

M.A (English)

Semester - II

Paper - C.C-7

Topic :- Horace and Ars Poetica

"Ars Poetica", or "The Art of Poetry" is a poem written by Horace in c. 19 B.C. Horace lived in the glorious Augustan era, which under the reign of Caesar Octavian Augustus, attained the heights of Roman civilization and culture. It was an age of national glorification, peace and prosperity and witnessed an all round development in art and literature.

→ It was an age of literary developments also. A number of literary persons specially Virgil and Horace immortalised the Augustan age by their works. In poetry Virgil stole a march over Horace, but Horace was a true representative of the age as he was not only a poet of the first rank, but he was also a critic.

→ Life of Horace :- Horace was born on 8th December 65 B.C at Venusia in Italy. He was the son of a freedman who was ambitious enough to send his son to Rome for education. Later in life he joined

the army of Brutus who came there to recruit for the republican cause. It was his poverty which goaded him to compose poetry. Virgil and Varius, who were attracted by his poetry, introduced him to Maecenas, the great patron of art and literature. This meeting proved a turning point in the career of Horace who now devoted himself heart and soul to the worship of muse. He got Sabine farm as a gift from Maecenas and this timely help relieved him of his financial worries. After Virgil's death in 19 B.C. he was virtually a Poet Laureate. He died peacefully as bachelor on 27th November, 8 B.C.

- Works of Horace: - The surviving works of Horace include two books of Satires, a book of epodes, four book of odes, three books of Letters or Epistles, and a hymn.

Horace and Ars Poetica

Ars Poetica is not essentially a treatise on the art of criticism but a long poem on the subject of criticism. It is a long hexametre letter to a certain Piso, and his two sons. Horace gave it the title "Epistle to the Pisos" but it was Quintilian who called it Ars Poetica and hence raised it to the level of a systematic treatise. Ars Poetica exercised a tremendous influence during the middle

ages and the Neo-Classical age. It was the Bible of classicism in England. The main ideas contained in *Ars Poetica* are summarized following -

1. Function and Nature of Poetry :- Though not a systematic treatise on criticism, this poem can be divided into three parts (a) poesis (subject matter); (b) poema (form) and (c) poeta (the poet). Its main topics of discussion are poetry, poetic style and drama. Horace nowhere calls poetry a process of imitation like Plato and Aristotle. Mere imitation, according to him, is not enough for a poet often uses fiction and mingles facts with fancy. To him the function of poetry was both to delight and instruct: "Poets desire either to improve or to please, or to unite the agreeable and profitable; and that it is not enough for poems to have beauty; they must also be pleasing and lead the listener's soul whither they will."

2. Artistic Unity :- It was Horace who made men feel that the demand for unity in a work of art is identical with good taste. He emphasized not merely the unity of the subject but the unity of organic life. The poets and painters enjoyed great freedom in respect of imagination, but they did not enjoy unchartered freedom. The poet is free to indulge his imagination but he must not lapse into absurdity and create monsters or impossible figures.

3. Form of Poetry :- The plot should be based on familiar old stories, and novelty may be imparted through skillful treatment. Entirely new themes may also be invented, but these would require great skill and art on the part of the poet.

4. Poetic Diction :- Horace will always be remembered for his theory of poetic diction. In the words of Abercrombie:
 "Poetic diction, he says, can never be an altogether established and stationary affair. The function of language in a poetry is to express, but man's experience, which poetry exists to express, is continually changing, since it is continually adding to itself. With the growth of experience, the language of poetry must keep pace, if it is to be truly expressive."

Horace makes use of a simile of a tree and leaves in order to express his view point. Language is like a tree and its words are like leaves. As the years go on, the old leaves fall, and new leaves take their place but the tree remains the same. Horace's observation on poetic diction are like those of Aristotle. Following Aristotle, he also emphasises the right choice of words and their effective arrangement in composition. A poet is free to use both familiar and new words. The poet is free to coin new words too.

5. Metres and their appropriateness :- Homer has shown us in what metre may be best written the deeds of kings and

great captains, and sombre war. Verses of unequal length were first used for laments, later also for the sentiment that attends beseeching. The muse has given to the lyre the celebration of the gods and their offspring, the victorious boxer, the horse, first in the race, the amorous yearning of youth, and the restrained pleasures of wine. If one does not know and cannot observe the conventions and forms of poems, he does not deserve to be called a poet. Comic material, for instance, is not to be treated in the verse of tragedy, similarly, it would be outrageous to narrate the feast of Thyestes in verses proper to common daily life and almost to comedy.

6. Sincerity of Emotion! - ^{Emotions} It must come from the heart of the poet. He tells, "It is not enough for poems to have beauty; they must also be pleasing and lead the listener's soul whither they will. If you would have me weep, you must first express grief yourself."

7. Views on Drama! -

In *Ars Poetica*, the treatment of drama is desultory. No systematic theory of drama is presented on a larger basis. Only fragmentary and casual views are expressed, e.g. 'Either follow tradition or invent a story which is consistent. But the conventional features of

traditional characters should be preserved. He writes that "If in your tale you represent the renowned Achilles, let him appear restless, passionate, inexorable and dauntless." If you commit a new theme on the stage and venture to create a new character, let the first impression be preserved to the end, and let his nature be consistent."

Horace studies drama under three heads: plot, characterization and style. Plot should be borrowed from familiar material, the chorus should be an integral part of the plot; characters should behave consistently and naturally; iambic metre was most suitable for drama. Dramatic speech should be appropriate and should suit the character, its sex, its age, its station in life, its mood. The language of a god should be different from the mortal and a man from a woman and an aged man from a heated youth.