends the reality. The poet however is an imitator twice-removed from reality. Commenting on the “true nature of imitation” Socrates points out, in the following dialogue:

“Shall we then put down all poets, from Homer onwards, as imitators of images of virtue and of all their other subjects, without any contact with the truth? As we were saying just now, the painter will make a semblance of a cobbler, though he knows nothing about cobbling, and neither do his public—they judge only by colours and shapes.”

“Yes.”

“Similarly, we can say that the poet with his words and phrases lays on the colours of every art, though all he understands of it is how to imitate it in such a way that other people like himself, judging by the words, think it all very fine if someone discusses cobbling or strategy or anything in metre, rhythm, and harmony. These have by their very nature such immense fascination. I imagine you know what the content of poetry amounts to, stripped of the colours of music, just on its own. You must have seen it.”

“I have.”

“It's like a pretty but not beautiful face, isn't it, when youth has departed from it?”

“Exactly.”

(*Ancient Literary Criticism* 69)

Substantiating his argument for the banishment of poets from the Republic, Plato says:

Poetical imitation in fact produces the same effect in regard to sex and anger and all the desires and pleasures and pains of the mind-and these, in our view, accompany every action. It waters them and nourishes them, when they ought to be dried up. It makes them our rulers, when they ought to be under control so that we can be better and happier people rather than worse and more miserable.

(*Ancient Literary Criticism* 74)

The poet or the literary artist is an emotional thinker who articulates his or her understanding of the world in a metaphorical language unlike the philosopher who arrives at the truth through argument and careful reasoning. That’s what makes the poet “dangerous” because s/he does not live up to the demands of the “truth” in the same sense as the philosopher. In the play *As you like It* Jacques a “melancholy” character is a philosopher of sorts who delivers the famous monologue “All the world’s a stage” where a man moves from one childhood to another childhood or “second childhood,” - “Last scene of all,/ That ends this strange eventful history,/ Is second childishness and mere oblivion;/ Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.” Jacques in some ways is a parody of the ideal philosopher that Plato constructs in the *Republic* who has a vision where, in the words of Rasselas from the tale by Dr. Johnson, “Human *life* is everywhere a state in which *much* is to be *endured*, and little to be *enjoyed*.” While the poet celebrates life through the use of metaphor the philosopher sees that more is to be endured than enjoyed. However the distinction between the poet and the philosopher is not a hard-and-fast one especially when you notice that Plato is fond of using language in a metaphorical manner. Whether it is the image of the cave or the sun or chariot, it is Plato’s use of figurative language that makes him a great philosopher who continues to exert a powerful influence on writers and thinkers even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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## Activity B

*What is Plato’s contribution to classical criticism? Do you think that Plato who is a stylist himself was being fair to the poets in banishing them from the Republic?*

## **Discussion**

Plato's *Dialogues* and *The Republic* are literary as much as philosophical achievements. As a classical critic Plato will be remembered for articulating philosophy in a literary style accessible to contemporary readers as much as it did to those who lived in Athens. Through the use of "dialogue" Plato's teacher Socrates who appears as a questioner attempts to examine and arrive at a critique of views held by certain prominent individuals of Athens. The method of questioning established views and gently showing alternative ways of looking at the same situation is known as Socratic Method. In fact in the dialogue *Apology* Socrates refers to himself as a "gadfly," someone who upsets others with his questions. The reason why he does that is because: "It is to fulfill some such function that I believe the god has placed me in the city. I never cease to rouse each and everyone of you, to persuade and reproach you all day long and everywhere I find myself in your company" (Plato 28). Socrates is not just asking questions. He also wishes to change the way people think about issues concerning social, political and ethical life. Plato's use of figurative language is to make people comprehend the difficult truths of philosophy and ethics. Therefore he is a literary artist with a moral objective. Perhaps Plato is unfair to the poets in banning them from the Republic. However when you think of the ruinous influence that consumer-based mass culture has on audiences in the present day we cannot deny that the role of the creative artist has to be clearly defined in any social order in order to prevent the masses from being demoralized or indoctrinated by unethical forces.

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### **1.3 Aristotle (384–322 BC)**

Unlike Plato's figurative style of writing which appeals to the reader's sensibility while claiming to defend the Idea or the Form that exists independent of particular instances--the Idea of the apple exists even if there are no apples in the world--, Aristotle has a blandness in his writing appealing to the logical faculty of his readers. Unlike the Socratic Method that uses argument to arrive at a position--an argument with an in-built bias in favour of the Ideal--Aristotle's method relies on moving from particular instances to the general.

