

**Literary Criticism (From Plato to Leavis)**  
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**Horace's Ars Poetica**

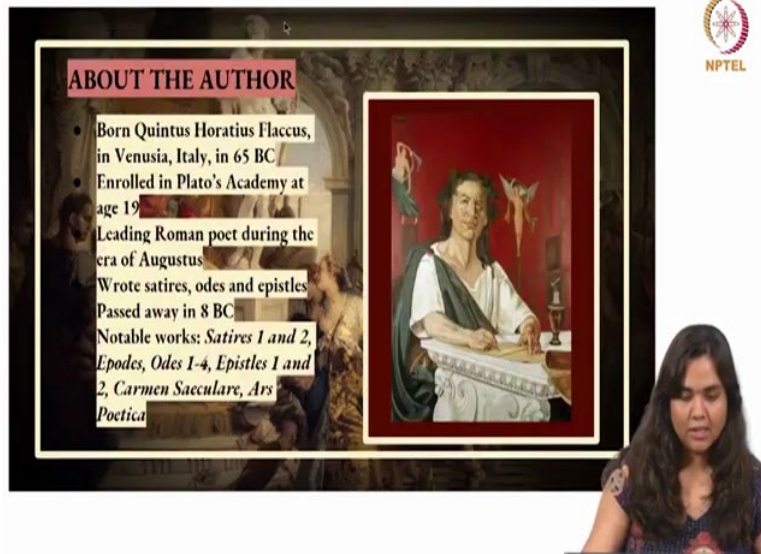
Good Evening, I shall be presenting on Horace's *Ars Poetica*. Now, *Ars Poetica* is one of the three foundational texts of western literary critical thought, the first of which is obviously Aristotle's *Poetics*, followed by *Ars Poetica* and then the third is *Longinus On the Sublime*. So, the objective of this class would be to sort of situate Horace within the canon of Western literary critical thought pertaining to *Ars Poetica* and see the ways in which it has influenced writers and thinkers over time.

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The contents of the presentation are as follows, I will be providing some short notes on the author and his background, following which I shall be focusing on form, genre and Horace's approach to poetry. Following which I will be providing some critique of the work and that is it. Let us get started.

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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

- Born Quintus Horatius Flaccus, in Venusia, Italy, in 65 BC
- Enrolled in Plato's Academy at age 19
- Leading Roman poet during the era of Augustus
- Wrote satires, odes and epistles
- Passed away in 8 BC
- Notable works: *Satires 1 and 2*, *Epodes*, *Odes 1-4*, *Epistles 1 and 2*, *Carmen Saeculare*, *Ars Poetica*

The slide features a portrait of Quintus Horatius Flaccus on the right and an NPTEL logo in the top right corner. A presenter is visible in the bottom right corner of the slide frame.

So, Horace born Quintus Horatius Flaccus in Venusia, Italy in 65 BC and enrolled in Plato's Academy at the age of 19. He was the leading Roman poet during the era of Augustus, I will be speaking more on this later. He wrote Satires, Odes and Epistles mostly and passed away in 8 BC. His notable works include *Satires 1 and 2*, *Epodes*, *Odes 1 to 4*, *Epistles 1 and 2*, *Carmen Saeculare* and *Ars Poetica*.

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**BACKGROUND**

- Written in 19 BC
- Dominant literary/intellectual attitudes of the time: Stoicism, Epicureanism and Skepticism

All three schools of thought accepted the Greek theory of imitation (mimesis) while striving for originality in the Roman context

Horace's place in the literary tradition seemed to be a middle ground between Virgil's Stoic approach and Ovid's very apparent Cynicism

