Theory and Practice in European Literary Criticism: A Study of Major Critical Essayists and Their Works

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Abstract

This study examines the works of major European critical essayists to determine whether their literary works align with the theories they postulated in their critical essays. Employing a qualitative analytical approach, it conducts a comparative study of selected literary works and critical essays by theorists such as Alexander Pope, Samuel Coleridge, Philip Sidney, William Wordsworth, P. B. Shelley and Matthew Arnold. The study explores the relationship between their theoretical perspectives and their creative practice. Grounded in Terry Eagleton's literary theory and ideology, which posits that literary theory is shaped by ideological structures and historical conditions, the study analyzes whether these essayists' theoretical positions were ideologically consistent with their creative works. It examines how their literature functioned as an ideological tool, reinforcing or challenging dominant cultural values, and how their historical contexts shaped their theoretical and artistic perspectives. The essayists were selected based on their influence on European literary criticism and their dual role as both critics and creative writers, with literary works chosen for their thematic relevance to the essayists' critical positions. The analysis reveals that the literary works of these essayists largely embody the principles and concepts they articulated in their critical essays. The findings suggest that these European essayists-maintained coherence between their literary theories and creative practices, reinforcing the idea that literary criticism and artistic production are interconnected. Using Eagleton's framework, the study highlights the ideological nature of critical theory, showing how it shapes artistic creation and connects literary theory to creative expression.

Keywords: _Mimesis, Literary Theory, Critical Essayists, Representation, Artistic Expression, Textual Analysis, Comparative Criticism, Ideology._

1. INTRODUCTION

Literary criticism involves the analysis, interpretation and evaluation of literary works. It seeks to develop a critical understanding of texts by providing general guidelines for their examination. This process is facilitated by critical essays or literary theories, which serve as conceptual tools for understanding literary art. These theories establish the foundations upon which literary works are analyzed, offering systematic approaches to the study of literature and the methods employed in literary analysis. However, as Terry Eagleton, 1996, Fredric Jameson (1981), Pierre Macherey (1966), Michael Moriarty (2006) and others argue literary/literary criticism is not merely an objective academic practice but is deeply embedded in ideological structures that shape both interpretation and value judgments.

The origins of literary criticism can be traced back to the Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle, whose seminal works, _The Republic_ and _Poetics_, respectively, laid the foundation for literary discourse. Plato viewed literature as an objective representation of reality and considered it an instrument of instruction. In line with this perspective, Chinua Achebe, in "The

Novelist as Teacher," asserts that "the writer cannot expect to be excused from the task of re-education and regeneration that must be done. In fact, he should march right in front. For he is after all - as Ezekiel Mphahlele says in his *African Image* - the sensitive point of his community" (Achebe, 1986, p. 6).

For Achebe, there is an intersection between literature and pedagogy, akin to the relationship between religious texts and moral instruction. Similarly, Ayem Agye (in Emenyonu, 1986, p. 129) underscores the interconnectedness of literature and politics, stating:

> I have all along been affirming by implication, the interconnectedness of literature and politics. Both of them have man as their centre-piece; they deal with human beings and their relationship over time and space. … Literature as a means of intellectual and imaginative communication is in itself a form of social consciousness, an important weapon in ideological struggles of classes.

Here, Agye posits that literature and politics are fundamentally linked, sharing ideological and functional similarities. Eagleton and others' critique of literary theory aligns with this view, as he argues that literature is not an autonomous entity but is shaped by the political, economic, and ideological conditions of its time. Thus, literary criticism, far from being a neutral or purely aesthetic pursuit, is an engagement with ideology.

Conversely, Aristotle argued that literature is a representation of a probable action, meaning an event that may or may not occur. He maintained that such representation is "something more philosophical and more worthy of serious attention" (*On the Art of Poetry*, Chapter 9). Unlike Plato, Aristotle did not perceive literature primarily as a means of moral instruction or an objective representation of reality but rather as a construct that stimulates intellectual engagement. In this regard, M.A.E. Okolie (in Akwanya & Okoro, Eds., 2003, p. 71) states that "there are some that hold the view that literature cannot bring about social change. Many others feel that literature is nothing but a 'witnessing of a kind,' a recorded 'history' albeit a portrayal of a situation or a society."

Aristotle further distinguishes literature from history, emphasizing that "the one describes the thing that has been, and the other a kind of thing that might be" (*On the Art of Poetry*, Chapter 9). This distinction highlights the imaginative and fictional nature of literature, which creates its own conditions for intelligibility. D.U. Opata (2008, p. 6) reinforces this notion, arguing that "the characteristic of a literary text is what I call its 'fictionhood,' i.e. its belongingness to a fictional world." Opata further elaborates on fictionality as an act of invention, stating that "in this context, invention would mean nothing more than mere disguise and the bringing into 'creative existence' something which prior to this did not exist at all" (2000, p. 235).

S.H. Olsen (1987) supports this perspective, asserting that "there are thus good reasons for saying that it is a general convention governing literary practice that a literary work is to be apprehended and appreciated as being fictional in toto" (p. 172). Similarly, R. Cohen (1974) emphasizes fictionality as a defining feature of literature, arguing that "the hallmark of 'literariness' is that a work fulfills the basic linguistic functions—the informative, emotive, and appellative—employing elements of fictionality" (p. 198).

These arguments underscore Aristotle's position that literature is a creative construct, a departure from Plato's view of literature as a mere imitation of reality. Following the foundational critiques of literature by Plato and Aristotle, literary criticism evolved through various historical periods. The medieval era saw limited literary criticism due to the dominance

of religious authority. However, during the Renaissance, Sir Philip Sidney echoed Plato's discourse on the societal role of poetry in *A Defence of Poesie*. The Neo-classical period introduced figures such as John Dryden, Samuel Johnson, and Alexander Pope. Dryden focused on the composition of literary works and the relationship between the artist and the work itself, as seen in *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy*. Johnson contributed to literary history through works like *Preface to Shakespeare* and *The Lives of the Poets*, while Pope emphasized adherence to classical rules in *An Essay on Criticism*.