For Aristotle poetry originates from two causes, imitation and experience, both of them interestingly being aspects of human nature. In the book *Poetics* Aristotle makes the following

observation: “Imitation, then, being natural to us—as also the sense of harmony and rhythm, the metres being obviously species of rhythms—it was through their original aptitude, and by a series of improvements for the most part gradual on their first efforts, that they created poetry out of their improvisations” (5). Poetry falls into two different kinds: “for the graver among them would represent noble actions, and those of noble personages; and the meaner sort the actions of the ignoble” (5). Tragedy shows that which is noble – an imitation of men better than what they are--and comedy rests on the “actions of the ignoble” -- “an imitation of men worse than the average; worse, however, not as regards any and every sort of fault, but only as regards one particular kind, the ridiculous, which is a species of the ugly. The ridiculous may be defined as a mistake or deformity not productive of pain or harm to others; the mask, for instance, that excites laughter, is something ugly and distorted without causing pain” (6). Given the “serious subjects”, epic poetry is similar to tragedy but it is “in one kind of verse and in narrative form” (6). Aristotle famously defines tragedy as “the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself; in language with pleasurable accessories, each kind brought in separately in the parts of the work; in a dramatic, not in a narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions” (7). According to Jonathan Barnes, catharsis means “purification,” but not just spiritual purification but also in a medical sense as well.

The Greek term *katharsis* sometimes means ‘purification’, and is applied in particular to certain religious rituals. Many scholars have supposed that tragic catharsis is a purification, and that tragedy (according to Aristotle) is essentially something which refines and improves our souls. Against this interpretation, Bernays argues that Aristotle has in mind a medical and not a religious use of the term *katharsis*. In medicine, catharsis is an operation of purgation, an operation effected by a laxative or an emetic. The purgation is worked upon the spectators of the tragedy. They—or some of them—have an excessive inclination to pity and to fear; the emotional pressure is painful and dangerous; the spectacle of tragedy stimulates and arouses precisely the feelings of pity and fear; and after the arousal and the emotional outflow which follows it, the spectators find themselves purged—they are drained and relieved. Thus tragedy offers not moral improvement but emotional relief. The theatre offers not a pulpit but a psychiatrist’s couch. (Laird 158-9)

Aristotle's most famous work *The Nicomachean Ethics* dwells on the notion of eudemonia which means happiness but also flourishing and well-being. Happiness is an end in itself according to Aristotle. "For happiness lacks nothing, but is self-sufficient; and an activity is worthy of choice in itself when nothing is sought from it beyond the activity. Actions in accordance with virtue seem like this, since doing noble and good actions is worthy of choice in itself" (Book X NE).

Raju, at the end of R. K. Narayan's novel *The Guide* experiences what Aristotle means by eudemonia in contemplation achieved through the selfless action of fasting with the intention of bringing rains. "For the first time in his life he was making an earnest effort; for the first time he was learning the thrill of full application, outside money and love; for the first time he was doing a thing in which he was not personally interested" (238). To the question asked by the American journalist if he had always been a Yogi, Raju responds not without a dint of irony "Yes; more or less" (244).

If eudemonia is a state of happiness within oneself Raju is right in saying that he was always a Yogi. The transcending joy of being oneself is possible for Raju only at the point when he's willing to give up his sense of possession. Possessiveness blinds him to the eudemonia that contemplation finally can give him. The flourishing or the ultimate well-being of the individual is somehow related to the strength to give up a narrow notion of self-interest, "for this (contemplation) is the highest activity, intellect being the highest element in us, and its objects are the highest objects of knowledge" (Book X NE).

In *The Eudemean Ethics* Aristotle refers to the divine element within an order that one experiences in contemplation. A manifestation of the state of inner order that produces transcending joy is a society that is stable – a society that ultimately must rest on virtuous action. From an Aristotelian point of view someone like Gandhi or Martin Luther King Jr. would in their politics as in their lives embody contemplation in action because it is an activity, "worthy of choice in itself when nothing is sought from it beyond the activity." The Good is the Idea or Form of the Good in Plato while in Aristotle the good is something that is attained. "As in the Olympic Games it is not the most attractive and the strongest who are crowned, but those who compete, so in life it is those who act rightly who will attain what is noble and good" (Book I NE).

