

**MODULE: 27**

# **AN APOLOGY FOR POETRY**

**SIR PHILIP SIDNEY**

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**1.0 OBJECTIVE:**

Our study material will tell us briefly about the life of Sir Phillip Sidney, one of the major poets of the sixteenth century and in more detail about his chief work *An Apology For Poetry*.

## **1.1 GENERAL INTRODUCTION**



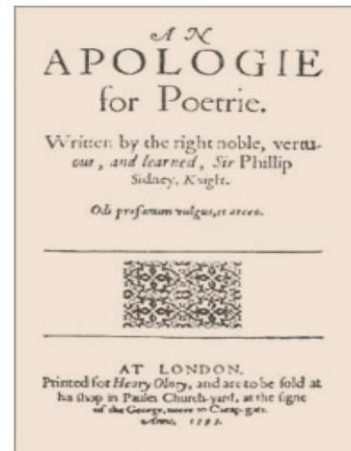
Sir Philip Sidney (1554-1595) was a courtier, soldier, statesman, scholar and a distinguished poet of the sixteenth century. He lived during the Elizabethan age, so was a contemporary of Shakespeare. We should recall that what we call the Elizabethan Age is really the English Renaissance. It begins in Italy and makes it to England during the age of Elizabeth. In the essay he both explores the core concepts and answers to earlier criticism of poetry. We shall first discuss how he praises poetry for being the cradle of civilization, for being a channel of divine power, for teaching as well as delighting, and for combining and surpassing the virtues of history and philosophy. We shall then move on to show how he refutes the main arguments made against poetry.

In order to have a total understanding of the text, we need to travel back in time. It is not just today that people have wondered if poetry is worthwhile. It has always had its critics. Like all critics before him, Sidney knew that he would have to answer not only contemporary attacks but he always had to answer Plato. Plato was always in the background, and was the *raison d'être*. During Sidney's time there was no standard model of English literary criticism. Sidney's predecessors in the field of literary criticism suffered from a myopic vision. Critics like Wilson, Ascham or Elyot cannot be regarded as full-fledged critics. Their myopic vision confined them to the discussion of the formal aspects of literature only. Sidney could see much more clearly than his contemporaries. He is the first critic of English literature and real criticism began in England with Sir Philip Sidney. In this sense he is an innovator, who broke away from the early critical tradition and created his own.

Chaucer had the critical spirit in him but it did not find the proper trajectory. In 1473, Richard de Bury (1281-1345) published the original Latin version of the *Philobiblon*. It is a weak attempt as it suffers from a narrow outlook. William Caxton ( c. 1422-91), the first literary icon of fifteenth century England showed some critical significance in his prefaces to the books he choose for printing. His critical observations are regarded as the first impressionistic 'appreciations' in the history of English literary criticism. Sir Thomas Elyot's ( c. 1490-1546) *The Book Named the Governor* ( 1531) lacks the deep critical insight. Roger Ascham ( 1515-68)

in his *Taxophilus* ( 1545) strongly advocated the use of English, as he was a purist he totally disapproved the introduction of foreign words into the English language. In *Schoolmaster* (1570) he clearly shows his affinity with the *misomousoi* or ‘ poet haters’ of the time. Thomas Wilson’s ( c. 1525-81) *The Art of Rhetoric* ( 1553) can be regarded as the first modern treatise on English composition.

Sidney’s *An Apology For Poetry* is a class of its own, altogether different from these critics. It was first published posthumously in 1595 in two separate yet more or less identical editions by two printers. The one which was brought out by William Ponosby was called *The Defence of Poesie*. *An Apologie for Poetrie* is the title of the work brought out by Henry Olney. Sidney was greatly influenced by the Italian renaissance writers. We are to remember that before the Renaissance the critical vision was shrouded in darkness. Sidney took a bold step to emerge from this medieval darkness into light. He wrote the first treatise on literary theory using humanist concepts. One thing that we should remember about Sidney’s *Apology*; is that even though it is a brilliant work, it is more synthetic than original. In other words, most of the ideas that he conveys in this defense, have been said before by Aristotle, Horace and others. Yet what Sidney brings to it is an incredible polish. He has selected, adapted from many sources in order to arrive at his own conception of poetry.