The Romantic period marked a shift, with poets such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, and Keats rejecting the rigid "rules of old" and embracing individual expression and imagination. The Victorian period saw figures like Matthew Arnold, who, in *The Study of Poetry* and *The Function of Criticism at the Present Time*, emphasized cultural criticism and opposed Romantic individualism.

The 20th century introduced diverse approaches, including psychological theories from Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung. This period lacked a unified system of literary criticism. T.S. Eliot, for instance, rejected the notion of poetry as mere expression and instead emphasized cultural and historical continuity, laying the foundation for New Criticism. New Criticism, in turn, influenced Reader-Response Theory, which evolved into Structuralism, Post-Structuralism, and other contemporary critical frameworks.

The historical trajectory of literary criticism reveals that many modern literary theories originated from the debates between Plato and Aristotle over mimesis. These controversies led to the development of various critical theories that now guide the evaluation of literary works. Eagleton critiques the tendency to treat literary theory as a static body of knowledge and instead argues that it is an ideological practice that reflects changing socio-political conditions.

As Eagleton emphasizes, literary theories are not merely neutral tools but are shaped by broader ideological struggles. That's why he maintains that what we have inherited in literature is an ideology (2003:19). Other scholars share similar view with Eagleton. Louis Althusser, in *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* ((1970, p. 125), argues that ideology shapes all knowledge, including literary criticism, and at the same time, reinforces dominant power structures. Etienne Balibar and Pierre Macherey (1981: 79) quotes Louis Althusser as saying that ideology is the material system of social practices and that to study ideology is to study not ideas, but the material practices of certain (religious, educational, familial, legal, etc.) ideological state apparatuses and the processes by which subjects become constituted in ideology. Pierre Macherey, in *A Theory of Literary Production* (1978, p. 79), builds on Althusser's idea, claiming that literature exposes ideological contradictions and, therefore, should be analyzed to reveal them. Finally, Jenna Sidun corroborates this, saying that "ideology controls and is produced through the subject and when language in literature is used to produce a product such as a novel, there is no language for the subject but the language of ruling ideology (8).

Thus, rather than perceiving literary criticism as a detached, objective practice, this study conceived it as an engagement with cultural and political ideologies. This study, therefore, seeks to explore whether major European critical essayists adhered to their theoretical principles, examining figures such as Alexander Pope, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Philip Sidney, William Wordsworth, P.B. Shelley, and Matthew Arnold through an ideological lens.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Terry Eagleton is a well-known literary theorist and critic, famous for his work in Marxist literary theory and cultural criticism. His literary theory is rooted in Marxist criticism, asserting that literature is inseparable from socio-economic structures and ideology. His stance is that literature is deeply ideological and cannot be separated from historical and political contexts. To put it succinctly, he maintains that "to speak of 'literature and ideology' as two separate phenomena which can be interrelated is, as I hope to have shown, in one sense quite unnecessary. Literature, in the meaning of the word we have inherited, is an ideology. It has the most intimate relations to questions of social power" (1983, pp. 19-20)

The above highlights that literature reflects and shapes social realities, particularly in the context of class relations. He further argues that literature is an **ideological construct**, shaped by **historical and political forces**. For **Eagleton**, there is **no literature that does not negotiate with ideology**. It is on this **basis** that **Louis Althusser** maintains that "**ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence**" (1971, p. 153) and that "ideology has a material existence" (1971, p. 153). The **real conditions of existence** and **material existence** refer to what he calls **repressive state apparatuses (RSA).** Althusser argues that the ruling class controls the working class through repressive state apparatuses such as the **g**overnment, courts, police and military. These institutions protect ruling-class interests by using either violent or nonviolent coercion. For Althusser, repressive state apparatuses are part of ideology, and literature, as part of the superstructure (Eagleton 1976, p. 5), is ideologically based**.** He asserts that literature serves as an ideological state apparatus, where hegemonic ideologies are both disseminated and contested**.**

Eagleton further argues that a literary work's meaning is shaped by social and historical factors rather than being fixed. He states, "language, in short, was a field of ideological contention, not a monolithic system; indeed signs were the very material medium of ideology, since without them no values or ideas could exist" (1996, p. 102). This means that literature is a site of ideological struggle, where language reflects social, historical and political tensions. From a Marxist perspective, Eagleton sees literature as tied to material conditions and class struggles, with language shaped by power and ideology. He also highlights the importance of language in literature, emphasizing that "literature is definable not according to whether it is fictional or 'imaginative', but because it uses language in peculiar ways" (Eagleton, 1983, p. 2). This assertion underscores the idea that literature is distinguished by its unique manipulation of language, which, in turn, shapes meaning and perception. Language, as Eagleton suggests, is not merely a neutral tool of communication but a vehicle of ideology, subtly influencing how individuals interpret reality and engage with the world. In the same vein, he establishes a strong connection between literature and ideology, arguing that "literature has become a whole alternative ideology…" (Eagleton, 1983, p. 17). This perspective suggests that literature does not exist in isolation but functions as a site of ideological expression and contestation, reinforcing or challenging dominant worldviews. Through this lens, Eagleton positions literature as a critical space where language and ideology intersect, shaping cultural and political discourse.

Eagleton underscores the active role of the reader in ideological interpretation, emphasizing that interpretation is never neutral; it is shaped by the ideological and historical location of the reader. This suggests that meaning is not inherent within a literary text but is constructed through the lens of the reader's social, political, and cultural positioning. He further elaborates that "all interpretation is situational, shaped and constrained by the historically

relative criteria of a particular culture; there is no possibility of knowing the literary text 'as it is" (Eagleton, 1983, p. 62). In other words, literary texts do not possess a single, objective meaning but are subject to reinterpretation across different historical moments and ideological frameworks. Meaning is dynamic and contingent, arising from the interaction between the text, the reader's ideological background and the broader historical context. This aligns with Eagleton's argument that meaning is socially and ideologically constructed rather than universally fixed.

Ideology is a key concept in Eagleton's work. He argues that all literary texts are rooted in and influenced by ideological constructs. By ideology, Eagleton means a set of ideas, values, beliefs and practices that form the basis of a particular social, economic or political system. He maintains that these ideologies shape the content and form of literary works and help to maintain existing power structures and social inequalities. This framework provides a lens to analyze whether the literary works of major European critical essayists reflect or challenge the ideological positions they advocate in their critical essays.