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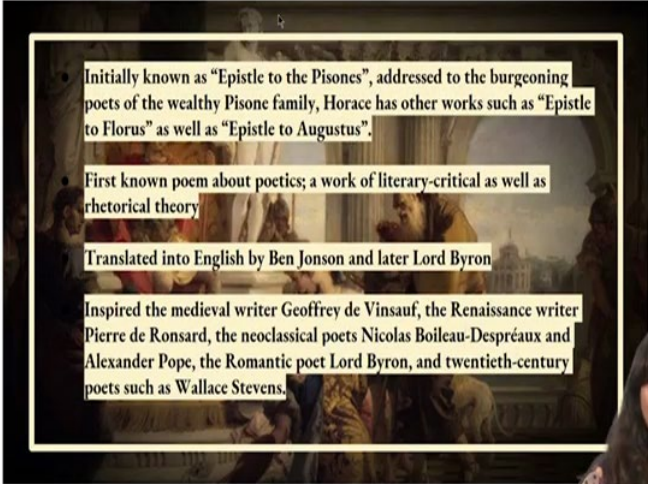
Background: So, *Ars Poetica* was authored in 19 BC and at the time of it being authored the dominant literary or philosophical attitudes were those of Stoicism, Epicureanism and

Skepticism. While Stoicism and Skepticism had strands of seriousness in them, Epicureanism was mostly concerned with the pursuit of pleasure.

And all three schools of thought were diverse and disparate, somewhat disparate. And they accepted the Greek theory of imitation, *Mimesis*, while striving for originality in the Roman context.

So, Horace's place in the literary tradition seems to be a combination of these different strands, and he seems to be occupying a sort of medium between Virgil's Stoicism and Ovid's Cynicism. Obviously, the works being referenced here are Virgil's *Aeneid* and Ovid's *Metamorphosis*.

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Initially known as "Epistle to the Pisones", addressed to the burgeoning poets of the wealthy Pisone family, Horace has other works such as "Epistle to Florus" as well as "Epistle to Augustus".

First known poem about poetics; a work of literary-critical as well as rhetorical theory

Translated into English by Ben Jonson and later Lord Byron

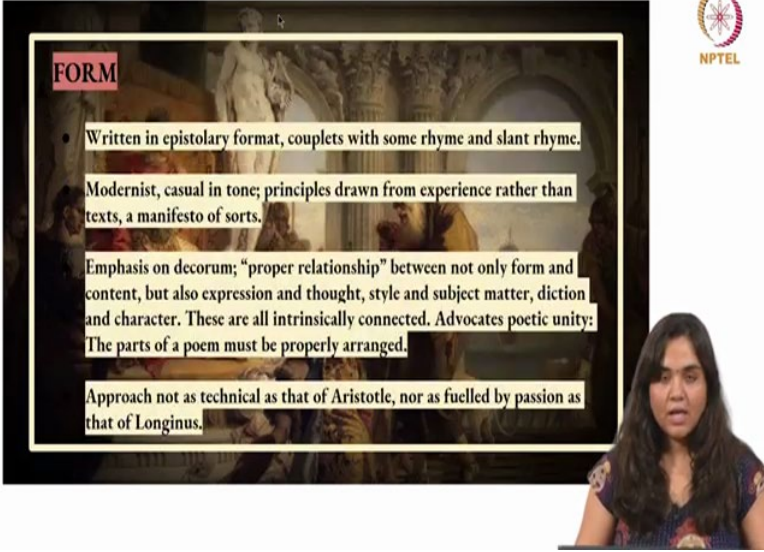

Inspired the medieval writer Geoffrey de Vinsauf, the Renaissance writer Pierre de Ronsard, the neoclassical poets Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux and Alexander Pope, the Romantic poet Lord Byron, and twentieth-century poets such as Wallace Stevens.



The poem itself is written in dactylic hexameter and it was originally written as a letter to the wealthy Pisone family and he has also written other such letters during the course of his career, some of them are *Epistle to Florus* as well as *Epistle to Augustus*. It is the first poem about poetics and not only does it have literary critical importance, but it is also an important work of rhetorical theory.

It was translated into English by Ben Johnson and then later Lord Byron. An inspired plethora of writers such as medieval writer Geoffrey de Vinsauf, the Renaissance writer Pierre de Ronsard, the Neo-classical poets Nicholas Boileau-Despreaux and Alexander Pope, the Romantic poet Lord Byron, and twentieth-century poets such as Wallace Stevens.

