

Dr. Johnson

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Dr. Johnson holds a unique position among the neo-classical critics, because of his liberalism, common-sense, proper respect for ancients and because of his sanity in everything that he talks and writes. A perfect blending of humanism and classical realism is found in his critical works. In fact, he balances weighs everything in the balance of life - whether appreciating or criticizing Shakespeare, or denouncing Lycidas or evaluating Metaphysicals or attacking three classical unities or advocating for tragic-Comedies. He is great both as a theoretician and as a practical critic. As a practical critic he is only next to Dryden.

According to Dr. Johnson literature should portray and express 'general nature'. He is concerned with the ultimate end of literature. A poet, in order to give some interpretation to nature, must divest himself of the prejudices of his age and country and try to find out essential truths of life which are common to different ages and countries. But he does not exclude the importance of historical study in criticism.

In his preface to Shakespeare, he writes "Nothing can please many, and please long, but just representation of general nature. Particular manners can be known to few, and therefore few only can judge how nearly they are copied. The irregular combinations of fanciful inventions may delight a while, by that novelty of which the common palatiness of life sends us all in quest, but the pleasure of sudden wonder are soon exhausted and the mind can only repose on the stability of truth."

The business of a writer is to examine

the individual, but the species⁽¹¹⁾. He must consider the right and the wrong in their abstracted and invariable state, he must disregard the present laws and opinions and rise to the general and transcendental truths which will always be the same. He must write as the interpreter of nature and legislator of mankind and consider himself as presiding over the thoughts and manners of future generations as being superior to time and place.

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The great thing that Dr. Johnson finds in Shakespeare is that his dramas are the faithful mirrors of manners and life. He says that Shakespeare does not allow his characters to be modified by the customs of particular places, unpractised by the rest of the world. Hence, Johnson makes truthfulness to life the first quality of great art. But the truthfulness is not naturalistic concentration on particular details. The Super structure of life may or may not be properly drawn and often it is found that an artist who overbusies himself with delineating the superstructure, forgets the fundamental elements of life. Shakespeare's characters are the genuine progeny of common humanity such as the world will always supply.

Thus, Dr. Johnson pleads that for general truths of life and realism as opposed to particularity and watery romanticism. He wants that the writer or the poet must be able to penetrate to the inner depths of common humanity through particular condition and set up. He points out that Shakespeare in his characters, at the same time presents pictures of general human nature and is lively and realistic. His characters are not

unreal, they are men ⁽¹²⁾ who act and speak as the reader thinks he himself should have spoken or acted on the same occasion. Regarding Shakespeare's dialogue, he observes that it is hardly 'perused with so much care and simplicity' that it seems scarcely to claim the merit of fiction, but to have been gleaned by diligent selection out of common conversation and common occurrence.

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While talking about the classical views of the dramatic critics, Dr. Johnson vigorously supports Dryden's opinions. He says that in a drama we should always remember that we are dealing with some imaginative experience and not with a series of personal distresses suffered by each member of the audience in the theatre. He strongly supports Shakespeare's neglect of the neo-classic rules. He asks his reader to have a more open minded and flexible conception of decorum, based directly on nature itself. Shakespeare, he argues, preserves the interior character of his created beings. His main attempt is to create a romantic whole. Therefore it is futile to say that romance in his dramas is not a romance. The point to see is that whether there is any untoward shock in the development of drama or not. A drama is not worthwhile if it just portrays human life of two to three hours duration, or if it is restricted to one place.

Dr. Johnson strongly supports the tragic-comedy of the Elizabethans and the fusion of tragic and comic plots in the same drama by Shakespeare. He points out the distinction of tragedy and comedy and says that the end of writing is to instruct.

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the end of poetry is to instruct by pleasing. The tragic-comedy may convey all the instructions of tragedy and comedy. The interchanges of mingled scenes seldom fail to produce the intended vicissitude of passion.

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To conclude, a sanity of our look runs through everything that Dr. Johnson writes. He asserts the classical aims and this assertion is positive and affirmative. Whether he is talking about the classical unities or tragic comedy or metaphysical poetry, pastoral poetry or wit, he never allows himself to be a slave of extreme neo-classic standard of correctness. He is always common sense. He has high respect for the ancients but never asks us to allow them slavishly.