3. ALEXANDER POPE

3.1 Essay on Criticism: An Overview of the Essay

In the age of Pope, poetry was regarded as an essential part of society, functioning as a means of upholding tradition and articulating aesthetic and moral values. During this period, the form of poetry was already well-established, and innovation was often seen as secondary to adherence to classical models. Poetry was expected to conform to iambic pentameter, reflecting the dominant neoclassical ideals. Pope's era represented the pinnacle of the classical spirit in English literature, and his works manifest these aesthetic and ideological tendencies.

Pope's *Essay on Criticism* is a poem written in heroic couplets, in which he establishes his position as both a poet and a critic. The work responds to an ongoing debate about whether poetry should be "natural" or should follow the structured, "artificial" rules inherited from the classical past. Pope's essay functions as advice to both writers and critics, asserting that literary judgment should be governed by established principles. He argues that poor criticism is more harmful than poor writing, as demonstrated in the lines:

> 'Tis hard to say, if greater want of skill
> Appear in writing or in judging ill;
> But of the two less dangerous is the offence
> To tire our patience than mislead our sense.

Pope conceptualizes nature as both universal and prescriptive, arguing that the rules of ancient writers are aligned with the principles of nature itself. He advises that poets and critics should imitate the ancients, maintaining:

> Learn hence for ancient rules a just esteem;
> To copy Nature is to copy them."

For Pope, nature is not an abstract, romanticized entity but a structured order, one that has been discovered and codified by classical writers. He expresses this in the following lines:

> Those rules of old discover'd not, devised,
> Are Nature still, but nature methodized;
> Nature, like liberty, is but restrain'd
> By the same laws which first herself ordain'd.

Thus, Pope presents poetic creation as an intellectual endeavour that must adhere to rational principles rather than personal inspiration. This reflects an ideological commitment to order, tradition and hierarchy, reinforcing the neoclassical worldview.

Pope also identifies the causes of bad criticism, which include pride and lack of knowledge. He sees learning as indispensable to poetic achievement, warning against superficial engagement with knowledge:

> A little learning is a dangerous thing;
> Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring.
> There shallow draughts intoxicate the brain
> And drinking largely sobers us again.

In Pope's view, true wit does not merely replicate the classics but refines and enhances their wisdom:

> True wit is Nature to advantage dressed
> What oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed.

The essay culminates in a discussion of the ideal critic, whose virtues are both intellectual and moral. Pope laments that such figures have become scarce in the degenerate world of his time, emphasizing the decline of literary and ethical standards.

3.2 Analysis of Pope's Works in Relation to His Theorized Ideals

3.2.1 "The Rape of the Lock"

Pope's "The Rape of the Lock" exemplifies his literary theories, particularly his adherence to classical models. This satirical poem transforms a trivial social incident—a young lord cutting a lock of a lady's hair - into a grandiose mock-epic. The narrative follows Belinda, who, after a warning from her guardian sylph, embarks on her day's social activities. The Baron, having performed a ritualistic invocation, succeeds in cutting her lock, leading to a dramatic conflict.

Pope employs epic conventions such as invocation, supernatural intervention and heroic battles (symbolized by a game of cards and a social quarrel). These devices mimic the grandeur of classical epics, demonstrating his belief in "nature methodized"—a structured approach to literary creation that aligns with the rational principles of neoclassicism. The poem also serves as an ideological critique of aristocratic triviality, illustrating how Pope uses classical frameworks not just for aesthetic purposes but for satirical social commentary.

3.2.2 "The Dunciad"

The Dunciad further exemplifies Pope's literary ideology by attacking the degradation of art and intellect. The poem narrates the ascension of a dull poet to the throne of Dulness, symbolizing the triumph of ignorance. The structure of the poem follows a clear temporal and spatial trajectory, reinforcing Pope's commitment to classical order.

Pope's satire is explicitly political and cultural, targeting the Whigs and the commercialization of literature. His critique of hack writers—those who write solely for financial gain—aligns with his belief in the moral responsibilities of poets. He ridicules writers who compromise artistic integrity for profit:

> He (a patron) chinks his purse, and takes his seat of state...
> And (among the poets) instant, fancy feels th' imputed sense.

By equating cultural decline with political corruption, *The Dunciad* reflects Pope's ideological position that literature should uphold moral and intellectual standards, rather than serve the whims of market forces.

3.3 Does Pope's Essay Align with His Works?

Pope's works largely adhere to the principles he outlines in *Essay on Criticism*. His reverence for classical tradition is evident in "The Dunciad", which follows Dryden's "Mac Flecknoe" in satirizing literary mediocrity. He adapts classical models to contemporary concerns, demonstrating that neoclassicism does not entail mere imitation but rather the intelligent application of established principles.

Similarly, "The Rape of the Lock" mirrors classical epic structures, reinforcing Pope's assertion that nature and the rules of the ancients are fundamentally aligned. The poem employs epic conventions, including supernatural intervention and formalized battle scenes, to satirize aristocratic vanity.

However, Pope was not constrained by classical forms; rather, he innovatively reshaped them. This balance between tradition and originality underscores his position as a neoclassical poet. As Terry Eagleton argues in *Literary Theory and Ideology*, literature is embedded within ideological structures. Pope's works, while adhering to classical principles, function as critiques of contemporary society, reinforcing his ideological stance on order, morality and intellectual rigor.

In conclusion, Pope's poetry exemplifies his theoretical assertions. His commitment to classical models reflects an ideological belief in tradition and rationality, while his satirical edge critiques the moral and intellectual failures of his era. Through this synthesis of form and ideology, Pope's works serve as both artistic achievements and cultural interventions.

4. SIR PHILIP SIDNEY

4.1 An Apology for Poetry: An Overview of the Essay

In this essay, Sidney eloquently defends poetry (his term for all imaginative literature) against its critics, exalting the role of the poet, the freedom of imagination and the moral value of fiction. Sidney's *Defense of Poetry* (also known in a slightly different version as *An Apology for Poetry*) is a prose essay that describes the nature of poetry and defends it against Puritan objections to imaginative literature.