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**FORM**

- Written in epistolary format, couplets with some rhyme and slant rhyme.

Modernist, casual in tone; principles drawn from experience rather than texts, a manifesto of sorts.

Emphasis on decorum; “proper relationship” between not only form and content, but also expression and thought, style and subject matter, diction and character. These are all intrinsically connected. Advocates poetic unity: The parts of a poem must be properly arranged.

Approach not as technical as that of Aristotle, nor as fuelled by passion as that of Longinus.



Coming to form, like I mentioned earlier, the poem is written in Epistolary format and couplets with some rhyme and slant rhyme. And there are said to be strands of modernism within the poem and it is fairly casual in tone, we can see that the author is beseeching his audience to follow certain principles that he draws from experience rather than from texts. And in some ways, it is highly prescriptive, although not as technical as the works of Plato or Aristotle and we can call it a manifesto of sorts.

There is a strong emphasis on decorum and the poet insists that there should be a proper relationship, not only between form and content, but also expression and thought, style and subject matter, and diction and character, because these are all integral to the structure of a poem and they are all intimately connected. So, what Horace advocates is poetic unity and lays constant emphasis on the on the parts of a poem being properly arranged and connected.

Approach: Again, comparing Horace to his predecessor such as Aristotle, we see that his work is not, his tone is not as prescriptive, is not as technical as that of Aristotle. However, we do realize that comparing Horace with *Longinus On the Sublime*, we see that it is not as passionate as what Longinus prescribes either.

So, while Longinus spoke often and at length about the concept of, the quality of transport, the ability of a work of art, of literature to transport the reader out of their body, to inspire in them feelings of extreme sublimity, that is not as much of a focus here.

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**GENRE**

- Deep consciousness of genre and the distinctions between different genres. Is aware of his place within the tradition and pays homage to the stalwarts of specific genres.

Knowledge of generic rules is considered integral- diction, meter and subject should align with the genre chosen. The notion of decorum or propriety is quite important.

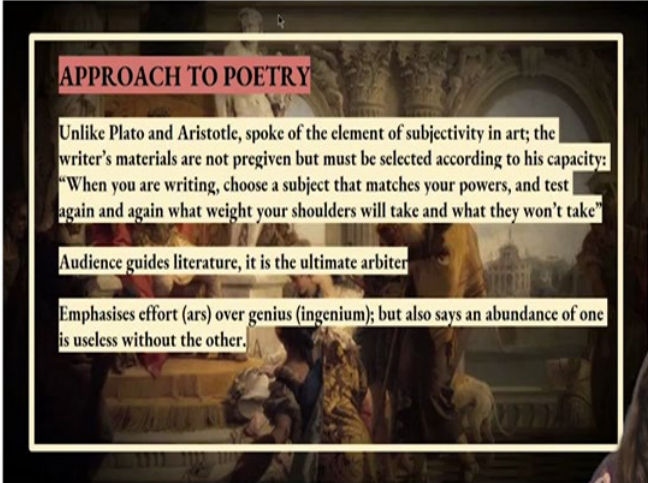


Adherence to loose hierarchy of genres: high genres (epic, tragedy, occasionally history) and low genres. Ambiguity surrounding the status of lyric.

One thing that is that Horace is very particular about is his deep knowledge and awareness of genre and the distinctions between different genres. So, he does accept that there is a hierarchy of genres and he adheres to them loosely. So, there are the high genres such as epic, tragedy and occasionally history and then there are low genres which are considered more base forms of entertainment.

However, the status of lyric is sort of ambiguous, it is seen as attractive, but it is again not accorded much intellectual importance. So, what Horace emphasizes upon is knowledge of generic rules such as diction, meter and subject and which should align with the genre being treated. The decorum and propriety, as I mentioned earlier, are also very important.



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**APPROACH TO POETRY**

Unlike Plato and Aristotle, spoke of the element of subjectivity in art; the writer's materials are not pre-given but must be selected according to his capacity: "When you are writing, choose a subject that matches your powers, and test again and again what weight your shoulders will take and what they won't take"

Audience guides literature, it is the ultimate arbiter

Emphasises effort (*ars*) over genius (*ingenium*); but also says an abundance of one is useless without the other.

