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15.0 OBJECTIVES

- The unit aims to examine the arguments stated by Sidney concisely and transparently.
- This unit will straightforwardly present author's claims about poetry.
- The unit will also try to explain the seminal text "An Apology for Poetry", which is considered one of the earliest works in English criticism in a lucid manner.
- Sidney's essay is divided into sections that should help the students understand the essay comprehensibly.
- Sidney is well-versed in various languages; his essay contains Latin, Greek and French phrases, which will be presented in a simplified manner in the present unit.

15.1 BACKGROUND

Stephen Gosson wrote "The School of Abuse" in 1579. The full title 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 Gentlemen that favour learning, as profitable for all that will follow virtue". Gosson led a scathing attack on the poets, the art of poetry and the stage, claiming that poets are corruptive elements in society.

Even though Gosson was not acquainted with Sidney, he dedicated his invective 'to the right noble Gentleman, Master Philip Sidney, Esquire'. Sidney's "An Apology for Poetry" is a response to the accusations levied by Gosson in his work. Sidney glorifies poetry as an excellent form which has profound social significance. What is interesting about "An Apology for Poetry" is that Sidney nowhere mentions the name of Gosson or his work in his essay; however, there are passages which appear to be written with Gosson's book in mind.

15.2 INTRODUCTION

Sir Philip Sidney's "An Apology for Poetry," which is also known as "The Defence of Poesy", has rightly been described as 'arguably the best single critical treatise of the whole European Renaissance'. W. K. Wimsatt wrote, "Sidney was provoked in part by a harsh attack on poetry from one of the self-appointed moral censors of the age. However, he undertook to defend poetry on terms which we will readily understand to be wrong: 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."

Sidney's "An Apology for Poetry" is a reader-friendly book. It may even be described as a companionable book. No less than an essayist, a critic must know how to write. That is indeed the first essential. "An Apology for Poetry" is a work that compels the reader to keep on returning for perpetual refreshment. Modern readers of Sidney would have been less inhibited had they paid sufficient attention to the fact that "An Apology for Poetry" was written to meet a particular attack. It is only natural that Sidney's treatment of his subject is influenced by the character of the attack he is encountering.

15.3 SIDNEY'S VIEWS ON THE ANTIQUITY AND UNIVERSALITY OF POETRY

Sidney begins his essay more curiously than significantly. The opening of "An Apology for Poetry" refers to an equerry in the Viennese imperial establishment who was always magnifying his office. From him, Sidney learnt this trick as well as horsemanship. Since the defence of poetry has been thrust upon him, Sidney is resolved to magnify his office. This humorous and arresting beginning at once sets the tone of the whole work.

The first section of Sidney's essay, in which he is concerned with the antiquity and universality of poetry, establishes poetry as the mother of all knowledge-the first light-giver to ignorance. Poetry has ever had an honoured position not only in Greece but also in Turkey, America, Ireland and Wales. The Latin word 'vates', meaning 'prophet', was the name the Romans gave a poet with the god-given power of seeing into the life of things. The Greek name 'poetes' is remarkably appropriate, and the good old word 'maker' is an exact analogue. Naturally, nothing can be higher in the hierarchy of human understanding than this faculty of 'making'.

All other human arts are subordinate to nature; poetry alone transcends nature since the poet is a 'creator'. Poetry transforms all things into loveliness. Sidney, taking his cue from Plotinus and Scaliger, is following a line of thought which finds its culmination in Shelley's "Defence of Poetry", which is inspired in part by Sidney's "An Apology for Poetry" and described by W.B. Yeats as "the most profound essay on the foundation of poetry in English". Poetry does not idealise nature; it goes higher still. Poetry idealises humanity, as we can all see in the Aeneas, the Cyrus, the Orlando, the Pylades, and the Theagenes created by poetic imagination. Sidney hastens to add that no irreverence to God is meant when the word 'creator' concerns the poet. Instead, our reverence for God is heightened when we realise the nature of human perfection and appreciate the significance of the Biblical expression about a man being made in God's image.

15.4 DEFINITIONS OF POETRY

The next part of "An Apology for Poetry" concerns poetry's scope. Sidney defines poetry as, "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." Sidney goes on to give a further definition of poetry as, "it is that feigning notable images of virtues, vices, or what else, with that delightful teaching, which must be the right describing note to know a poet by".