The essay asserts the nobility of poetry and its role in moral instruction. Sidney argues that poetry is the foundation of all knowledge and that to dismiss it is an act of ungratefulness. He states:

> And first, truly to all item that professing learning inveigh against poetry may justly objected that they go very near to ungratefulness, to seek to deface that which, in the noblest nations and languages that are known, hath been the light-giver to ignorance, and first nurse whose milk by little and little enabled them to feed afterwards to tougher knowledge.

Sidney contends that poetry is the origin of knowledge, a foundational construct upon which other disciplines are built. He argues that poets are the true educators of society, stating that "...neither philosopher nor histographer could at the first have entered into gates of passport of poetry, which in all nations at this day where learning flourisheth not in plain to be seen; in

all which they have some feeling of poetry" (Koplan, 1986, p. 111). He provides historical validation by referencing Herodotus, who titled his history after the Muses, signifying the intertwined relationship between poetry and historical narration.

Sidney further elevates poetry by aligning it with prophetic and divine creation, emphasizing that the poet is distinct from other intellectuals because he does not merely imitate nature but creates anew. He asserts:

> Only the poet, disdaining to be tied to any such subjection, lifted upon which the vigour of his own invention, doth grow in effect into another nature, in making things either better than nature bringeth forth, or, quite anew, forms such as never were in nature, as the heroes, demi-gods, Cyclopes, Chimeras, furies, and such like; so as is goeth hand in hand with nature, not enclosed within the narrow warrant of her gifts but freely ranging within the zodiac of his own wit (Koplan, 1986, p. 113).

Sidney's *An Apology for Poetry* operates within an ideological framework that upholds poetry as a moral and epistemological authority. From the perspective of Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory and Ideology*, Sidney's work reflects the historical conditions of Elizabethan England, where literature was employed as a means of shaping aristocratic and national identity. Poetry, in Sidney's view, serves both an ethical and pedagogical function, shaping virtuous citizens who are guided by poetic imagination rather than mere historical record or philosophical doctrine.

4.2 Analysis of Sidney's Works in Relation to His Theories

4.2.1 "Astrophel and Stella"

"Astrophel and Stella" explores the lover's state of mind and soul, the contradictory impulse, desires and frustrations that haunt him" (*The Norton Anthology*, Seventh Edition, p.446). Sidney's sonnet sequence "Astrophel and Stella" explores the internal conflict of unfulfilled love through the elaborate and highly metaphorical style of the Italian sonnet tradition. The first stanza reads: "Loving in truth, and fain in verse my love to show, That the dear She might take some pleasure of my pain: Pleasure might cause her read, reading might make her know, Knowledge might pity win, and pity grace obtain."

The poem reflects Sidney's ideology that poetry serves as a medium of persuasion and moral refinement. The speaker, Astrophel, seeks poetic inspiration through external sources but ultimately realizes that true creativity comes from internal passion, as his Muse advises him: "Fool,' said my Muse to me, 'look in thy heart and write."

From Eagleton's perspective, Sidney's "Astrophel and Stella" engages in the ideological construction of Renaissance courtly love, reinforcing the idea of poetry as a refined, aristocratic pursuit. The idealization of Stella aligns with both Platonic and humanist traditions, situating poetry as a means of articulating intellectual and moral ideals.

4.2.2 "The Nightingale"

Sidney's "The Nightingale" is based on the legend of Philomela from Ovid's "Metamorphoses." The poem recounts Philomela's suffering at the hands of King Tereus and her subsequent transformation into a nightingale. The poem expresses her sorrow: "Alas she had no other cause of anguish But Thereus' love on her by strong hand woken,"

Sidney uses this myth to reflect on themes of violence, justice, and poetic expression. The nightingale's lament encapsulates the ideological function of poetry as a voice for the

silenced and oppressed, reinforcing Sidney's assertion that poetry provides moral and ethical instruction beyond mere historical narrative.

4.2.3 "Leave Me, O Love"

Unlike his other poems that dwell on earthly love, *Leave Me, O Love* shifts its focus to divine and eternal love. Sidney dismisses transient, worldly love: "Leave me O love which reachest but to dust, And thou my mind aspire to higher things."

The poem underscores Sidney's belief in poetry's role as a medium for moral elevation, reinforcing its superiority over philosophy and history. From an ideological perspective, it reflects the Protestant-inflected Renaissance humanism that sought to reconcile classical ideals with Christian morality.

4.3 Do Sidney's Essay and His Works Agree?

Yes, Sidney's essay and his poetic works align in their thematic concerns. His *An Apology for Poetry* argues for the moral, imaginative and pedagogical significance of poetry, and these principles are evident in his works:

1. **Freedom of Imagination**: *Astrophel and Stella* and *The Nightingale* exemplify Sidney's belief in poetry's ability to transcend reality and create alternate, morally instructive worlds.

2. **Moral Instruction**: *The Nightingale* serves as an allegory of justice and suffering, while *Leave Me, O Love* presents a spiritual ideal that aligns with Sidney's assertion that poetry teaches virtue more effectively than philosophy or history.

3. **Delight and Teaching**: Sidney's poetic craft embodies his theory that poetry should "teach and delight." His use of metaphor, allegory, and rhetorical flourish makes his works both aesthetically pleasing and ideologically instructive.

From the perspective of *Literary Theory and Ideology*, Sidney's poetry reflects the ideological structures of Renaissance England—promoting aristocratic values, reinforcing national identity and aligning poetic creativity with moral and intellectual authority. His works, much like his essay, uphold poetry as the highest form of knowledge and cultural expression.

5. P.B. SHELLEY

5.1 *A Defence of Poetry*: An Overview of the Essay

In *A Defence of Poetry*, P. B. Shelley engages with Romantic ideals while also addressing the ideological structures of his time. Shelley critiques the utilitarian emphasis on science and technology, arguing that they exacerbate the "inequality of mankind." He presents poetry as a counterforce to materialism, asserting that it should serve as an antidote to "the principle of the self, of which money is the visible incarnation."

Shelley's critique of inequality aligns with the ideological concerns expressed by Terry Eagleton in *Literary Theory and Ideology*, where he posits that literature is deeply embedded in historical and ideological contexts. Shelley, recognizing the role of economic and political forces in shaping society, observes that "the rich have become richer, and the poor have become poorer; and the vessel of the state is driven between the Scylla and Charybdis of anarchy and despotism" (*Defence of Poetry*). This reflects his awareness of how systemic inequalities perpetuate power imbalances, an idea central to ideological criticism.