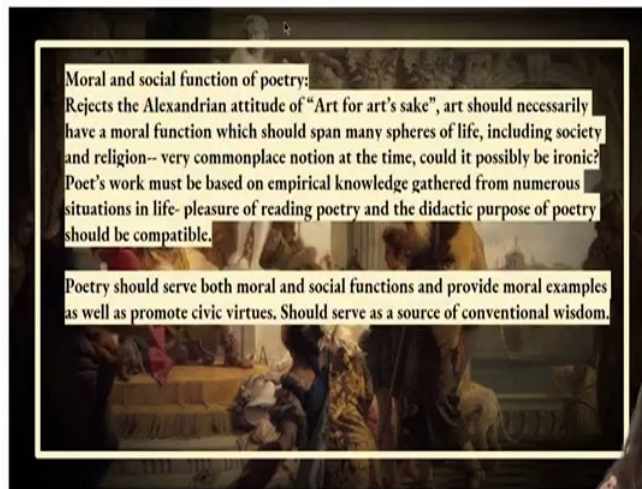
Approach to poetry: Unlike Plato and Aristotle, Horace's approach was more subjective and more realistic, there was a strong strand of pragmatism in his advocacy of poetry and that I will speak about later. He spoke of the element of subjectivity in art and he often said that the writer's selection of subjects should be in tandem with his own capabilities. So, the writer should be aware of what he is capable of producing, that he should be aware of the limits of his ability to create art.

Although Horace did compare poetry to painting he also brought about some new ways of looking at poetry and one of them was this, I am going to quote him now, "When you are writing choose a subject that matches your powers and test again and again what weight your shoulders will take and what they won't take." He reiterates this point a few times, that an author or a poet should be aware of what they are capable of writing and what are the so-called limits of what they are capable of producing.

And there again he emphasizes quite a lot on the ability of the audience to guide literature. In some ways this can be seen as an anticipation of Reader-Response criticism. And he often says that it is the audience that is the ultimate decider, the ultimate arbiter, when it comes to judging the quality of a piece of poetry.

Again, like the debate on the tussle between effort and genius, technique and genius, *Ars and ingenium*, respectively, is present here as well and again, is extended in Longinus, but here the crux of the argument is that effort should ideally take precedence over genius, but also an abundance of one without any of the others is quite useless.

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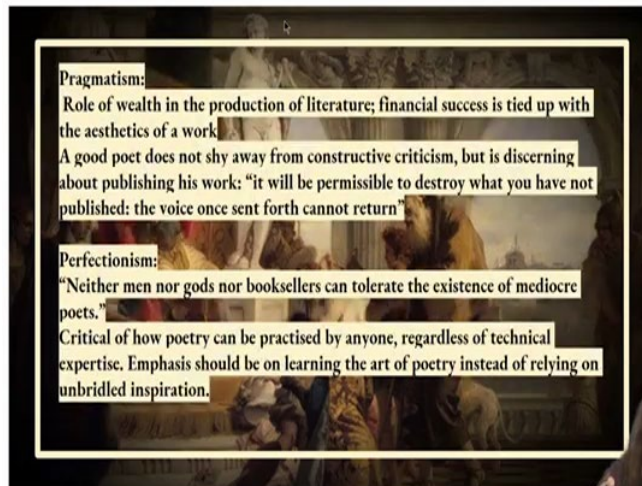
So, necessarily, poetry should serve a moral and social function is what Horace believed. He rejected the Alexandrian attitude of art for art's sake alone. And the moral and social function of poetry should extend to the spheres of life, including society and religion. However, this does not seem to be in line with Horace's otherwise contrarian attitude, and this was a notion that was quite commonplace at the time, a notion that we have seen in Plato's *Republic*, where he did say that poetry was useless and that poets should be rusticated from society.

