

Literary theory essay on dryden's 'an essay on dramatic poesy'

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Mimesis, the Greek word for imitation, has been of major importance in the history of aesthetic and literary theory. It is the earlier way to judge any work of art in relation to reality and to decide whether its representation is accurate or not. Though this mode starts from Plato, it runs through many great theorists of Renaissance up to some modern theorists as well. A literary work is taken to be a representation of reality or of any aspect of it.

Plato holds a rather negative view on mimesis; he sees the work of an artist as a simple imitation of imitations, a work that is removed from the essence of nature and one that represents imagination rather than truth, thus introducing the audience to a world of illusions. Aristotle, on the other hand, treats imitation as a basic human faculty, which expresses itself in arts like Literature, music and painting. Unlike Plato, Aristotle believes that it is ungrateful to consider imitation as a mere copy or reflection of reality since it involves a complex meditation of nature that reveals human creativity.

It is therefore considered as a human Art. This essay deals essentially with the neoclassical conception of Mimesis, and the attitude of the neoclassicist John Dryden towards the ancient literary theory. Neoclassicism was a widespread and influential movement in literature and visual arts enduring from the early 17th century until around 1750. Neoclassical writers looked to ancient Greek and Roman writers for inspiration and guidance and reaffirmed literary composition as a rational and rule-bound process, requiring a great deal of craft, labor and study.

Central to neoclassical literary theory and practice was the concept of imitation; In the Neoclassical view, Mimesis has been understood as the imitation of nature as objects or phenomena, which means in effect, that <https://assignbuster.com/literary-theory-essay-on-drydens-an-essay-on-dramatic-poesy/>

literature imitates other modes of discourse , such as philosophy, ethics , rhetoric , the natural and social sciences , religion , psychology or linguistics . Neoclassicists believed that writers should strive to achieve excellence by imitating those great writers of the past rather than by trying to be original and innovative.

The essence of Art thus becomes reinvention and rediscovery. The complex notion of nature, which was closely related to the notion of imitation, referred to aspects of the real world and human behavior, to what was central, timeless, and universal in human experience. The Neoclassical writers generally saw the ancients such as Homer and Aristotle as having already discovered and expressed the fundamental laws of nature . Hence , the external world, including the world of human action , could best be expressed by modern writers if they followed the path of imitation already paved by the ancients.

Invention was of course allowed but only as a modification of past models, not in the form of a rupture. The Neo-classicist theorist John Dryden is known for his support of the theory and practice of the Greek and Roman writers of antiquity and his belief in the necessity of a continuation and development of the rules set by the ancients. Dryden and his contemporaries looked upon the ancients as their models. By " the ancients" they generally meant the ancient writers.

Seneca provided the model for tragedy, Terence and Plautus for comedy, Virgil for epic, Horace and Juvenal for satire, Pindar for odes, and Horace for literary criticism. Of all the ancient Roman writers, Dryden respected Virgil the most and repeatedly acknowledged him as his master and guide. Dryden <https://assignbuster.com/literary-theory-essay-on-drydens-an-essay-on-dramatic-poesy/>

emphasizes the importance of following the classic models with a sense of innovation and originality. He believes that poetry has a historical development, and he wishes " that poetry may not go backward, when all other arts and sciences are advancing. This refers to his belief in the ability of following the models and the experience of the ancients and trying to get beyond them. The neoclassical era is not particularly sensitive to originality and invention, but Dryden believes that originality is to be preferred to good imitation, and is a greater proof of genius. Dryden opposes Aristotle in believing that the plot is the first of all elements in a play and the basis on which the others are built, he believes that it's rather the author's language, the diction and thought, that form the basis of a play.

He also opposes the strongly conventionalized characters and plots of Roman comedies, asking for a wider imitation of nature, although he also appreciates the advantages of structural simplicity, but the interest of the plot and the characters is also to be found in variety and not simply in a well-defined structure. In variety we recognize human behavior, real life, and the essence of nature. John Dryden's essay " An essay on Dramatic Poesy" gives an explicit account of neoclassical theory of art in general.

He defends the classical drama standing on the line of Aristotle, saying that it is an imitation of life, and that it reflects human nature clearly. The essay is written in the form of dialogue concerned to four gentlemen: Eugenius, Crites, Lisideius and Neander. Neander seems to speak for Dryden himself. Eugenius takes the side of the modern English dramatists by criticizing the faults of the classical playwright. Crites defends the ancient , he opposes the

use of rhyme in plays and argues that through the moderns excel in science, the ancient age was the true age of poetry .

He notes that poetry is now held in lower esteem , in an atmosphere of ' Few good poets and so many severe judges' , his essential argument is that the ancients were faithful imitators and wise observers of nature which is ' ill represented in our plays ' he states that ' they have handed down to us a perfect resemblance of her (nature) which we , like ill copiers , neglecting to look on , have rendered monstrous and disfigured' Lesideius defends the French playwrights and attacks the English tendency to mix genres.

He defines a play as a just and lively image of human nature, representing its passions and humors and the change of fortune to which it is subject, for the delight and instruction of mankind" A definition that is very different from Aristotle's; the latter has defined tragedy not as the representation of ' human nature' but as the imitation of a serious and complete action. Neander who speaks for Dryden himself, favors the moderns, respects the ancients, and is critical to rigid rules of drama. He defends rhyme if it is in proper place .

Neander argues that tragic comedy is the best form for a play; because it is the closest to life in which emotions are heightened by both mirth and sadness. He complains that the Ancients were either tragedians or comedians, and that it is easier to attain perfection in this way, writing only the kind of thing one does best. He states that this natural gift has to be controlled by techniques; the good writer must know the emotions he is depicting, and he must not get carried away by them in order to remain

credible in the eyes of the audience. He also finds subplots as an integral part to enrich a play.

Neander favors the violation of the unities of time , place and action because it leads to the variety to the English plays, he argues that the unities have a narrowing effect on the play . The violation of unities helps the English dramatists present a mere, just and lively image of human nature. Neoclassicism comprised a return to the classical models, literary styles and values of ancient Greek and Roman authors , but if Dryden is neoclassical , it is in the sense that he acknowledges the classics as having furnished archetypes for drama , but modern writers are at liberty to create their own archetypes and their own literary traditions.