Shelley views poetry as a transformative force capable of challenging hegemonic structures, asserting that "poets are... the trumpets which sing to battle and feel not what they inspire... Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world" (*Defence of Poetry*). Here, Shelley implies that poetry, like ideology, shapes collective consciousness and has the power to alter social realities.

Throughout *A Defence of Poetry*, Shelley emphasizes poetry's moral dimension, arguing that it fosters empathy and imagination. He writes:

A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others. The pains and pleasures of his species must become his own. The great instrument of moral good is the imagination; and poetry administers to the effect by acting upon the cause.

This assertion aligns with Eagleton's argument that literature serves ideological functions, reinforcing or resisting dominant power structures. Shelley's belief in poetry's capacity to inspire moral goodness underscores its ideological function—it is not merely aesthetic but also a medium for shaping collective values and challenging social injustices.

5.2 Analysis of Shelley's Works in Relation to His Theoretical Perspective

5.2.1 "Ode to the West Wind"

This poem is an exploration of nature's power and its metaphorical implications for political and social transformation. The West Wind, as a force of destruction and renewal, symbolizes revolutionary change. Shelley describes how the wind scatters "dead thoughts" over the universe like "withered leaves," suggesting that poetry can inspire ideological renewal and resistance against oppression.

From an ideological perspective, the poem reflects Shelley's revolutionary optimism. Eagleton's argument that literature often reflects and critiques its socio-political context is evident in Shelley's use of natural imagery to symbolize upheaval. The wind serves as a metaphor for the radical forces that Shelley hoped would dismantle tyranny and bring forth a new, more just society.

5.2.2 "To a Skylark"

In *To a Skylark*, Shelley presents an idealized vision of artistic inspiration, elevating the skylark as a symbol of pure, untainted poetic expression. The speaker admires the skylark's ability to sing without the burdens of human suffering, contrasting it with human experiences marked by "scorn, hate, fear," and "shed tears."

Shelley's Romantic idealism here interacts with ideological concerns by contrasting the liberating potential of poetry with the constraints of material reality. Eagleton's theory that literature simultaneously embodies and resists ideology is applicable—while Shelley idealizes the poet's role, he also acknowledges the real-world suffering that inhibits human happiness. The poem ultimately suggests that poetry, like the skylark's song, has the potential to transcend material limitations and offer visionary insight.

5.2.3 "Ozymandias"

"Ozymandias" explores the impermanence of power and the limits of human ambition. The poem describes the ruined statue of a once-great ruler, whose inscription – "Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!" - ironically highlights the transience of political dominance.

This poem serves as a critique of historical and ideological arrogance. Shelley undermines the ideology of imperial grandeur, demonstrating that all empires, no matter how mighty, are ultimately subject to decay. Eagleton's assertion that literature can expose the contradictions within dominant ideologies is applicable here; "Ozymandias" dismantles the myth of absolute power by revealing its inherent fragility. The sculptor, through his artistry, captures the king's arrogance, suggesting that art, unlike political power, endures beyond the structures that seek to control it.

5.2.4 "England in 1819"

This poem is an overtly political critique of England's rulers, army, and legal system. Shelley describes the king as "An old, mad, blind, despised, and dying" figure, directly attacking the monarchy's legitimacy. He extends his critique to the ruling elite, portraying them as corrupt and detached from the suffering of the people.

Shelley's engagement with contemporary political issues in this poem aligns with Eagleton's view that literature is never ideologically neutral. *England in 1819* functions as a radical counter-narrative to the dominant political discourse of the time, exposing the injustices perpetuated by those in power. By giving voice to the oppressed, Shelley challenges the prevailing ideological order and advocates for social change.

Shelley's works, when analyzed through the lens of Eagleton's *Literary Theory and Ideology*, reveal a deep engagement with the ideological tensions of his time. His poetry does not exist in isolation but rather responds to and critiques the socio-political structures around him. Whether through his idealistic faith in poetry's moral power, his revolutionary optimism, or his critique of political tyranny, Shelley's writings illustrate the intricate relationship between literature and ideology. His belief in the transformative potential of poetry aligns with Eagleton's assertion that literature is an active participant in shaping and contesting ideological formations. Ultimately, Shelley's poetic vision is one of resistance - against materialism, oppression, and historical amnesia - making his work both a literary and ideological statement of defiance.

6. WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

6.1 Preface to Lyrical Ballads: *An Overview of the Essay*

Wordsworth's *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* is often regarded as a foundational text of the Romantic Movement in English poetry. In this work, Wordsworth challenges the neoclassical literary tradition, which prioritized form, intellect and artificiality, advocating instead for a poetry rooted in the direct experience of ordinary life and emotions. The *Lyrical Ballads*, co-authored with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, introduced this new poetic vision, with Wordsworth contributing most of the poems, including the renowned "Tintern Abbey," while Coleridge added "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." However, the collection met with resistance from contemporary critics.

In defense of his poetic approach, Wordsworth appended a *Preface* to the second edition of the *Ballads*, in which he argued that poetry should stem from "emotion recollected in tranquility." He dismissed the rigid formalism and intellectualism of neoclassical poetry, instead emphasizing that the everyday experiences and speech of common people should serve as the raw material of poetry. His assertion that "all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" directly opposed the artificial conventions of his time.

Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory and Ideology* offers a lens through which Wordsworth's *Preface* can be examined in terms of the ideological underpinnings of Romanticism. Eagleton argues that literature is not merely a reflection of reality but is shaped by ideological structures. Wordsworth's poetic vision—his valorization of common speech, rural life and spontaneous emotion—can be seen as an ideological response to the changing social and economic landscape of his time, particularly the effects of industrialization and the growing alienation of individuals from nature.

Moreover, Wordsworth's rejection of poetic elitism aligns with broader ideological shifts in late 18th-century Britain. The French Revolution had ignited debates about democracy and the rights of the common man, and while Wordsworth later distanced himself from radical politics, his poetry remained deeply concerned with the dignity of ordinary people. His assertion that poets must "create the taste by which they are to be relished" suggests a belief in poetry's transformative power - an idea that echoes Eagleton's view that literature can shape and reinforce ideological perspectives.