And so, although this was a very commonplace notion, we might be able to see as to how it was ironic in Horace's case, given his given his tendency to postulate things that sort of deviated from the ordinary.

The poet's work must be based on empirical knowledge, again experience gathered from situations in life and poetry should combine pleasure as well as didactic lessons. So poetry should not be for pleasure sake alone or serve just a moral or a social purpose, there should be a combination of these two things for poetry to be considered ideal.

Along with serving as a source of conventional wisdom and citing numerous examples to that end, poetry should also promote civic virtues and want to inspire people to become better citizens.

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The strand of Pragmatism like I mentioned earlier, is quite strong in Horace's work and like some critiques of him mentioned later, his strand of pragmatism is also directly tied up with his situation in life. So, Horace started his career, at the start of his career Horace opposed Augustus, but eventually came under the patronage of Augustus.

So, for this he was subjected to a fair bit of criticism, because people did view him as a turncoat, but what Horace maintains is that the role of wealth is of utmost importance in the production of literature and to this end, poets should not be afraid of seeking monetary patronage.

So, the financial success of a work cannot be seen as independent from the aesthetics of a work and for that a good poet does not shy away from seeking patronage, because it is that patronage that enables him to focus solely on the creation of poetry. Again, when it comes to receiving and dealing with criticism, Horace is of the opinion that a good poet does not shy away from constructive criticism.

However, what is very important here is that a poet, a good poet is often very discerning about when and where to publish his work, especially when, because if it does not meet a certain standard, the poet has to live with the knowledge of his work being disseminated and him having no way to take it back. The fact that his work will enter the mainstream and enter consciousness of the public and he will not have any way to recall it, is something that the poet should keep in mind.



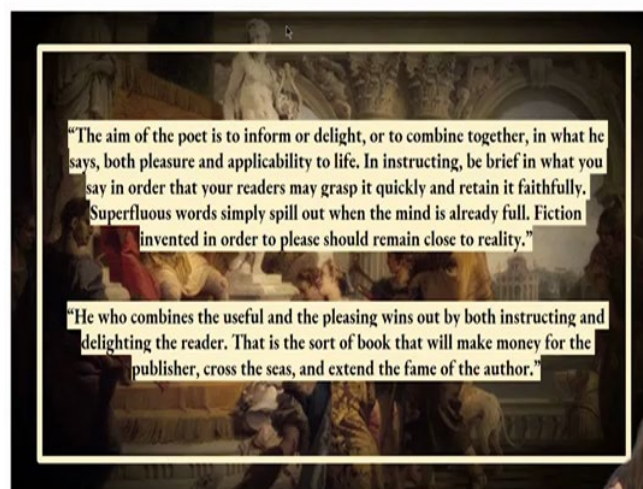
To this end there is a quote, “It will be permissible to destroy what you have not published: the voice once sent forth cannot return.” Coming to perfectionism in Horace’s work, Horace insists upon this, “Neither men nor Gods nor booksellers can tolerate the existence of mediocre poets.”

So, here we see how perfectionism should not only refer, perfectionism should not only be tied up with how the poet views his work, it is also something that is expected by the audience, by Gods and by those who are looking to achieve monetary success by publishing. So, he is of the opinion that poets should practice a fair bit of discernment when it comes to creating their work, as well as striving for perfection, which should obviously be a very important aspect of creating poetry.

And to this end, he is critical of how poetry can be practiced by anyone regardless of whether or not they have technical expertise in it. What he keeps reiterating is that emphasis should be on learning the art of poetry, as is reflected in the name of the work itself, *Ars Poetica*, instead of relying on unbridled inspiration.

Here we can see how Horace’s thoughts on this topic differ from *Longinus On the Sublime*, while Longinus speaks about the sublime causing readers and the audience to not be able to contain their emotions, saying that the sublime stems from a place of deep unbridled creativity. The focus here again, is shifted to the technique behind producing such poetry and saying that merely creative inspiration is not enough.