While the goodness of Raju is similar to Nekhlyudov, a nobleman in Tolstoy's novel *Resurrection*, who must make changes in his life to redeem himself for the wrong he had done in pushing a young maid into prostitution, the good that Aristotle speaks of can be seen in Myshkin from Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*; the goodness of the latter is that he never ceases to believe in the goodness of the world that is only too ready to betray his expectations. The complete absence of cynicism is possible only with one who is at peace with himself. Even in pain and suffering the experience of eudemonia is a reality for Myshkin. He cannot but be ultimately happy.

If eudemonia or happiness in the sense that Aristotle implies as resulting from contemplation is possible only in a just society where men are liberated from the greed for power the fact that it is possible in the first place is what makes Aristotle a visionary philosopher with an eye into the future of humanity.

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### Activity C

*What is Aristotle's view of poetry and how is it different from that of Plato? Aristotle's notion of eudemonia is an ethical concept. In what way is the area of ethics relevant to an understanding of classical criticism?*

### **Discussion**

Unlike Plato who views the role of the poet negatively, Aristotle has a positive view of the poet. In fact he says in the *Poetics* that "Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular. By the universal I mean how a person of a certain type on occasion speak or act, according to the law of probability or necessity; and it is this universality at which poetry aims in the names she attaches to the personages." More importantly at the very opening of *Poetics* Aristotle declares that he intends to study the "principles which come first" in understanding "poetry" which originates in imitation "produced by rhythm, language, or 'harmony,' either singly or combined."

Although eudemonia which means happiness or flourishing is an ethical concept, from a literary perspective we see that it is central to our understanding of the experience of characters in literary works. Just as in life so in art eudemonia or contemplation is the goal of the human person.

#### 1.4 Horace (65–8 BC)

If Horace in the *Ars Poetica* (“The Art of Poetry”) sounds pompous and repetitive – a bit of a lecturing Polonius from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, in love with his own voice – he, in fact embodies the classical in the truest sense of the term as a quest for order at the level of individual creativity. In the process of using the form of a poem to talk about the art of poetry, Horace in fact defines the classical more than any other poet of his age.

Along with the Latin masters, Virgil (70-19 BC) and Ovid (43 BC-18 AD), Horace was a poet during the reign of the emperor Augustus who ruled from 31 BC to his death in AD 14. In a way Horace’s *Ars Poetica* not only represents the peace and stability of the Age of Augustus but also stands for a defence of the idea of order. Literature or the literary form is a mirror to the social and political order and must reflect a *formal* need to prevent the meanings of words from dispersing in all directions leading to chaos or anarchy.

Hence the very first section of the *Ars Poetica* is “Unity and Harmony.” Societies perish in the absence of unity and harmony that is ensured by the presence of a strong state. The form keeps the content under control to make sure that *unity* and *harmony* prevail and meaning is preserved from chaos. The opposite state would be close to what Horace describes in the opening lines of the poem through an image which a surreal artist like Salvador Dali would’ve visualized in the 20<sup>th</sup> century:

If a painter had chosen to set a human head  
On a horse’s neck, covered a melding of limbs,  
Everywhere, with multi-colored plumage, so  
That what was a lovely woman, at the top,  
Ended repulsively in the tail of a black fish:  
Asked to a viewing, could you stifle laughter, my friends?

If the image of “a human head on a horse’s neck” is what Horace dreads because it would invoke “laughter” and perhaps derision, it offers an insight into how the original Augustans (not the pale imitation of “order” that the 18<sup>th</sup> century England stood for) thought about language and life. D. A. Russell in his essay “*Ars Poetica*” points out that:

The *Ars*, with its many facets, the shimmering surface that catches so many divergent lights, admits of course many observations on this level. But this one is worth more than a

moment's pause. It brings out two essentials of the process that turned poetics into this sort of poetry. It reminds us that the *poiema*, the thing made, could never be material for a poem without the maker, without his emotions and morals, his credibility, his honesty. Only by bringing in the artist could the 'art' be made to live. And second, this particular sort of poem, like the *Satires* and *Epistles*, needs something to laugh about, and, perhaps more important, someone to laugh at. It is the madman who sticks in our mind most, it is the caricature that brings the complicated and allusive artfulness of the whole poem most vividly to life. (*Ancient Literary Criticism* 339)

Plato lived in turbulent times and saw his master Socrates – the wisest of men that the Oracle at Delphi had declared - unjustly put to death by the “Thirty Tyrants” who were in charge of Athens. Following the death of Alexander, Aristotle had to escape from Athens out of fear of being executed like Socrates. The need for ultimate order, cosmic order, human order, social order, ethical and philosophical order and order in style – all these are reflections of a world desperate for a sense of certainty.