6.2 Analysis of Wordsworth's Works in Relation to His Theories

6.2.1 "The Solitary Reaper"

This poem exemplifies Wordsworth's belief that poetry should be rooted in personal, emotional experience. The speaker, encountering a lone Scottish girl singing while harvesting, is captivated by the song's profound emotional effect despite not understanding its words. This moment aligns with Wordsworth's theory of poetry as a medium for deep emotional resonance beyond intellectual comprehension.

From an ideological perspective, "The Solitary Reaper" embodies Wordsworth's Romantic idealization of rural life and the ordinary individual. The solitary figure of the reaper symbolizes the common labourer, whose emotional depth is often overlooked in a society increasingly dominated by industrialization. Eagleton's critique of literature as an ideological construct suggests that Wordsworth's depiction of the reaper serves to romanticize rural life, potentially obscuring the harsh realities of peasant labor. Nevertheless, the poem reinforces the Romantic ideology that authentic emotion and beauty are more likely to be found in the simplicity of nature and the lives of common people than in the urban centers of power and wealth.

6.2.2 "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud"

In this poem, Wordsworth explores the enduring power of memory and imagination. The speaker's encounter with a field of daffodils becomes a transformative experience, one that continues to bring joy long after the initial sighting. This reflects Wordsworth's assertion that poetry arises from "emotion recollected in tranquility."

Eagleton's theory of literature as an ideological form invites an analysis of *I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud* beyond its aesthetic and emotional appeal. The poem's focus on personal emotional fulfillment can be seen as reinforcing an individualistic ideology, where personal experiences of nature provide solace in a rapidly industrializing world. The contrast between the transient moment of encountering the daffodils and the permanence of memory serves as a metaphor for the Romantic resistance to the alienation brought by modernity. Wordsworth's emphasis on the solitary self's emotional response aligns with the Romantic ideology of the poet as a visionary figure.

6.2.3 "She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways"

This lyric mourns the loss of Lucy, a figure often interpreted as representing the fleeting beauty and isolation of rural life. Wordsworth's portrayal of Lucy aligns with his broader ideological commitment to celebrating the overlooked and ordinary. Her death is significant to the speaker alone, reinforcing the Romantic emphasis on individual emotional depth.

From Eagleton's perspective, "She Dwelt Among the Untrodden *Ways"* reflects an ideological investment in the notion of the poet as one who discerns value in what society neglects. However, this romanticization of obscurity and isolation may also be read as a conservative retreat from political engagement. The poem, rather than calling attention to the social conditions that marginalize individuals like Lucy, instead transforms her into a symbol of personal loss and poetic inspiration.

6.2.4 "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal"

This poem continues the theme of loss, but with a more philosophical meditation on death. The speaker acknowledges the inevitability of death, depicting Lucy as now part of the natural world. Wordsworth's use of simple language and direct emotion reinforces his poetic principles.

Eagleton's approach to ideology suggests that such a portrayal of death serves to naturalize loss, potentially downplaying social or historical forces that shape human suffering. By presenting Lucy's death as an organic transition rather than a tragic event, Wordsworth aligns with a Romantic ideology that sees human life as harmoniously intertwined with nature, avoiding overt political or historical engagement.

6.2.5 "London, 1802"

This sonnet is explicitly ideological in its lamentation of England's moral decline. Addressing the poet John Milton, Wordsworth calls for a return to the virtues of the past, criticizing the selfishness and corruption of contemporary England. The poem reflects the poet's disillusionment with the post-revolutionary era and the materialism of industrial society.

Eagleton's framework helps unpack the ideological dimensions of *London, 1802*. Wordsworth's nostalgia for an idealized past can be seen as a conservative impulse, longing for a return to a pre-industrial moral order. However, his critique of materialism and loss of virtue also aligns with Romanticism's broader resistance to the dehumanizing effects of capitalism. Unlike his more personal and introspective poems, *London, 1802* engages with historical realities, demonstrating that Wordsworth's poetry is not entirely detached from ideological concerns.

Through an analysis of Wordsworth's poetry using Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory and Ideology*, we see how Romanticism serves as both an aesthetic movement and an ideological response to historical and social changes. Wordsworth's emphasis on ordinary life, emotion and nature reflects a broader Romantic reaction against industrialization and neoclassical formalism. However, Eagleton's critique of literature as an ideological tool invites a more nuanced understanding: while Wordsworth celebrates the dignity of the common individual, his poetry often refrains from direct political critique, instead offering an aestheticized vision of nature and rural life. Thus, Wordsworth's work exemplifies both the liberatory potential of poetry and its ideological constraints.

7. SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE

7.1 Selections from *Biographia Literaria*: An Overview of the Essay

Biographia Literaria marks a significant shift in literary criticism, embodying the emergence of fundamentally new critical principles in literature. Coleridge's work represents a rejection of the artificial classicism that characterized contemporary English verse, aligning instead with the Romantic Movement's emphasis on emotion, imagination and nature. Despite its revolutionary insights, the work was met with hostility by many of the leading critics of the time.

The essay is both autobiographical and theoretical, containing reflections on literary criticism, philosophy and aesthetics. Notably, Coleridge defines his views on poetry and imagination, distinguishing between the *primary imagination*—the innate human ability to perceive and make sense of the world—and the *secondary imagination*, which is the creative power of the poet. His theory challenges Enlightenment rationalism and foregrounds the role of the poet as an active creator rather than a passive observer. In line with Terry Eagleton's critique of literary ideology, *Biographia Literaria* can be seen as a response to the ideological forces shaping literature at the time, advocating for an organic and holistic approach to artistic creation rather than one dictated by rigid classical norms.

7.2 Analysis of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Works in Relation to His Theoretical Framework

7.2.1 "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"

"The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is a narrative poem that explores themes of guilt, punishment, and redemption through supernatural elements. The mariner's seemingly irrational act of killing the albatross results in ghostly retribution, transforming the ship's voyage into a nightmarish journey of suffering and existential realization. The mariner's ultimate redemption comes through his recognition of the intrinsic value of all living things, reinforcing the Romantic ideology of nature's sanctity.

