

M.A - (English)

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C.C - 6

Date _____
Page _____
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Coleridge : As a Critic

Coleridge is one of the greatest critic of English literature. He is regarded by many scholars to be the best English critic, and one of the best critics in Europe. Saintsbury praises him a lot and places him in line of Aristotle and Longinus. He eliminates one after another of possible contenders for the title of the greatest critic and concludes: "So then, there abide these three, Aristotle, Longinus and Coleridge." The great critic R.A. Scott. James admires him for his union of heart and head. Cazamia observes: "No one before him in England had brought such mental breadth to the discussion of aesthetic values."

Coleridge was the greatest exponent of English romantic criticism. His fame as a critic rests on his two monumental works - 'Biographia Literaria' and Lectures on Shakespeare. The first is an explanation and criticism of Wordsworth's theory of poetry, and

The second is the plea for the avoidance of arbitrary rules which for two centuries had stood in the way of literary criticism of Shakespeare in order to study the works themselves. As Lectures on Shakespeare were never prepared for publication by Coleridge himself, they lack the finish of works properly prepared for publication. Apart from it, other notable critical writings are: The Friend, The Table Talk, his contributions to Southey's Omniana, his 'Letters' his the posthumous 'Anima Poetae'. However the most important is Biographia Literaria.

Coleridge differs from almost all the English critics before him in his interest. No English critic before Dryden had much concerned himself with the question of the poetic process, and Dryden's interest had been no better than a passing one, based on his acquaintance with Hobbesian psychology. The aim of Coleridge as a critic is not so much analysis of a finished product but the finding out of a theoretical certainty. He wanted "to reduce criticism to a system by the deduction of causes from principles involved in our faculties". Again he says in Biographia Literaria that his aim is "to establish the principle writing rather than to furnish rules how to pass judgement on what has been written by others." For Coleridge, only a theory of poetic creation matters: he analyses, not so much poems as they exist, but

the creative act that makes them what they are. The Neo-Classical critics judged on the basis of fixed rules, they were either legislative or judicial, or were carried away by their prejudices. Coleridge does not judge on the basis of any rules. He does not pass any judgement, but gives his responses and reactions to a work of art. His criticism is impressionistic, romantic, a new kind of criticism, criticism which dealt a knock out blow to neo-classic criticism and which continued in vogue more or less ever since.

Coleridge is the first English critic to base his literary criticism on philosophical principles. While critics before him had been content to turn a poem inside out and to discourse on its excellences and defects, he busied himself with the basic question of how it came to be there at all. He was more interested in the creative process that made it what it was than in the finished product. Coleridge's greatest and most original contribution to literary criticism is his theory of imagination. He is the first critic to differentiate between imagination and fancy, the first literary critic to distinguish between primary and secondary imagination. Through his theory of imagination he revolutionised the concept of artistic imitation. His views on metre and rhyme is another contribution to literary theory. He showed that metre and rhyme are not merely pleasure

super added, not mere decoration but essential to that pleasure which is the true poetic pleasure. This demonstration of the organic wholeness of a poem is one of his major contributions to literary theory.

Some of the great men criticize Coleridge for too philosophical; and not easy to understand. Victorians, in general, could not appreciate him and his appeal was confined to the few. To Lucas, Coleridge's statements about imagination are "obscure and contorted," his classifications barren, his theories windy, cloudy, mysterious. Allen Tate thinks that Coleridge has bequeathed to later generations "fatal legacy" of indecision. But these demerits do not belittle his greatness. Today Coleridge occupies a prestigious place among great English critics.