The poetic form of the Horatian ode written in stanzas of two to four lines is evidence of the fact that he took his own advice given to poets in *Ars Poetica* only too seriously. The “tongue interpreting, shows heart's emotions” in these *Odes* of Horace. The fixed-stanza form is fully exploited to explore themes of a deeply philosophical nature with a pagan celebration of the present.

You'll leave behind your expensive pastures and  
your city house and your country villa which  
the Tiber flows by, you'll leave them behind, and  
your heir will possess your riches piled up high.

It makes no difference whether you're wealthy, born  
a descendant of ancient Inachus, or whether you live out  
in the open, a poor man and of a humble family --  
[you're still] the prey of pitiless Orcus.

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**Activity D**

Can a literary text be interpreted without an understanding of form? What is the central point that Horace is trying to make in *Ars Poetica*?

## Discussion

An understanding of form is vital to the interpretation of a literary text. In the absence of form a literary text ends up in chaos or disorder. A poem has to be carefully constructed and just not just be a product of one's emotions. In fact the privileging of "form" over inspiration is the central point that Horace is attempting to make in *Ars Poetica*. D. A. Russell makes mention that *Ars Poetica* "was for long the most accessible source of the basic tenets of classical criticism: the doctrines of propriety and genre, and the underlying assumption that the poet, like the orator, sets himself a particular task of persuasion and is to be judged by his success in bringing it off" (*Ancient Literary Criticism* 339).

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### **1.5 Longinus (1<sup>st</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD)**

Unlike Horace in whom we see that the poet has a social function of responding to his audience, in *On Sublimity* by Longinus we're struck by the individuality of the text in its emphasis on the relationship between literary genius and greatness. "Sublimity" is a metaphor that connects both of them. "Sublimity is a kind of eminence or excellence of discourse. It is the source of the distinction of the very greatest poets and prose writers and the means by which they have given eternal life to their own fame."

The greatness however does not rest on a vacuum. It rests on the ability of genius to make great comparisons. Take the example that Longinus gives: "In praise of Alexander the Great, Timaeus writes: 'He conquered all Asia in fewer years than it took Isocrates to write the *Panegyricus* to advocate the Persian war.' What a splendid comparison this is-the Macedonian king and the sophist!" In his *Life of Cowley* Dr. Johnson famously said of the metaphysical poets that in their work, "the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together." The comparison that Timaeus makes in bringing together Alexander's conquest of Asia and Isocrates writing the *Panegyricus* carries this sense of being "yoked" with an irony that disguises the "violence". The conqueror and the poet – most heterogeneous ideas - are brought together in the same statement because both are achievements that demand enormous abilities.

Greatness as experienced in the form of sublimity is as much a moral and psychological trait as it is intellectual and philosophical. A literary artist is also a moralist. In his essay, "The artist's

struggle for integrity,” James Baldwin says that an artist must be true to the person that he or she is. You cannot be creative for money or fame or power. You can be creative only when you’ve the ability to disdain these things. Says Baldwin: “The poets by which I mean the artists are the only ones who know the truth about us. Soldiers don’t. Statesmen don’t. Union leaders don’t....Only artists can tell. Only artists have told what it is like to die....what it is like to feel....what it is like to love.”

The aesthetic – how we define the beautiful - and the moral – how we live our lives - go together for sublimity to be possible in the highest sense of the term. The poet is both a stylist as well as a moralist. True sublimity is about achieving perfection of the self in terms of the “integrity” that Baldwin speaks of as much as it is achieving that integrity in the work of art itself.

People who could have these advantages (wealth, honor and power) if they chose but disdain them out of magnanimity are admired much more than those who actually possess them. It is much the same with elevation in poetry and literature generally. We have to ask ourselves whether any particular example does not give a show of grandeur which, for all its accidental trappings, will, when dissected, prove vain and hollow, the kind of thing which it does a man more honour to despise than to admire. It is our nature to be elevated and exalted by true sublimity. Filled with joy and pride, we come to believe we have created what we have only heard.

Longinus brings two things together in the above quote: the “magnanimity” of those who do not care for wealth and “elevation” in poetry. Further down he says: “In literature, nature occupies the place of good fortune, and art that of good counsel. Most important of all, the very fact that some things in literature depend on nature alone can itself be learned only from art.”

