

**J.M.S. COLLEGE, MUNGER**  
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*Department of English*  
**B.A. Part-III, English (Hons.)- Paper-V**

**IMPORTANT CONCEPTS OF SIDNEY'S *AN APOLOGY FOR POETRY***

The following are the important concepts dealt by Sidney in his *Apology*.

**Importance of Poetry:**

In the discussion of Sidney's *An Apology* M. A. R. Habib states that toward the beginning of the text Sidney observes that poetry has fallen from its status as "the highest estimation of learning" to "be the laughing stock of children." He produces a wide range of arguments in defence of "poor poetry" based on chronology, the authority of ancient tradition, the relation of poetry to nature, the function of poetry as imitation, the status of poetry among the various disciplines of learning, and the relationship of poetry to truth and morality. Sidney's initial argument is that poetry was the first form in which knowledge had been expressed, the "first light giver to ignorance," as bodied forth by poets such as Musaeus, Homer, and Hesiod, Livius, Ennius, Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch. In addition, the first Greek philosophers Thales, Empedocles, Parmenides, and Pythagoras, Sidney points out, expressed their vision in verse. Even Plato used poetic devices such as dialogue and description of setting and circumstance to adorn his philosophy. Again, historians such as Herodotus too had borrowed the "fashion" and the "weight" of poetry. Sidney concludes here "neither philosopher nor historiographer could at the first have entered into the gates of popular judgments, if they had not taken a great passport of poetry." His point is that an essential prerequisite of knowledge is pleasure in learning; and it is poetry that has made each of these varieties of knowledge – scientific, moral, philosophical, and political – accessible by expressing them in pleasurable forms. While he acknowledges that poetry is a "divine gift" and dependent on genius, he actually laments the fact that these would-be poets ignore the need to labour at their craft, a craft whose principles must be "art, imitation, and exercise" He concludes by asking the reader not to scorn poetry. Instead, he entreats the readers to believe that "there are many mysteries contained in poetry, which of purpose were written darkly, least by profane wits, it should be abused". In addition, he curses those who are possessed of "so earth-creeping a

mind that it cannot lift itself up, to look to the sky of poetry". In *An Apology*, poetry is elevated to that sacred status: in its very nature it is opposed to worldliness and "earth creeping" concerns.

### **Nature of Imitation:**

Although the principle of imitation reigned unchallenged in literary criticism from the Renaissance to the end of the 18th century, not all critics meant the same thing by *imitation*, nor did they necessarily agree on the existing notion of imitation. At the centre of the controversy over imitation was a debate about nature itself—what constituted nature and, what was the status of representations of reality? Like the third-century philosopher Plotinus, Sidney uses the Platonic theory of Forms to refute criticism against poetry. Sidney held that the nature poets imitated the ideal, and not the material. During the Renaissance, the ideal of nature was God's cosmological plan. Sidney perhaps best represents this viewpoint when he argues that the Right poets "imitate to teach and delight, and to imitate, borrow nothing of what is, hath been, or, shall be, but range only reined with learned discretion into the divine consideration of what, may be and should be." This view of imitation is based on a religious belief in providential design; because the universe is the product of divine wisdom. Hence, the purpose of the poet is ultimately to affirm the rule of justice. In the next century, this view of nature runs head on into the scientific revolution, and the debate is recast in Dryden's *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* and elsewhere.

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