

## S.T. COLERIDGE AS A CRITIC

Coleridge is one of the greatest of literary critics, and his greatness has been almost universally recognized. He occupies, without doubt, the first place among English literary critics. After eliminating one after another the possible contenders for the title of the greatest critic, Saintsbury concludes:

“So, then there abide these three – Aristotle, Longinus and Coleridge.”

According to Arthur Symonds, Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* is,

“... the greatest book of criticism in English.”

Herbert Read concludes Coleridge as:

“... head and shoulders above every other English critic.”

### I. A. Richards:

Considers him as the fore-runner “**of the modern science of semantics**”, and Rene Wellek is of the view that he is a link, “**between German Transcendentalism and English Romanticism.**”

A man of stupendous learning, both in philosophy and literature, ancient as well as modern, and refined sensibility and penetration intellect, Coleridge was eminently fitted to the task of a critic. His practical criticism consists of his evaluations of Shakespeare and other English dramatists, and of Milton and Wordsworth.

Despite the fact there are so many digressions and repetitions, his practical criticism is always illuminating and highly original. It is rich in suggestions of far reaching value and significance, and flashes of insight rarely to be met with in any other critic. The Neo-classic critics judged on the basis of fixed rules. They were neither legislative nor judicial, nor were carried away by their prejudices. Coleridge does not judge on the basis of any rules. He does not pass any judgment, but gives his responses and reactions to a work of art. His criticism is impressionistic-romantic, a new kind of criticism, a criticism which dealt a knockout blow to neo-classic criticism, and has been in vogue, more or less, ever since.

He could discover new beauties in Shakespeare and could bring about fresh re-valuations of a number of old English masters. Similarly, his criticism of Wordsworth and his theories enable us to judge him and his views in the correct perspective.

In the field of theoretical inquiry, Coleridge was the first to introduce psychology and philosophy into literary criticism. He was interested in the study of the process of poetic creation, the very principles of creative activity, and for this purposes freely drew upon philosophy and psychology. He thus made philosophy the basis of literary inquiry, and thus brought about a union of philosophy, psychology and literary criticism. His literary theories have their bases in philosophy; he imparted to criticism the dignity which belongs to philosophy. He philosophized literary criticism and thus brought about a better and truer understanding of the process of creation and the nature and function of poetry.

### **Contribution:**

His greatest and most original contribution to literary criticism is his theory of imagination. Addison had examined the nature and function of imagination, and Wordsworth, too, had developed his own theory on the subject. But all previous discussions of imagination look superficial and childish when compared with Coleridge's treatment of the subject.

He is the first critic to differentiate between “**Imagination and Fancy**”, and to differentiate between “**primary and secondary Imagination**”. Through his theory of imagination he revolutionized the concept of artistic imitation. Poetic imitation is neither a servile copy of nature, nor is it the creation of something entirely new and different from Nature. Poetry is not imitation, but creation, but it is creation based on the sensations and impressions received from the external world. Such impressions are shaped, ordered, modified and opposites are reconciled and harmonized, by the imagination of the poet, and in this way poetic creation takes place.

Further, as **David Daiches** points out:

***“It was Coleridge who finally, for the first time, resolved the age old problem of the relation between the form and content of poetry.”***

Through his philosophical inquiry into the nature and value of poetry, he established that a poem is an organic whole, and that its form is determined by its content, and is essential to that content.

Thus metre and rhyme, he showed, are not merely, “pleasure super-added”, not merely something superfluous which can be dispensed with, 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.

Similarly, his theory of “Willing Suspension of Disbelief” marks a significant advance over earlier theories on the subject. His view that during the perusal of a poem or the witnessing of a play, there is neither belief nor disbelief, but a mere suspension of disbelief, is not universally accepted as correct, and the controversy on the subject has been finally set at rest.

However, it may be mentioned in the end that as Coleridge's views are too philosophical, he is a critic no easy to understand. Often it is fragmentary and unsystematic. Victorians, in general, could not appreciate him and his appeal was confined to the few.

It is only in the 20th century that his literary criticism has been truly understood and recognition and appreciation have followed. Today his reputation stands very high, and many go to him for inspiration and illumination. Despite the fragmentary nature of his work, he is now regarded as the most original critic of England.