Sublimity is a literary technique that leads one to elevation. For instance, the Persian poet Hafez says in one of his ghazals: “If that Shirazi Turk would take my heart in her hand,/ For the dark mole on her cheek/ I would give Samarkand and Bukhara/ And add thereto even my body and my soul.” The “dark mole” is certainly without a price; but if it has to be valued at all then Hafez would not only give Samarkand and Bukhara – two famed cities on the Central Asian Silk Route, the former also being the capital of Timur the Lame’s empire - but “add thereto even my body and my soul.” The thought is a sublime one – the fact that a person can

give everything he possesses for a “dark mole” on the cheek of the beloved. That’s what makes the expression a sublime one as well.

A sublime thought cannot but have a sublime expression. Sublime thoughts are rooted in a moral sensibility. The beauty of the “dark mole” has awakened the moral sensibility in the poet and elevated him to utter lines filled with grandeur so much so that legend says that Timur complained: “With the blows of my lustrous sword, I have subjugated most of the habitable globe...to embellish Samarkand and Bokhara, the seats of my government; and you, miserable wretch, would sell them for the black mole of a Turk of Shiraz!”. Hafez, not without some irony responded: “Alas, O Prince, it is this prodigality which is the cause of the misery in which you find me,” a response that fortunately pleased the dreaded Timur the Lame.

The sublime is not a discourse that happens through pure inspiration. While “competence in speaking is assumed as a common foundation for all,” the important sources of the sublime are: *great thoughts, inspired emotion* – both of which are “natural,” *certain kinds of figures of thought and speech, noble diction and dignified word arrangement*. One of the ways of achieving sublimity is by conscious imitation of “great writers” of the past.

When we are working on something which needs loftiness of expression and greatness of thought, it is good to imagine how Homer would have said the same thing, or how Plato or Demosthenes or (in history) Thucydides would have invested it with sublimity. These great figures, presented to us as objects of emulation and, as it were, shining before our gaze, will somehow elevate our minds to the greatness of which we form a mental image.” Therefore imitation in itself is not to be looked down upon as an artistic failure in terms of a lack of originality. Earlier in the essay, Longinus points out that “lapses from dignity arise in literature through a single cause: that desire for novelty of thought which is all the rage today.

The attempt to be original does not always lead one to the sublime; on the contrary it could be a frivolous end in itself serving no higher purpose as such. At the same time Longinus wisely observes that genius takes risks that mediocrity cannot. He asks himself the question: “What then was the vision which inspired those divine writers who disdained exactness of detail and aimed at the greatest prizes in literature?”

It may not always be possible to find a straight answer to the question, but Longinus asserts confidently that, “Freedom from error does indeed save us from blame, but it is only greatness that wins admiration.”

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### **Activity E**

*What in your view constitutes the “sublime”? Make a list of books and passages that can be included in your definition of the sublime.*

### **Discussion**

All great literary works carry within them a sense of the sublime. We attach a notion of permanence to a great literary work – take for example Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* or the plays of Shakespeare. They not only appeal to our sense of delight but they do so in a way that does not exhaust the senses that usually is the case with a sensational work. We do not return to a sensational product but a great work owing to its sublimity is constantly inviting us to return for refreshing ourselves with new ideas and thoughts that help us discover who we are and what is our role in life.

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### **1.6 Conclusion**

The struggle with language or the struggle to arrive at a definition is at the heart of the classical discourse. That’s what makes them contemporaries in fact - whether it is Plato’s ideal universe, Aristotle’s insistence on reason as the basis of knowledge, Horace’s form-based definition of a literary text or Longinus’ sublimity – the attempt of classical criticism is to inevitably throw light on the relationship of a work of art to the author and the world around that he or she belongs to. This relationship of the author to his or her worlds needs to be defined. It needs to be located, identified and understood for what it means to itself and to us looking at it from the vantage point of the present. The classical critics from Plato to Longinus sought to explore the relationship between art and life – a debate that moves into the twenty-first century making those ethical, social, literary and philosophical concerns that we see in these writers as relevant today as they might have been then.

## 1.7 Summing up

In this Unit, we looked at the origins of Western literary criticism, called classical criticism. We discussed the work of the Greek critics, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and Longinus and that of the Roman critic Horace all of whom are generally regarded as the major figures of ancient (classical) literary criticism. We concluded with a few remarks on their continuing relevance.

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