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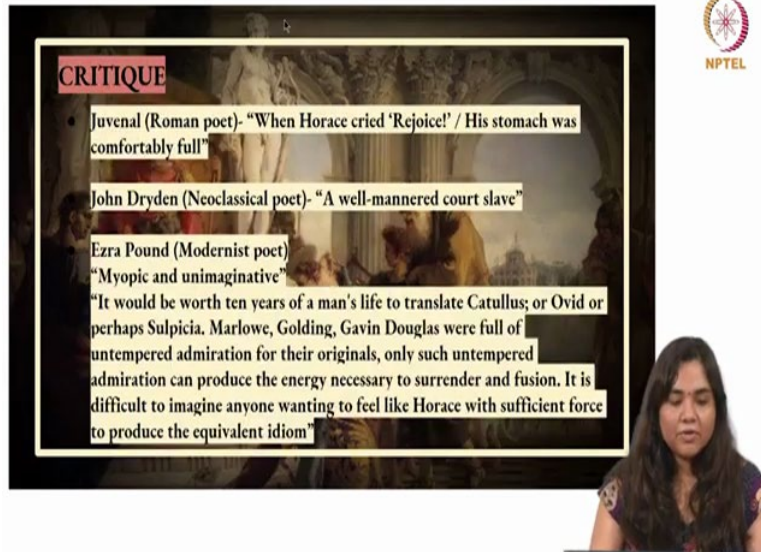
Again, I shall be quoting two stanzas from the poem to show how exactly Horace envisions poetry to be in its ideal form: “The aim of the poet is to inform or delight or to combine together in what he says both pleasure and applicability to life. In instructing be brief in what you say, in order that your readers may grasp it quickly and retain it faithfully. Superfluous words simply spill out when the mind is already full. Fiction invented in order to please should remain close to reality.”

Here, we can see how Horace emphasizes on brevity for one, as well as the need to remain close to reality, the need to adhere to realism. These again, are things that we take for granted now when it comes to viewing literary texts, things that are not seen as very out of the ordinary, but at the time these were again important points that he thought poets should keep in mind.

“He who combines the useful and the pleasing wins out by both instructing and delighting the reader. That is the sort of book that will make money for the publisher, cross the seas, and extend the fame of the author.” So, instructing and delighting the reader, here we can see how the purpose of poetry is again like I mentioned earlier, the didactic and the pleasure-providing purposes of poetry are emphasized upon and they go hand in hand with each other, one is not sacrificed for the other. And instructing and delighting- these are both seen as equally important functions of poetry.

And again, monetary gain is not seen as is not seen as a negative here. Art for art’s sake is rejected as an axiom. So, the fact that a publisher can publish, that a poet can write poetry that will be published by a publisher who views it as a lucrative undertaking is not seen as something that is morally corrupt. It is seen, it is accepted as only natural and is considered integral to how a poet is supposed to earn his living.

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**CRITIQUE**

- Juvenal (Roman poet)- "When Horace cried 'Rejoice!' / His stomach was comfortably full"
- John Dryden (Neoclassical poet)- "A well-mannered court slave"
- Ezra Pound (Modernist poet)  
"Myopic and unimaginative"  
"It would be worth ten years of a man's life to translate Catullus; or Ovid or perhaps Sulpicia. Marlowe, Golding, Gavin Douglas were full of untempered admiration for their originals, only such untempered admiration can produce the energy necessary to surrender and fusion. It is difficult to imagine anyone wanting to feel like Horace with sufficient force to produce the equivalent idiom"

Coming to critique of Horace's work, I shall be looking at ancient poets from the classical age as well as contemporary critics. So, Juvenal the Roman poet said this, "When Horace cried rejoice, his stomach was comfortably full." Now, this again is tied up with Horace's confusing allegiances, and his complete and utter disregard as to how people might view him changing allegiances that often. Obviously this is a reference to him seeking patronage under Augustus, in spite of the fact that he had begun his career in opposition to Augustus.