Sidney is more or less traditional in his classification of poetry. There are three general kinds: sacred poetry (oldest, highest and holiest), philosophical or didactic poetry (next in order, both of time and dignity), and poetry, in the strict sense of the term, where we have an imaginative treatment of life ('right' poetry). The poets who wrote the first kind of poetry are restricted by their theology. The second group of poets are also circumscribed in so far as they have to depend for their material on external sources such as the sciences. The third group of poets are the real 'makers' since they can give free rein to the faculty of imagination.

Sidney emphatically states, "it is not rhyming and versing that maketh a poet-no more than a long gown maketh an advocate". Verse, to Sidney, is but "an ornament and no cause to poetry". Poetry may also be classified according to metrical patterns, but this is to impose a meaningless limitation to poetry which even an ancient critic like Aristotle could hardly approve of. Sidney regarded verse as adventitious and not essential to poetry, and in this, he was followed by Milton, Wordsworth and Shelley. So the verse is nothing more than the outer clothing of poetry. Poetry need not necessarily be written in a metrical language.

15.5 POETRY SUPERIOR TO HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY

Of the conventional branches of learning, Sidney thinks only four deserve special credit as contributors to the mistress-knowledge: theology, law, philosophy and history. (The natural sciences, Sidney has pointed out earlier, do not come into the picture as they are not directly related to the study of humanity.) Sidney, however, will discuss neither theology nor law since theology's primary concern is divine knowledge, and law encourages virtue only in a purely negative way.

At the outset, Sidney shows how philosophy and history claim to be the best teacher of virtue. Haunted with an obsession for definition and categorisation, smug and hypocritical philosophers flaunt an analytic approach. They not only attempt to teach what virtue is but also bring out its essence and exhibit its causes and effects. They also expose the arch-enemy of virtue, vice, which has to be destroyed root and branch, and passion, the clumsy servant of virtue, which has to be conquered once and for all. They determine the genus and species of virtue and its specific results. They also show how the frontier of virtue is extended from a man's personal life to his relation to his family and society

Nevertheless, in an equally ironic vein, Sidney points out that history claims to be superior to philosophy. Though its principal basis is second-hand sources and hearsay, history prides itself upon its authenticity. In Cicero's eloquent phrasing, it is supposed to be 'the evidence of time, the light of truth, the life of memory, the directress of life, the herald of

antiquity'. While the philosophy approach is theoretical, the historian asserts that the approach of history is pre-eminently practical. Far from teaching by precept or abstract argument, history has recourse to concrete examples from life that reveal what virtue is.

In order to establish his claim of the supremacy of poetry, Sidney examines the relation of poetry to philosophy and history reasonably closely. Poetry is superior to both since it supplies the other two deficiencies. Poetry can combine precepts with examples. It is a 'perfect picture' that the 'peerless poet' gives us. The philosopher can give only 'a wordish description'. As illustrations of the perfect pictures of poetry, mention may be made of old Anchises speaking amid Troy's flames and Ulysses in the fullness of all Calypso's delights bewailing his absence from bleak Ithaca.

Poetry is superior to history since poetry is more philosophical and studiously serious. Sidney fully realises the nature of imaginative truth as distinct from historical truth. He also realises that the former predominates over the latter. The historian prides himself upon the fact that history shows virtue exalted and vice punished. However, this is far better shown by poetry, as the phrase 'poetic justice' itself bears out. Since 'moving is of a higher degree than teaching' and, according to Aristotle, praxis (action), not gnosis (knowledge), is the end of human activities, poetry is superior to its rivals. As an incentive to virtuous action, philosophy is far inferior to poetry. Poetry can present moral lessons in a beautiful form. Remarkable, indeed, is the sweet seductiveness of p since it appeals to old and young alike. Poetical imitation is delightful, and the persuasive power of poetry is illustrated in the famous parables of Menenius Agrippa and Nathan. The poet knows how to allure his readers; 'and with a tale forsooth he cometh unto you, with a tale which holdeth children from play; and old men from the chimney-corner'. This is how Sidney concludes that "of all sciences... is our poet the monarch" and "setteth the laurel crown upon the poet as victorious, not only of the historian, but over the philosopher."

15.6 THE VARIOUS KINDS OF POETRY

In the next part of the essay, Sidney examines several kinds of poetry. First, Sidney differentiates poetry into Pastoral poetry, Elegiac poetry, Iambic poetry, Satiric poetry, Comedy, Tragedy, Lyric poetry and Epic or Heroic poetry. Sidney then addresses all the poet-haters and why they criticise all the various above kinds of poetry. Finally, Sidney has recourse to a homely but devastating analogy when he compares them to 'some good women, who often are sick, but in faith, they cannot tell where'. Since moral instruction is Sidney's only criterion for judging the excellence of a literary type, his examination is limited in scope.