In this unit we are going to learn:

- Sidney’s *Defence* and Gosson’s *Abuse*
- Sidney’s *Apology For Poetry*
- Sidney’s *View of the Antiquity and Universality of Poetry*
- Sidney’s *Definition of Poetry*
- *Poetry as Superior to History and Philosophy*
- *The Various Kinds of Poetry*
- *Four Chief Objections to Poetry*
- *Sidney’s Review of English Poetry and Drama*

nd Drama

- Sidney's View of Poetry.

## **1.2 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

The immediate cause of Sidney's writing the essay was Stephen Gosson's *The Schoole of Abuse* (1579), which was unauthorizedly dedicated, to Sidney and questioned the morality of poetry and other forms of literature. *Apology* was written in the sixteenth century renaissance literary climate that was concerned about aesthetic problems regarding the object and purpose of poetry itself. Thus unlike Thomas Lodge's *Defence of Poetry* (1580), Sidney's *Apology* is much more than a reply to Gosson. He proceeds to give an argument for the value of poetry and its social significance also.

Gosson was essentially guided or misguided by the spirit of sour Puritanism. He has described his work as 'a pleasant invective'; however the readers have an unpleasant experience while reading it. The general feeling is of coarseness, as the entire essay is full of claptrap expressions----'poets are the whetstones of wit' ..... 'that wit is dearly brought. Where honey and gall are mixed, it will be hard to sever the one from the other'. When Gosson wrote this essay he was just twenty-four, he wanted instant fame, instead he became infamous. He suffered

essentially from the Malvolio complex and spared none. His was a typical case of those 'who seek a praise by dispraising others'.

Let us refer to the following lines from Sidney, which clearly states the occasion of his work:

.....who ( I know not by what mischance) in these my not old years and idlest times, having slipped into the title of a poet, am provoked to say something unto you in the defence of that my unelected vocation, which if I handle with more good will than good reasons, bear with me....And yet I must say that, as I have just cause to make a pitiful defence of poor poetry, which from almost the highest estimation of learning is fallen to be the laughing-stock of children, so have I need to bring some more available proofs, since the former is by no man barred of his deserved credit, the silly latter hath had even the names of philosophers used to the defacing of it, with great danger of civil war among the Muses. (1-2)

One thing which we should put clearly in our mind is that Sidney's outlook is a moral one.. At a glance Sidney's aesthetic principle may appear to be Horation, however he transcends Horace's aim of teaching and delighting. He strongly emphasizes the ability of poetry to move men towards perfection. He takes *en route* to Plato and creates a Neo-Platonic ideal world for the poet. He advocates this ability of the poet to move men to more virtuous action. This essence of Sidney's theory places poetry on the same pedestal which was formerly ascribed to scriptures.

The full title of Gosson's work is: 'The School of Abuse, containing a pleasant invective against poets, Pipers, Players, Jesters and such like Caterpillars of a Commonwealth; setting up the Flag of Defiance to their mischievous exercise and overthrowing their Bulwarks by Profane Writers, Natural reason and common experience; a discourse as pleasant for Gentleman that favour learning, as profitable for all that will follow virtue'.

### **1.3 SIDNEY'S APOLOGY FOR POETRY**

Nature never set forth earth in so rich tapestry as divers poets have done; neither with pleasant rivers, fruitful trees, sweet smelling flowers, nor whatever else may make the too-much loved earth more lovely; her world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden ( 6).