Coleridge employs strong rhythms and repetitions to align the poem with oral traditions rather than elite literary culture. The insistent rhymes and supernatural imagery emphasize the inexorable forces that govern the mariner's fate. His declaration - "I pass, like night, from land to land"—underlines his cursed compulsion to recount his tale, suggesting that his suffering has ideological implications. In Eagleton's terms, this can be interpreted as a critique of the alienation imposed by rigid social and religious structures, as the mariner's transformation challenges the deterministic worldview upheld by dominant institutions.

Furthermore, the poem's use of poetic devices such as similes ("as idle as a painted ship upon a painted ocean") and alliteration ("about, about, in reel and rout") enhances its immersive effect. However, beyond its literary aesthetics, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" can be viewed as an ideological text that interrogates the consequences of human actions within a broader moral and ecological framework. The mariner's journey from destruction to enlightenment can be read as an allegory for social transformation, reflecting the Romantic ideal of personal and collective redemption.

7.2.2 "Kubla Khan"

"Kubla Khan" presents an imaginative vision of a paradisiacal yet conflicted world, where pleasure and power coexist with ominous, uncontrollable forces. The poem's opening

lines establish a setting of grandeur and order, yet this carefully structured world is disrupted by chaotic, supernatural elements, as seen in the description of the "savage place" haunted by the wailing woman.

The poem can be interpreted as an exploration of poetic inspiration and artistic creation, with the figure of "Kubla Khan" embodying both the authoritative power of empire and the transcendent force of imagination. The sacred river Alph, which runs "through caverns measureless to man," symbolizes the unconscious depths from which artistic inspiration emerges. In Eagleton's terms, the poem reveals the ideological tensions between creativity and control, highlighting how artistic genius resists the constraints of social and political power structures.

The narrator's longing to recreate the Abyssinian maid's song reflects the Romantic belief in the transformative power of art. However, his inability to do so suggests the fragility of artistic vision in the face of external realities. The final lines, which depict the poet as a figure of divine inspiration ("For he on honey-dew hath fed, / And drunk the milk of Paradise"), reinforce the Romantic notion of the poet as a prophet-like figure, yet also hint at the isolation that comes with such visionary insight. This aligns with Eagleton's argument that literature often both reinforces and resists dominant ideologies, serving as a site of ideological struggle.

7.2.3 "Christabel"

"Christabel" is an unfinished narrative poem that tells the story of the innocent Christabel and the enigmatic Geraldine, whose supernatural qualities evoke both fascination and fear. Geraldine's ambiguous nature—simultaneously seductive and monstrous—reflects the anxieties surrounding female sexuality and power in the 19th century.

The poem's ideological undercurrents align with Eagleton's assertion that literature is shaped by historical and social forces. "Christabel" can be read as an exploration of patriarchal anxieties about female agency, with Geraldine's influence over Christabel representing a disruption of conventional gender norms. The Gothic setting and supernatural elements further emphasize this tension, reinforcing the ideological conflict between tradition and transgression.

Coleridge's use of fragmented narrative and evocative imagery heightens the poem's sense of uncertainty and incompletion. The unfinished nature of "Christabel" itself can be interpreted as an ideological statement—perhaps reflecting Coleridge's own ambivalence about fully resolving the poem's themes of power, innocence, and supernatural disruption. As Eagleton suggests, literature often embodies contradictions, revealing ideological struggles rather than resolving them.

Coleridge's major poems – "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," "Kubla Khan" and "Christabel" - demonstrate his engagement with Romantic ideology, particularly in their emphasis on imagination, nature and the supernatural. However, through the lens of Eagleton's *Literary Theory and Ideology*, these works can also be seen as sites of ideological contestation. They reflect tensions between individual creativity and societal constraints, between the power of imagination and the forces of political and religious orthodoxy. By foregrounding the role of the poet as both a visionary and a critic of dominant ideologies, Coleridge's works offer a profound reflection on the transformative potential of literature.

8. MATTHEW ARNOLD

8.1 *The Study of Poetry:* An Overview of the Essay

In his essay *The Study of Poetry*, Matthew Arnold emphasizes the crucial role of poetry in society. He asserts that poetry is "the criticism of life," and the power of this criticism depends on the excellence of the poetry conveying it: "the criticism of life will be of power in proportion as the poetry conveying it is excellent rather than inferior." Arnold argues that poetry's purpose is "to interpret life, to explain meanings beyond our comprehension," asserting that "more and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to complete us, to sustain us." He presents poetry as a medium that provides answers and explanations about the world around us. He further states:

> The future of poetry is immense, because in poetry, where it is worthy of its destinies, our race, as time goes on, will find an ever surer and surer stay. There is not a creed which is not shaken, not an accredited dogma which is not shown to be questionable, not a received tradition which is not threatened to dissolve. Our religion has materialized itself in the fact; it has attached its emotion to the fact, and now the fact is failing it. But for poetry the idea is everything; the rest is a world of illusion, of divine illusion. Poetry attaches its emotion to the idea; the idea is the fact. The strongest part of our religion today is its unconsciousness of poetry (Koplan, 1986, p. 358).

Arnold suggests that science, religion and philosophy are all dependent on poetry, as they would be incomplete without it. He argues that religion fails because it prioritizes supposed facts, which are often subject to change, whereas poetry values ideas, which remain enduring. Science, he contends, requires poetry to unveil the mysteries of nature and illustrate life. Arnold places a significant burden on poetry, expecting it to be of the highest quality: "if we conceive thus highly of the destinies of poetry, we must also set our standard for poetry high, since poetry, to be capable of fulfilling such high destinies, must be poetry of high order of excellence." According to Arnold, the distinction between truth and falsity, as well as between excellence and mediocrity, is more vital in poetry than in prose because poetry has a higher purpose. The best poetry, he claims, possesses "power of forming, sustaining, and delighting us like nothing else can" (Mulhauser, 1960, p. 301).

Arnold identifies two major fallacies in poetic judgment. First, people often judge poetry based on historical context, granting undue credit to ancient poems simply because of their age. Second, judgment is frequently influenced by personal emotions, leading to the undervaluation of contemporary poetry due to the assumption that only ancient works are worthy of praise. He argues that poetry should be evaluated on its intrinsic merit rather than historical or personal biases.