15.7 FOUR OBJECTIONS TO POETRY

Sidney now would like to meet the specific objections raised against poetry. There are several idle fault-finders. Sidney gently reminds them that "scoffing cometh not of wisdom". Some people object to the employment of rhyming and versing in poetry. However, how can one blame verse when it polishes and beautifies the blessing of speech more than anything else and knits up the memory? The poet-haters have made four necessary imputations:

1. Poetry is useless-a waste of time
2. Poetry is deceptive-the mother of lies
3. Poetry is immoral-the nurse of abuse
4. Plato would have none of it and banished poets from his republic.

Sidney gallantly defends poetry against the first charge and rejects it. Sidney can never bring himself to believe that a more fruitful knowledge has sprung out of the earth. He dismisses the second charge as based on ambiguity and meets it by advancing the paradox that "of all writers under the sun the poet is the least liar". As the poet is concerned not with ascertained facts but with airy nothings, he labours not "to tell you what is or is not, but what should or should not be". He "nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth". Who is there so foolish as to mistake the poet's "local habitation and a name" for reality?

The third charge is a weightier one-that poetry corrupts men and has an effeminising effect on the readers. Poetry, its detractors say, infects us with "many pestilent desires"; comedies, lyrics, elegies and heroic poems are all stained with the theme of love and abound in amorous conceits; Sidney humorously appeals to Cupid himself in the hope of finding in this God, who is ever on the offensive, the power of self-defence. Sidney points out that it is unwise to censure the theme of love as such since the gift of discerning beauty is a noble difference of man. Even then, he is ready to concede, for argument's sake, that some poets might have treated love in an ignoble or vicious manner. They might have been vain and vulgar as well. However, granted all this, we have to admit that the fault is not something inherent in poetry; instead, it is a case of man's misuse of poetry: "... not... that poetry abuseth man's wit, but that man's wit abuseth poetry".

The fourth and last objection is perhaps the greatest treason, or that is how Sidney would like to look at it. It is beyond his comprehension how the outstanding and 'most poetical' philosopher can 'defile the fountain out of which his flowing streams have proceeded'. First, philosophers extracted their wisdom from 'the sweet mysteries of poetry' and reduced it to a formulary. Then they, 'like ungrateful prentices, were not content to set up shops for themselves, but sought by all means to discredit their masters'. Moreover, poets have often been held in higher esteem than

philosophers and have shown more persuasive power. As for the question of morals, every reader can see that the author of *Phaedrus*, *Symposium* and *Republic* has not exactly been a model of virtue. Even then, Sidney would not consider Plato an enemy of poetry merely because he was a philosopher. Plato's objection, thinks Sidney, was levelled against the wrong opinions of the Gods and atheism which poetry in ancient times had helped develop. Plato was opposed not to poetry in general but to a particular kind of poetry which would show Gods in a licentious manner. So, Plato cautioned men not against poetry but against its abuse. Then again, Plato revealed the divine origin of the poet's inspiration when he described the poet as 'a light and winged and holy thing'. So, Plato, Sidney declares on behalf of all lovers of poetry, 'shall be our patron and not our adversary'.

15.8 REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH POETRY AND DRAMA

While reviewing the state of poetry in England, it is a gloomy survey; Sidney regrets that in his time, England was a stepmother to poets, who are ranked with mountebanks. The actual cause of England's poetical decadence is the attempt at uninspired writing. After all, poets are born rather than made: "... poesy must not be drawn by the ears; it must be gently led, or rather it must lead." This does not mean that there is no need for any training.

Few good poems have been produced in England since Chaucer, says Sidney, and he specifies these poems. Praise is bestowed on Chaucer, Sackville, Surrey and Spenser. It is a pity that Sidney mentions only Chaucer's "*Troilus and Criseyde*" and takes no notice of his magnum opus, "*The Canterbury Tales*", even though Sidney can pay Chaucer the most glowing tribute: "Of whom, truly, I know not whether to marvel more, either that he in that misty time could see so clearly, or that we in this clear age walk so stumblingly after him." Furthermore, as for Sidney's view of the works of most other writers, they have this in common with the tale that our life-they are full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.