Sidney in his *Apology* states that poetry alone transcends nature. Though he was 'provoked' by Gosson, (we have already noticed that in his own writings quoted above) Sidney's *Apology* is more than a work of criticism, it is a remarkable piece of literature. The essay restores our faith in poetry as well as in ourselves. He has not confined himself within narrow critical thoughts, rather his clarity and elegance makes him stand tall above others. One of the main tenets of sixteenth century Protestantism is that man is not virtuous and is incapable of doing any good to himself or to the society at large. Sidney's essay is reflective of the humanistic worldview. Thus he was much ahead of his times.

And that the poet hath that *idea* is manifest, by delivering them forth in such excellency as he hath imagined them. Which delivering forth also is not wholly imaginative, as we are wont to say by them that build castles in the air: but so far substantially it worketh.... (7).

Whereas the sixteenth century Protestantism thought otherwise Sidney reiterates his belief in humanity and substantiated his point by arguing that the poet's creativeness is the highest human faculty. .

...this purifying of wit, this enriching of memory, enabling of judgment, and enlarging of conceits, which commonly we call learning, under what name so ever it comes forth, or to what immediate end so ever it be directed, the final end is to lead and draw us to as high a perfection as our degenerate souls, made worse by their clayey lodgings, can be capable of" (140).

### **1.4 SIDNEY'S VIEW OF THE ANTIQUITY AND UNIVERSALITY OF POETRY**



When the right virtuous Edward Wotton and I were at the Emperors court together, we gave ourselves to learn horsemanship of John Pietro Pugliano, one that with great commendation had the place of an esquire in his stable. And he, according to the fertileness of the Italian wit, did not only afford us the demonstration of his practice, but sought to enrich our minds with the contemplations therein which he thought most precious.(1).

This is how Sidney begins his essay, on a rather curious note we would say. Before launching a defence of poetry, Sidney justified his stand by referring in a half-humorous manner to a treatise on horsemanship by Pietro Pugliano. If the art of horsemanship can deserve such an eloquent eulogy and vindication, surely poetry has better claims for eulogy and vindication. Sidney finds a just cause to plead a case for poetry since it has fallen from the highest estimation of learning to be 'the laughing stock of children.' The equerry was always busy blowing his own trumpet. From Pugliano Sidney learnt this trick of magnifying his own vocation as well as horsemanship. At first he is resolved to establish poetry as the mother of all knowledge. He is concerned with the antiquity and universality of poetry. He goes on to establish the fact that poetry is respected in all ages and in all countries, even in uncivilized countries.

Among the Romans a poet was called *vates*, which is as much as a diviner, forseer or prophet (4)...let us see how the Greeks named it and how they deemed of it. The Greeks called him a 'poet' which name hath, as the most excellent, gone through other languages. It cometh of this word, *poiein*, which is 'to make': wherein I know not whether by luck or wisdom, we Englishmen have met with the Greeks in calling him a maker: which name, how high and incomparable a title it is, I had rather were known by marking the scope of other sciences than by my partial allegation ( 5-6).

According to Sidney all other human arts are subordinate to nature; poetry alone transcends nature, since the poet is a maker. Shelley's *Defence of Poetry* is inspired by Sidney's *Apology For Poetry*. In order to have a better understanding we can refer to Shelley's comment in this context. He says "None deserves the name of Creator, but God and the poet". As God, the creator, creates his own universe, the poet too has his own world. To attack poetry is to attack the roots of culture, to attack poetry is to attack the universality of poetry itself.

### **1.5 SIDNEY'S DEFINITION OF POETRY**

Poesy therefore is an art of imitation, for so Aristotle termeth it in his word mimesis, that is to say, a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth----to speak metaphorically, a speaking picture----with this end, to teach and delight. (8).