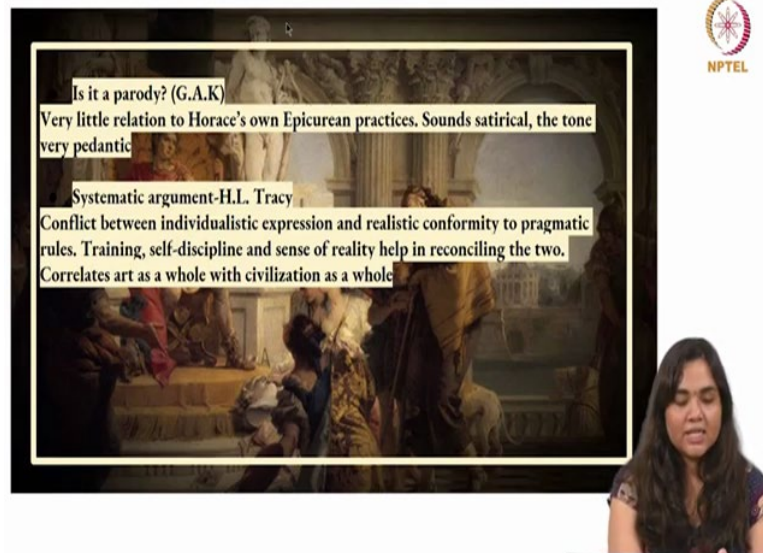
John Dryden, the neoclassical poet says this, that Horace was "a well-mannered court slave." Now Horace's pragmatism is seen in different ways by different people, his belief that poetry should be created with an economic end in mind is utterly rejected by neoclassical poets who are obviously coming from a place of following what classical poets had to say on the topic of poetry and that was that poetry should compulsorily serve a moral and social function.

Ezra Pound, the modernist poet has this to say, he calls *Ars Poetica* "myopic and unimaginative." And he says this, "It would be worth ten years of a man's life to translate Catullus, or Ovid, or perhaps Sulpicia. Marlowe, Golding, Gavin Douglas were full of untempered admiration for their originals, only such untempered admiration can produce the energy necessary to surrender and fusion. It is difficult to imagine anyone wanting to feel like Horace with sufficient force to produce the equivalent idiom."

Pound is of the opinion that *Ars Poetica* is undeserving of the place that it has been afforded in the Western literary canon and that it is quite irrelevant in recent times. Now, this can be seen in light of Pound's emphasis on individualism, which is directly at loggerheads with *Ars*

*Poetica*, with the tenet in *Ars Poetica* that emphasizes on the social and moral function of poetry, emphasizes on the need of poetry to serve, to appreciate civic virtues and appreciate and inspire civic virtues.

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Is it a parody? (G.A.K)  
Very little relation to Horace's own Epicurean practices. Sounds satirical, the tone very pedantic

Systematic argument-H.L. Tracy  
Conflict between individualistic expression and realistic conformity to pragmatic rules. Training, self-discipline and sense of reality help in reconciling the two.  
Correlates art as a whole with civilization as a whole

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A question that is often brought up, like I mentioned earlier, is whether *Ars Poetica* is a parody. So, it is widely known that Horace in his own beliefs was Epicurean, that his beliefs were geared towards the pursuit of pleasure and pleasure alone. And so, for him to emphasize at great length upon the social and moral function of poetry, seems to deviate from what he seems to preach in his other works. To that end it sounds satirical, and its tone sounds very pedantic as though the author is occupying a much higher moral ground than he actually does.

H.L. Tracy considers *Ars Poetica* to be a systematic argument. Like I mentioned earlier, there is a conflict between individualistic expression and realistic conformity to pragmatic rules. We can try to understand Ezra Pound's critique of *Ars Poetica* in this light, because Ezra Pound was of course heavily bent on individualistic expression. So, training self-discipline and a sense of reality help in reconciling the two, that of individually expression and realistic conformity.

So, what Horace does through this work of art, by correlating art as a whole with civilization as a whole, he helps us view art in a multi-faceted way and helps us see art not only in the ways that it might provide pleasure to readers, that it might prove to be aesthetically pleasing

to readers, or inspire feelings of happiness in them or sadness as well, but also in the ways that it might prove to be instrumental in the betterment of society as a whole.