Unfortunately, Sidney emphasises the defects of English drama rather than its merits. The English play seems to him to be all wretched. An exception is made in the case of *Gorboduc*, but even this play appears to be only partially satisfactory, being faulty in the matter of the 'unities' of time and place. Sidney can never forgive the English dramatists for their flagrant violation of these unities. The practice of mixing tragic and comic elements seems equally absurd to Sidney. It is foolish to mingle kings and clowns or to match hornpipes and funerals. Sidney is unhappy that tragedy is not always 'maintained in a well-raised admiration' and

comedy, the right end of which is delightful teaching often degenerates in England into something farcical or immoral.

According to Sidney, the English lyrics are most artificial and imitative. The diction of the English poets is exceptionally affected. Their alliterations and other superfine tricks can only spoil everything. The prose style also is severely criticised by Sidney. Nevertheless, he shows genuine nationalistic fervour and sound philological sense when he praises the English language as especially suitable for poetry. According to him, English is an analytic language free from grammatical complexities. The bilingual vocabulary, the expressiveness, the terseness, compound words-everything contributes to the richness of the English language. English, moreover, is fit for both systems of versification: the classical (which depends on the length of the vowels in the syllables) and the modern (which depends on the number of syllables and the nature of the accents). In this respect, English is the best of the modern European languages.

Sidney concludes his work with a peroration in which he sums up the claims of poetry to our veneration. Then, humorously, he assures the lovers of the poetry of his blessing and threatens those who are allergic to poetry with a curse. Finally, though Sidney had the most serious intentions, he began his "An Apology for Poetry" in a light-hearted vein. The conclusion is written in the same delightful manner.

15.9 KEYWORDS

Antiquity	the ancient past
Bulwarks	a defensive wall
Equerry	an officer of the household of a prince or noble who had charge over the stables.
Hearsay	things you have heard another person or other people say, which may or may not be true, gossip
Licentious	showing a complete lack of moral discipline and standards,
Peroration	the concluding part of a speech, typically intended to inspire enthusiasm in the audience
Smug	too pleased with oneself
Theology	the study of religion
Treatise	a long formal book, article or piece of writing dealing with a particular subject
Universality	the quality of involving or being shared by all people or things in the world or in a particular group

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15.10 LET US SUM UP

Philip Sidney, in his essay, tried to defend poetry against several accusations that were levied against it. Sidney began by establishing the universality of poetry and then defined poetry. His definitions of poetry are based on Aristotle's definition of poetry, where Aristotle considers poetry an imitation. Sidney claims that poetry is superior to history, philosophy and even law. Furthermore, poetry is only subservient to nature. First, Sidney explains the various kinds of poetry, then defends poetry against the four main accusations. His defence against the four main accusations forms the central part of the essay. Sidney concludes his essay by overviewing the contemporary scene of English poetry and drama.

15.11 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Choose the correct option:

1) Sir Philip Sidney says, "Poetry is an art of imitation." He gets this idea from _____

- a) Horace b) Longinus c) Aristotle d) Plato

2) Sidney in his work An Apology for Poetry cites Aristotle who said that the goal of teaching is not gnosis but praxis. What do 'gnosis' and 'praxis' mean here?

- a) truth and action b) knowledge and action
c) folly and knowledge d) thought and imitation

3) Sidney in his work An Apology for Poetry uses the Greek term 'misomousaioi' to mean _____

- a) "poet-lovers" b) "poet-haters" c) "philosophers" d) "historians"

4) Sidney in his work An Apology for Poetry says that we should _____ to crown poets.

- a) "build more kingdoms" b) "read more classics"
c) "plant more laurels" d) "act more noble"

5) Sidney in his work An Apology for Poetry praises _____, who "in the misty time could see so clearly."

- a) Aristotle b) Earl of Surrey c) Chaucer d) Spencer

ANSWER IN BRIEF:

1) What is the nature and function of poetry according to Sidney?

2) How is poetry superior to philosophy and history?

3) How has Sidney established that poetry is antique and universal in nature?

4) What, according to Sidney, is the relationship between pleasure and learning?

5) What is the essence of Sidney's defence against poetry?

Write a detailed note on the following questions:

1) What was Sidney's approach on Plato's banishment of poets from his ideal republic?

2) What should be the qualities of a tragedy according to Sidney?

3) Does "rhyming and versing" make a poet, according to Sidney?

Answers:

1) – C 2) – B 3) – B 4) – C 5) – C

15.12 BOOKS SUGGESTED

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