In his definition of poetry he follows both Aristotle and Horace : ‘to teach and delight’. He gives emphasis to the didactic purpose of this Horatian notion that poetry must teach or delight, in order to encourage and inspire people to acquire knowledge and thus move out of barbarism. Poetry is an art of ‘imitation’ and its chief function is to teach and delight. Imitation does not mean mere copying or a reproduction of facts. It means a representing or transmuting of the real and actual, and sometimes creating something entirely new. In this context we should remember the significant phrase ‘speaking picture’. Both Plato as well as Aristotle has drawn parallel between poetry and painting. In *Ars Poetica* Horace mentions it as *ut picture poesis*. Taking the cue from Horace, Sidney speaks of poetry as the ‘speaking picture’.

Sidney then goes on to classify different kinds of poetry-----sacred poetry, philosophical or didactic poetry and the right kind of poetry. The poets who write sacred poetry, the teachers of religion and prophets are essentially theologians, hence they have their own limitations. The philosophical or didactic poets are restricted within their own boundaries as they are dependant for their material on external sources. He draws special attention to this third group of poets. The third group of poets are the ‘ real makers’, as Shelley says, ‘ the unacknowledged legislators of the world’.

Sidney makes poetry free from any kind of external limitations---like metrical patterns.

..it is not rhyming and versing that maketh a poet---no more than a large gown maketh an advocate (9).

Verse is the outer skin and not the flesh and blood of poetry. We should remember that verse is just an ornament and not essential to poetry.

We should remember that rhyme and metre are not essential for poetry, but they harmonize the language and help to the memory.

## **1.6 POETRY AS SUPERIOR TO HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY**

In the next part of his essay Sidney looks closely at the roles of philosopher as well as historian in relation to the poet. He argues that poetry is above both history and philosophy, as,

The philosopher therefore and the historian are they which would win the goal, the one by precept, the other by example. But both, not having both, do both halt.....Now doth the peerless poet perform both: for whatsoever the philosopher saith should be done, he giveth a



perfect picture of it in some one by whom he presupposeth it was done, so as he couplet the general notion with the particular example. (13).

In other words, Poetry is superior to the other two in teaching the essential human virtues. Even if we consider poetry as an art or craft, following Aristotle's definition of poetry, it is superior to all. Sidney believes that poetry can move men to better, more virtuous individuals, rather than simply teaching. In the promotion of virtue, both philosophy and history play their individual parts. Philosophy deals with its theoretical aspects and teaches virtue by precept whereas history teaches practical virtue by drawing concrete examples from life. But poetry combines both precepts and practical examples. Philosophy, being based on abstractions, cannot properly guide the youth. On the other hand, the historian is tied to empirical facts. His example draws no necessary consequence. Poetry gives perfect pictures of virtue which are far more effective than the mere definitions of philosophy. It also gives imaginary examples which are more instructive than the real examples of history. The reward of virtue and the punishment of vice is more clearly shown in Poetry than in History. Poetry is superior to Philosophy in the sense that it has the power to move and achieve virtuous action. It presents moral lessons in a very attractive form. Things which in themselves are horrible as cruel battles, unnatural monsters, are made pleasant in poetic imitation. Poet is, therefore, the monarch of all sciences.

Poetry is superior to philosophy: the poet gives a perfect picture. The poet is the right philosopher. Poetry is more philosophical and superior to history.

## **1.7 THE VARIOUS KINDS OF POETRY**

Sidney now focuses his attention to several kinds of poetry. Pastoral poetry, elegiac poetry and satiric poetry, according to Sidney are all wholesome. The pastoral poetry treats of

the beauty of the simple life, and sometimes, of the miseries of the common people under Lords and nobles. Elegiac poetry deals with the weakness of mankind and wretchedness of the world. It evokes pity. Satiric poetry laughs at folly, and iambic poetry tries to unmask villainy. He lays undue stress on the moral aspects of comedy. Comedy is an imitation of the common errors of our life presented in a ridiculous manner. It helps men keeping away from such errors. Tragedy, is replete with 'sweet violence' and it makes us remain grounded when we realize that life is full of uncertainties. The lyric which gives moral precepts and soars to the heavens in singing the praises of the God, can never be displeasing. Nor can the epic or heroic poetry be disliked because it inculcates virtue to the highest degree by portraying heroic and moral goodness in the most effective manner. Sidney asserts that the heroical is 'not only a kind, but the best and most accomplished kind of poetry.'

