

Literary Criticism (From Plato to Leavis)
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Samuel Johnson's Preface to Shakespeare
(Session3)

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the original masters of our language.

These observations are to be considered not as unexceptionably constant, but as containing general and predominant truth. Shakespeare's familiar dialogue is affirmed to be smooth and clear, yet not wholly without ruggedness or difficulty; as a country may be eminently fruitful, though it has spots unfit for cultivation: His characters are praised as natural, though their sentiments are sometimes forced, and their actions improbable; as the earth upon the whole is spherical, though its surface is varied with protuberances and cavities.

Shakespeare with his excellencies has likewise faults, and faults sufficient to obscure and overwhelm any other merit. I shall shew them in the proportion in which they appear to me, without envious malignity or superstitious veneration. No question can be more innocently discussed than a dead poet's pretensions to renown; and little regard is due to that bigotry which sets candour higher than truth.

His first defect is that to which may be imputed most of the evil in books or in men. He sacrifices virtue to convenience, and is so much more careful to please than to instruct, that he seems to write without any moral purpose. From his writings indeed a system of social duty may be selected, for he that thinks reasonably must think morally: but his presents, and



Hello and welcome to yet another session of this course on Literary Criticism. We are reading through Samuel Johnson's *Preface to Shakespeare*. This as we have noted before, is one of the iconic texts which had cemented the literary reputation of William Shakespeare. So, after having outlined the general excellences, the general nature of Shakespeare which has earned him the reputation which has outlived a century, now, Johnson proceeds to look at some of the faults that he has identified in Shakespeare's oeuvre of work. And here, we also notice this balanced approach that Johnson has towards literary criticism and also in evaluating Shakespeare's works. So he begins with this almost prefatory kind of expression before he starts addressing the faults, he notices, "His characters are praised as natural though their sentiments are sometimes forced, and their actions improbable; as the earth upon the whole is spherical, though its surface is varied with protuberances and cavities."

So it is a natural kind of thing that he locates as faults within Shakespeare's works that just as you can notice certain kind of uneven land in earth, which is otherwise seen as spherical, in the same way that we notice certain kinds of inconsistencies and flaws in the works of Shakespeare. The term that he uses to talk about the critical things in Shakespeare's work is faults and "Shakespeare with his excellencies has likewise faults, and faults, sufficient to

obscure and overwhelm any other merit. I shall show them in the proportion in which they appear to me without envious malignity or superstitious veneration.”

So this is the balance that he aims to strike. “No question can be more innocently discussed than a dead poet’s pretensions to renown, and little regard is due to that bigotry which sets candour higher than the truth.” That is also a note that he began with this debate between the merit, the relative merit of antiquity vis-a-vis, the modern writers.


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axioms drop casually from him; he makes no just distribution of good or
evil, nor is always careful to shew in the virtuous a disapprobation of the
wicked; he carries his persons indifferently through right and wrong, and
at the close dismisses them without further care, and leaves their examples
to operate by chance. This fault the barbarity of his age cannot extenuate;
for it is always a writer's duty to make the world better, and justice is a
virtue independant on time or place.

The plots are often so loosely formed, that a very slight consideration
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So, he goes on to talk about the faults; the first one. “His first defect is that to which may be imputed most of the evil in books and in men. He sacrifices virtue to convenience, and is so much more careful to please than to instruct that he seems to write without any moral purpose.” So we find the inherent morality in Johnson's framework at work over here. So we find that he expects a certain sense of morality in any kind of aesthetic creation, in any kind of literary expression.

And he finds it quite wanting in Shakespeare, that in “his writings indeed a system of social duty may be selected, for he that thinks reasonably must think morally, but his precepts and axioms drop casually from him; he makes no just distribution of good or evil nor is always careful to show in the virtuous a disapprobation of the wicked, he carries his persons indifferently through right and wrong, and at the close dismisses them without further care, and leaves their examples to operate by chance. This fault, the barbarity of his age cannot extenuate, for it is always a writer’s duty to make the world better and justice as a virtue independent on time or place.”

So he is talking about this universal quality that he thinks should be there in any work of literature, which is to work towards the betterment of the individuals in the society. We do find a reflection of the platonic attitude towards literature towards poets that unless a poet edifies and Plato also believed that the poet perhaps has no power to edify and hence, should be banished from the ideal Republic. So this has been very straightforwardly and very directly stated over here.

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The plots are often so loosely formed, that a very slight consideration may improve them, and so carelessly pursued, that he seems not always fully to comprehend his own design. He omits opportunities of instructing or delighting which the train of his story seems to force upon him, and apparently rejects those exhibitions which would be more affecting, for the sake of those which are more easy.

It may be observed, that in many of his plays the latter part is evidently neglected. When he found himself near the end of his work, and, in view of his reward, he shortened the labour, to snatch the profit. He therefore remits his efforts where he should most vigorously exert them, and his catastrophe is improbably produced or imperfectly represented.

