

# **Biographia Literaria**

## **- by S. T. Coleridge**

Prof. Shrikant N. Puri

Head, Dept. of English

Lokmanya Mahavidyalaya, Warora

# The Poet-Critic

- Born in 1772; died in 1834
- Interest in literature (Arabian Nights)
- Once ran away from home, spent night beside a river
- Caught cough, ill health
- Addicted to drugs
- Married with sister-in-law of Southey
- Supernatural elements (Christabel, Kubla Khan, Ancient Mariner)

# Biographia Literaria (1817)

- Autobiography of literary career since 1800 (2<sup>nd</sup> ed of 'Preface')
- 'Preface' to "Lyrical Ballads" is 'half a child of my (Coleridge's) brain'
- But he disagrees with some of the theories in 'Preface'
- 'It is middle-aged man disagreeing with his youth' – a critic
- Fancy and Imagination
- Willing Suspension of Disbelief

# Parts

- Chapters: I to XIII = Philosophical views on poetry
- Chapters: XIV to XXII = Critique of Wordsworth
- Chapters: XXIII & XXIV = Conclusion

# Chapter - IV

- How Coleridge acquainted with Wordsworth at Cambridge in 1795
- How their poetry was criticized / welcomed by the 'reviewers'
- Reference to "fancy and imagination" as two different things; not synonyms
- Fancy came from Latin word 'Phantasia'
- Imagination from Latin word 'Imaginatio'
- Ex. Milton's mind is highly imaginative; Cowley is curiously fanciful.

# Chapter – XIII

## Sense

- Perception of objects through senses- esp. eye & ear
- Sense is **passive**

## Mind

- Mind is **active** and more **lively**
- Half-creator and half-perceiver of objects
- **Imagination is the faculty of mind**

❖ **Imagination is further divided into Primary and Secondary**

# Fancy

- Works upon fixed and definite objects of external nature
- Remembers things without distortion
- Low /no respect
- Can mix up memory, but just like a mechanical mixture
- Only vivid pictures of objects in memory
- Not a Creative power
- Mechanical process
- Like drapery (dress) of poetic genius

# Chapter – XIII (last two paragraphs)

- Fancy and Imagination
- Imagination: Faculty of mind
- Primary Imagination: common to all sane & healthy human beings
- Helps to perceive objects in nature & remember them without change
- Involuntary (uncontrolled) & unconscious act of mind
- Perception of objects as its impression on mind
- Chemical compound
- Less active than Secondary I.



## Secondary Imagination:

- Creative power possessed only by Artists and Poets
- ‘Echo’ of primary imagination (s. i. follows p. i.)
- Difference betn. P.I. & S.I. is of degree; not of kind
- Secondary I. works on material supplied by P. i.
- Makes conscious use of powers of primary imagi..
- In it, objects of memory are dissolved, destroyed, broken & melted in order to create new forms

# Secondary Imagination

- Brings unity & order in diverse, confused impressions (fuses between internal with external; subjective with objective; mind with nature; spiritual with material/ physical)
- Synthesizes/ fuses – various faculties of soul (perception, intellect, will, emotion)
- Chemical compound (once mixed, cannot be separated/ synthetic process)
- More active / creative than Primary I.
- ‘It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates in order to re-create’
- Reveals the beautiful and permanent forms of nature

# Examples

- **Fancy: Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis***

“Full gently now she takes him by the hand  
A lily prisoned in a goal of snow  
So white a friend engirds so white a foe.

- **Imagination (Secondary): Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis***

“Look! How a bright star shooteth from the sky  
So glides he in the night from Venus' eye.

## **Fancy**

- **Light & playful**
- **Present in everyone – Scientists, artists**
- **Plays on definite, static & fixed images without modifying/ changing them**
- **Like an ordinary memory**
- **Only vivid pictures of objects in memory**
- **Not a Creative power**
- **Mechanical process**
- **Like drapery (dress) of poetic genius**
- **Less honorable/inferior term**

## **Imagination**

- **Grave & serious**
- **Only in artists /poets**
- **Changes, modifies, breaks, dissolves & unites objects of memory to create new things**
- **More than memory**
- **Creative power**
- **Chemical compound**
- **Like soul of poetic genius**
- **Honorable / superior term**

# Chapter - XIV

- Representation of objects in nature – **subject** of poetry
- **Wordsworth**: familiar things seem unfamiliar
- **Coleridge**: unfamiliar things seem familiar
- **‘Willing Suspension of Disbelief’** (while reading a poem or watching a play) to justify his poems
- **Praises Wordsworth** for his simple language / diction and subjects
- Critics of Wordsworth are false; they don’t have single opinion; debate goes on even after 15 years
- Day by day, readers of Wordsworth are increasing
- But, Wordsworth contradicts in the theories and practice; sometimes confusing & not clear

## Poem

- Metre, rhyme
- Helps to memorize
- Aim – pleasure first; teaching secondary
- The best words in their best order.
- Eg. Thirty days has September  
...

## Prose

- No metre, rhyme
- Not helpful to memorize
- Aim – truth, moral teaching; pleasure may be secondary
- Words in their best order.
- Eg. Bacon

- Difference is not in matter/ subject; but in the combination / composition of words
- Against Wordsworth (no essential difference between prose and poetry)
- A poem is that species of composition which is opposed to works of science by proposing for its immediate object pleasure, not truth

# Objection to Wordsworth's Language

- 1. Must be diff. between common language and selected language for poetry**
- 2. If metre (special order of words) is used: this metrical language is bound to differ from prose**
- 3. Metre and Diction both are artificial. So either both be used (or both be avoided). Both are good for poetry**
- 4. 'real' means what? Language changes man to man, region to region**
- 5. Best part of language is not derived from nature, but from thought and reflective acts of mind.**

# Poem ≠ Poetry

## Poem

- The poem cannot be poetry
- Anything written in metre & rhyme

## Poetry

- Some parts of a poem may be poetry
- Prose of Plato, Bible have poetry
- Something sublime

❖ Finally, good sense is the body of poetic genius, fancy its drapery, . . . **Imagination the soul** that is everywhere, and in each; and forms all into one graceful and intelligent whole.