### **1.8 FOUR CHIEF OBJECTIONS TO POETRY**

According to Sidney, Plato was not against poetry in general but he l

After the general discussion on poetry, Sidney now argues against specific critiques of poetry. First---poetry is useless---a waste of time, second---poetry is deceptive the mother of all lies, third---poetry is immoral---the nurse of abuse, fourth---Plato would have none of it and so banished poets from his republic. In answer to the first charge, Sidney argues that to call poetry useless is begging the question itself.

**FOUR CHIEF OBJECTIONS TO POETRY:**

1. Its uselessness
2. Its falsehood
3. Its corrupting effect
4. Plato's condemnation of poetry.

Now let us put it in simple words---the statement---that it is by denouncing the mere prerequisite for the accusation---a poet intends to state the ( or a) truth, is itself invalid. Poetry is not the falsest art, it is the truest form of art, as it does not actually pretend to factual truth. The Astronomer, the Geometrician, the historian, and others, all make false statements .But while a poet is not a liar, the immorality of poetry is actually its abuse. So what he presents is not fact but fiction embodying truth of an ideal kind. If rightly used, poetry does most good. In answer to the effeminizing effect, Sidney says that it is the stock abuse against all learning. Poetry alone has the ability to rouse man to virtuous action. The fourth and last accusation against poetry is perhaps the greatest treason according to Sidney. He thinks Plato was against the wrong opinions of the gods and atheism which poetry in ancient times talked of. According to Sidney, Plato was not against poetry in general but he leveled his charges against a particular kind of poetry which would create a harmful effect on human minds and society in general. Plato had warned against the abuse of poetry as he with all reverence described the poet in *Ion* as

A light and winged and holy thing. ( *Ion* ,157).

So as Plato, banishing the abuse, not the thing, not banishing it, but giving due honour unto it, shall be our patron and not our adversary. (36).

### **1.9 SIDNEY'S REVIEW OF ENGLISH POETRY AND DRAMA**

Sidney now reviews the pathetic state of poetry in England. He uses the term poetry in its original Greek sense, which denotes not only poetry but all sorts of imaginative literature like drama. He sadly recounts England's step motherly attitude towards the poets of his time who unfortunately are ranked with the mountebanks. He strikes at the root cause of this poetical decadence---the tendency of the poets to write uninspired writing---*invita Minerva*. He repeats the old tagline---A poet is born and not made:

Poesy must not be drawn by the ears; it must be gently led, or rather it must lead ( 39).

A threesome combination of art, imitation and exercise goes on to make poetry successful. According to Sidney, since Chaucer there are few good poems in England. He mentions Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, but sadly leaves out his magnum opus, *The Canterbury Tales*. He mentions Sackville, Surrey and Spenser. Strangely, strangely he ignores Langland's *Piers Plowman* or Tottel's *Miscellany*.

However this doomed state of drama is somehow redeemed by *Gorboduc* though this play lacks the unities of time and place. Sidney prescribes that a 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 tragical convenience. Furthermore Sidney analyses that tragedy is not always maintained in a well-raised admiration (42).

Comedy on the other hand degenerates into something farcical or immoral. Often laughter in comedy is confused with pleasure. Sidney stresses that comedy should aim at delightful teaching and not vulgar amusement.

Neither is he hopeful about English lyric poetry which has undergone degeneration and has become tame and artificial during this age. The affected eloquence has turned too fashionable. The metaphors are too farfetched. In the next part of the essay he praises the English language as it is the most suitable for poetry. It is adaptable both to ancient and modern systems of versification. Sidney's bold view of English language has successfully paved its way for future development. He comes to a closure with a peroration wherein he sums up the claims of poetry. All the charges laid against it are false and baseless. He ends with a request that poetry should never ever be degraded. Moreover the contemporary poets were inferior men with mercenary motives. They lacked the genuine love for poetry. They also lacked the training and practice that is necessary to write successful poetry. He blesses people who love poetry and threatens people who are allergic to poetry in general. He wrote the essay in a light hearted manner. He gives an adequate answer to the puritan approach of his age. The end too is humorous enough to make us fall in love with poetry once more and behold Sidney as the first critic!

