

Life of Milton"-samuel johnson essay sample

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



In "Critical Approaches to Literature", David Daiches has said that the imagination, in its primary manifestation, is "the great ordering principle", an agency which enables us both "to discriminate and to order, to separate and to synthesize, and thus makes perception possible", for without it, we would have only a collection of meaningless sensory data.

Literary theory and poetry materialize concurrently, for poets have a strong tendency to form opinions about their craft and to use these opinions as part of the message of their poems. Imagination is undoubtedly inherent in literature, the prime component in any work of art, but this view has been a cause of debate since the dawn of literature and criticism.

As with most dissentions and philosophy regarding literature and its attendant features, the first records of this debate are to be found in the germinal works of Aristotle and Plato. Writing at a time when the poet was venerated for his work, and the philosopher persecuted for his, it is but natural that Plato would react negatively towards poetry.

He regarded it as being fundamentally unsound and his view of imagination was much the same, since the imagination is the wellspring from which poetry arises. Imagination was inspirational and emotional, and he did not agree or identify with it for he did not find it logical. Aristotle, on the other hand, acknowledged that art represented reality, and that imagination was an important element of the structuring and creating of art.

Horace, while admitting that poets utilized "fiction and often mingled facts with fancy", put forth a synthesis of Aristotle and Plato's views. According to him, the end function of poetry is to please and instruct, "...a mixture of

pleasure and profit appeals to every reader..." and hence, imagination took on a fairly central position.

John Dryden, a Seventeenth Century liberal and neo-classical critic, acknowledged imagination as "inspiration breath'd into man by God." Increasingly we observe that, as it is investigated down the ages, the primary human faculty of imagination becomes inseparable from poetry- Dryden acknowledged both the didactic and aesthetic nature of poetry. The term 'Fancy', so commonly used, was coined by him. Pope, in accordance to the vigorous structural formalism of the Augustans, declares that imagination was "native", but that it should be kept under control, for there was a necessity for decorum.

In the Nineteenth Century, the issue of imagination became one of utmost significance, mostly due to the theorizing of Wordsworth, and more significantly, of Coleridge. While imagination, as a primary and unique faculty of the human psyche and consciousness, was never debated, both poets managed to convey its indisputable significance in poetry. In the Seventeenth Century, the writer became of soul importance- the readers reacted to the experience of emotion with delight. This 'delight', the Romantics stressed, was the prime objective of their poetry, but was not achieved by mechanical application of rules, but by the strength of the imagination.

An early and somewhat haphazard attempt on the part of Wordsworth to discriminate between 'imagination' ("Impressive effects out of simple elements"), and 'fancy' ("Pleasure and surprise... excited by sudden

varieties of situation and accumulated imagery"), appears in "The Thorn". In earlier discussions, both of these had been in most part used synonymously to denote a faculty of the mind which is distinguished from 'reason' and 'judgement', and which receives 'images' from the senses and records them into new combinations. He stresses that 'imagination', and not 'fancy', should be used to refer to the creative or poetic principle.

The distinction between imagination and fancy was a key element in Coleridge's theory of poetry, as well as in the general theory of the mental processes. This laconic differentiation is the core of his exposition on "the nature and genesis of the imagination." M. H. Abrams, in "The Mirror and the Lamp", points out that, "As in his philosophy, so in his criticism, Coleridge roots his theory in the constitution and activity of the creative mind."

The memory, for Coleridge, is "mechanical", and fancy "passive", which acts only "by a sort of juxtaposition". The imagination, on the other hand, "recreates", its elements by a process to which Coleridge sometimes applies terms borrowed from the physical and chemical unions- it is a "synthetic", a "permeative" and a "blending, fusing power". The imagination is "essentially vital"; it "generates and produces a form of its own."

Fancy is thus a perfunctory process which receives the elementary images- the "fixities and definites" which it receives from the senses, and without altering the parts, reassembles them into a different spatial and temporal order form that in which they were originally perceived. The imagination

creates rather than reassembles by dissolving the fixities and definites, and unifying them into a new whole.

The faculty of imagination " generates and produces a form of its own" while its rules are " the very powers of growth and production." It assimilates and synthesises the most disparate elements into an organic whole- a newly generated unity, constituted by a living interdependence of parts whose identity cannot survive their removal from the whole.

Fancy can be taken to mean surface decorations of new combinations of memories and perceptions, while imagination involved a combination of elements in the cauldron of the poet's mind, with imagination acting as a base of sorts more than anything else, which results in the creation of a new work.

Coleridge further distinguishes between the Primary and Secondary imagination. If the process of creation is conceived as being essentially and perpetually the bringing of order out of chaos, then the Primary imagination is essentially creative and " a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the finite I AM." This could be explained by reducing imagination to a single image, or a train of thought, in one's mind- this quality, being inherent in every conscious, human being (that is, in evolutionary terms, the ability of foresight and being able to think around a situation), and Coleridge has recognized this as constituting the Primary imagination.

The Secondary imagination is the conscious human use of this power. When we employ our Primary imagination in the act of perception, we are not doing so with our conscious will, but are exercising the basic faculty of our awareness of ourselves and the external world; the Secondary imagination is more conscious and less elemental, but it does not differ in kind from the primary.

In imagination, elements in an environment that strike the creator's sensibility are blended and fused into a new whole- the poet has to merge reason and emotion, restraint and spontaneity, the abstract and the concrete, etc. The entire exercise is a "reconciliation of opposites", (precisely why it is a conscious one), emphasizing the dialectical character of creativity. The action can be reduced to three basic phases: thesis, antithesis and synthesis, but this process is inexplicable, as is imagination, and particular to the poet himself. The resultant exposition can never be stripped down to its original elements.

To exemplify this, Coleridge uses the analogy of the transformation of a seed into a plant to explain this theory. Once the seed has been planted, and grows into a plant, it is impossible to reduce the plant to singular elements like the seed, the water, the air, the soil, etc. It is a whole- an organic unit. In the same manner- a creation of the imagination has an inherent organic unity- it cannot be reduced to any of its contributory elements. This is the dialectical character of creativity that involves synthesis- the result of this blend and fusion is a whole.

Coleridge stressed that imagination makes "new perception possible". If indeed a work springs out of imagination, it holds the ability to penetrate the experience of its genesis and reveal the essence of the object. This echoes Aristotle's view that poetry or art penetrates through the idea of an object and brings to the surface not the particular, but the universal in the particular, the essence. In a writer's imagination, thus, the experience is unifying or coadunative- what Coleridge calls "Esemplastic"- it is moulded into an expression by the imagination. Literature thus becomes a piece of actuality subjected to the laws of imagination.

Most critics after Coleridge tended to make fancy simply that faculty that produces a lesser, lighter, or more humorous kind of poetry, and to make imagination the faculty that produces a higher, more serious, and more passionate poetry. However, the mark of Coleridge's theories is undoubtedly present in each of these. As he himself has stated: "I laboured at a solid foundation, in the component faculties of the human mind itself and their comparative dignity and importance."