For Arnold, classic poetry is defined not merely by antiquity but by its excellence: a work belongs to the "class of the very best." He warns that good poetry is difficult to define and is better "recognized by being felt in the verse of the master (poet), than by being pursued in the prose of the critic." Nevertheless, he outlines some characteristics of great poetry, such as its manner, matter, and style. He asserts that superior poetry derives its greatness from its truthfulness and seriousness, which, in turn, foster superior diction and movement, culminating in excellence in both style and manner. Anderson (1965) observes that Arnold "had not committed himself to any ordered principle which could be termed classicism" (p. 35).

From a theoretical perspective, Arnold's argument aligns with Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory and Ideology*, which suggests that literature is shaped by and, in turn, shapes ideological forces. Arnold's insistence on poetry's power to interpret life and guide humanity reflects an ideological stance that literature serves as a means of moral and intellectual refinement. His claim that religion is failing due to its attachment to mutable facts rather than enduring ideas echoes Eagleton's view that ideology is historically contingent and subject to transformation. Poetry, for Arnold, becomes a stabilizing force in a world of shifting ideological structures.

8.2 Analysis of Arnold's Works in Relation to His Theoretical Arguments

8.2.1 "Dover Beach"

Set in Dover, on the southeast coast of England, "Dover Beach" uses the ebbing and flowing of the sea as a metaphor for the decline of religious faith. The speaker reflects:

> Sophocles long ago
> Heard it on the Aegean, and it brought
> Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
> Of human misery; we
> Find also in the sound a thought,
> Hearing it by this distant sea.

Here, "ebb" and "flow" symbolize human suffering, suggesting that misery moves like the tide. The poem's central metaphor, "the sea of faith," conveys Arnold's lament for the waning of religious conviction. As Maduakor (1991) notes, "Arnold has successfully used the ebb and flow of the tide to describe the decline of religious faith in his day" (p. 9).

In the final stanza, Arnold presents human love as the only source of stability:

> Ah, love, let us be true
> To one another! For the world, which seems
> To lie before us like a land of dreams,
> So various, so beautiful, so new,
> Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
> Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
> And we are here as on a darkling plain
> Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
> Where ignorant armies clash by night.

The melancholic tone underscores the existential crisis of the modern world, mirroring Arnold's belief in poetry's role as a means of interpreting and coping with reality.

8.2.2 "Requiescat"

Similar to "Dover Beach," this poem has a melancholic tone. The title, a Latin phrase meaning "may she rest," conveys the speaker's grief for a departed loved one. The poem explores the contrast between worldly suffering and the promise of eternal peace:

> Her life was turning, turning,
> In mazes of heat and sound.
> But for peace her soul was yearning,
> And now peace laps her round.

The final stanza evokes a sense of finality:

> Her cabined ample spirit
> It fluttered and failed for breath.
> Tonight it doth inherent
> The vasty hall of death.

This fatalistic outlook aligns with Arnold's literary philosophy, emphasizing poetry's ability to articulate the inevitability of human suffering.

8.2.3 "Shakespeare"

This poem celebrates Shakespeare's genius and independence from classical literary traditions:

> Others abide our question. Thou art free.
> We ask and ask—thou smilest and art still
> Out-topping knowledge.

Arnold's praise for Shakespeare's originality reflects the Romantic ideal of creative freedom. This resonates with Eagleton's argument that literature is not merely an aesthetic enterprise but an ideological construct that embodies societal values.

8.3 Do Arnold's Essay and His Works Agree?

Arnold's poetry reinforces his theoretical arguments by demonstrating how poetry interprets life's complexities. His assertion that poetry, rather than religion, provides meaning is evident in *Dover Beach*, while *Requiescat* and *Shakespeare* illustrate poetry's power to explore mortality and genius. As Robbins (1959) argues, Arnold's literary approach was "consistent in motivation and conservative in aim, idealizing man's moral nature and experience as witnessed in literature and history" (p. 74). Arnold's works, which explore themes like mortality and human genius, reinforce dominant cultural and moral values, illustrating how literature is embedded in social and historical structures. From Eagleton's perspective, Arnold's literary approach, rather than being purely aesthetic or autonomous, operates within ideological frameworks that reflect and uphold specific power relations.

9. CONCLUSION

This study has examined whether the selected European essayists' poems align with the literary theories they advanced in their essays. The analysis confirms that their poetic works remain consistent with the ideological positions they articulated in their theoretical writings. Each essayist adheres to the principles and perspectives outlined in their essays, demonstrating that literary production is inherently shaped by ideological and historical contexts.

This finding aligns with Terry Eagleton's perspective in *Literary Theory and Ideology*, which argues that literature is not produced in a vacuum but is deeply rooted in the ideological frameworks and historical conditions of its time. Eagleton posits that literary texts both reflect and participate in ideological formations, reinforcing or challenging dominant power structures. The selected poems, therefore, serve as ideological expressions, encapsulating the social, political, and historical realities that informed the essayists' theoretical positions.

From this standpoint, knowledge production is neither neutral nor objective; rather, it emerges from human interests and is shaped by social conditions. As Wojciechowski (2001, p. 93) states:

There are two aspects of knowledge, subjective and objective. The act of knowing is subjective but, because of the insertion of the knower in society, this act is also a social fact. Moreover, knowledge is not only the sum total of subjective acts, it is also their product, namely, the knowledge construct. The body of knowledge is a product of individuals, but it takes more than individuals as individuals to build up and preserve it. It requires the existence of an organized group of peoples, i.e., a society persisting through generations, thus making possible synchronic and diachronic communication and accumulation of knowledge beyond the capacity of memorization of individual minds. This assertion underscores the socio-historical nature of literary and theoretical discourses. The poets, as intellectuals embedded in their historical contexts, contribute to the ideological construction of knowledge through their literary works. Their poems not only reflect personal artistic expression but also engage with the dominant and emerging ideological currents of their time. Thus, this study reaffirms the intricate relationship between literary theory, ideology and historical realities, demonstrating that literature remains a crucial site of ideological negotiation and cultural production.

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