#### **LET US SUM UP:**

- Sidney's *Apology For Poetry* is more than a work of criticism, it is a work of literature.
- Poetry is the mother of all knowledge.
- Poetry alone transcends nature.
- Plato is not against poetry, he warned against the abuse of poetry.

#### **QUESTIONS:**

**Answer the following questions: (15 marks).**

1. Discuss *An Apology for Poetrie* as a typical specimen of Renaissance criticism.
2. Discuss Sidney's contribution as a critic. Can he be called the father of English criticism?
3. How did Sidney react to Stephen Gosson's *School of Abuse*? Why was it necessary for Sidney to defend poetry?
4. Discuss the limitations of Sidney's criticism.
5. Write an essay on Sidney's view of poetry. What is the most important function of poetry? Is Sidney's view original?
6. Write an essay on Sidney the 'classicist'. Do you detect any 'romantic traits' in him?
7. Sidney is indebted to Greek and Latin critics. Discuss.
8. What was the impact of Italian criticism on Sidney?

9. Discuss Sidney's arguments for the superiority of poetry to history and philosophy.
10. Is verse essential to poetry? Discuss Sidney's standpoint.

**Answer the following questions: (7 marks).**

1. What are the principal subdivisions of poetry postulated by Sidney?
2. How does Sidney refute the major objections leveled against poetry in his own day?
3. Discuss Sidney's view regarding the dramatic unities. Comment on Sidney's review of tragicomedy.
4. Analyse Sidney's review of English poetical literature.
5. Comment on Sidney's review of English dramatic literature.
6. Enumerate Sidney's view of the true nature of tragedy.
7. Enumerate Sidney's view of the state of English tragedy in his time.
8. What are the observations of Sidney on the true nature of comedy?
9. Do you agree with Sidney's view about the state of English comedy in his time?
10. Summarise Sidney's observations on the diction of English poetry.

**Answer the following questions (4 marks).**

1. Explain. "Nature never set forth the earth in so rich tapestry divers poets have done...Her world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden".
2. "Poesy therefore is an art of imitation.....with this end, to teach and delight." Is poetry an art of imitation?
- 3 ".....his [ the historian's] example draweth no necessary consequence." Explain.
4. Examine "...the Comedy is an imitation of the common errors of our life".
5. Explain. "...the poet only bringeth his own stuff, and doth not learn a conceit out of a matter, but maketh matter for a conceit."
6. Do you agree with Sidney's view that ".....Now for the poet, he nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth."
7. "...our erected wit maketh us know what perfection is, and yet our infected will keepeth us from reaching unto it." How does Sidney define wit?
8. Comment. "...poesy must not be drawn by the ears; it must be gently led, or rather it must lead."
9. What is Sidney's view about the English language?

10. Explain. “.....where the whole tract of a comedy should be full of delight, as the tragedy should be still maintained in a well-raised admiration.”

**MULTIMEDIA LINKS TO EXPLAIN THE TEXT:**

Sources:

- <http://www.enotes.com/topics/defence-poesie>
- <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/philip-sidney>
- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/An\\_Apology\\_for\\_Poetry](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/An_Apology_for_Poetry)
- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philip\\_Sidney](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philip_Sidney)





Philip Sidney in his *Apology for Poetry* reacts against the attacks made on poetry by the puritan, Stephen Gosson. To, Sidney, poetry is an art of imitation for specific purpose, it is imitated to teach and delight. According to him, poetry is simply a superior means of communication and its value depends on what is communicated.