He had no regard to distinction of time or place, but gives to one age or nation, without scruple, the customs, institutions, and opinions of another, at the expence not only of likelihood, but of possibility. These faults Pope has endeavoured, with more zeal than judgment, to transfer to his imagined in interpolators. We need not wonder to find Hector quoting Aristotle, when we see the loves of Theseus and Hippolyta combined with the Gothic mythology of fairies. Shakspeare indeed was not the only



And Johnson also seems to think that this is very deliberate. He omits opportunities of instructing or delighting which the train of his story seems to force upon him, and apparently rejects those exhibitions which would be more affecting, for the sake of those which are easier. So, there is a way in which the plot becomes almost slavish to convenience. And we also need to keep in mind that much of the plot devices and many of those stage instructions were actually based on convenience during the time that Shakespeare's plays were performed. Because he did not have the time to add certain things into his script and convenience was of course, a big matter when he was also churning out hits one after the other. And he also identifies another problem in his plot, the structure of his plot, how Shakespeare was quite neglectful towards the latter half of his work.

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critics have also discussed about, how certain parts and his work are hastily formed and hastily concluded and there would be complex plots and complex narratives that Shakespeare would be exploring throughout his play. And when it comes to the final act and the final scene, there seems to be a hasty way in which he brings everything to conclusion. So Johnson obviously identifies that as a fault.

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in the same age Sidney, who wanted not the advantages of learning has, in his *Arcadia* confounded the pastoral with the feudal times, the days of innocence, quiet and security with those of turbulence, violence and adventure.” He is referring to a major flaw which later has been identified as anachronism. So this is about placing certain things which are historically not in sync, for instance, in the Roman plays, there is a clock that is shown in Shakespeare's plays. And that is an anachronism because clocks were not yet invented during the Roman time when the plays were historically set.



So this disregard to the distinction of time and place is seen as another major fault and he says, this is not something that only Shakespeare has committed. We find this in Sidney's *Arcadia* too and in spite of Sidney's scholarships, Sidney's learning and his proclivity towards these fine details, we find that in spite of that scholarship we find Sidney's work also committing such grave errors. And this he is also through this implying that it is quite understandable that someone of Shakespeare's learning perhaps it was quite okay that he had committed those errors. But one also needs to be attentive to the fact that these anachronisms and this disregard, as Johnson puts it, towards the age or place, towards the time or place, it does not really affect the aesthetic considerations of the play.

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In his comic scenes he is seldom very successful, when he engages his characters in reciprocations of smartness and contest of sarcasm; their jests are commonly gross, and their pleasantry licentious; neither his gentlemen nor his ladies have much delicacy, nor are sufficiently distinguished from his clowns by any appearance of refined manners. Whether he represented the real conversation of his time is not easy to determine; the reign of Elizabeth is commonly supposed to have been a time of stateliness, formality and reserve, yet perhaps the relaxations of that severity were not very elegant. There must, however, have been always some modes of gayety preferable to others, and a writer ought to chuse the best.

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He also finds some of the comic scenes very problematic. "In his comic scenes he is seldom very successful, when he engages his characters in reciprocations of smartness and contest of sarcasm, their jests are commonly gross and their pleasantry licentious." We need to keep in mind that Shakespeare was also writing for the groundlings and not just for the elite in the society. "Neither his gentlemen nor his ladies have much delicacy." So there is a problem that he identifies in the manner in which the characters have been formed, the characters have been presented, and not only his comedy, but his representation is also seen as very gross and quite inferior.

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which were not presentable in the present age. So, we do find this sense of modesty, we find the sense of modesty prevailing over other aesthetic judgments.

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In tragedy his performance seems constantly to be worse, as his labour is more. The effusions of passion which exigence forces out are for the most part striking and energetic; but whenever he solicits his invention, or strains his faculties, the offspring of his throes is tumour, meanness, tediousness, and obscurity.


In narration he affects a disproportionate pomp of diction and a wearisome train of circumlocution, and tells the incident imperfectly in many words, which might have been more plainly delivered in few. Narration in dramatick poetry is, naturally tedious, as it is unanimated and inactive, and obstructs the progress of the action; it should therefore always be rapid, and enlivened by frequent interruption. Shakespeare



In this evaluation, while trying to be quite objective and quite dispassionate to his best, we find Johnson identifying, almost nitpicking at Shakespeare's works and now there is a problem he identifies with the tragedy. In tragedy, his performance seems constantly to be worse as his labor is more. And remember some other critics had also pointed out as the first half of Johnson's preface also highlighted. Many had thoughts that his natural inclination is towards comedy, which at that point of time in the first half, Johnson had also justified it by saying, his skill is more evident in tragedy. But here he is saying, almost contradicting himself, "His labor is more in tragedy; the effusions of passion, which exigence forces out are for the most part, striking and energetic, but whenever he solicits his invention, or strains his faculties, the offspring of his throes is tumor, meanness, tediousness and obscurity."

So, this is what happens when you engage with something which is not within your natural capacity. He is also stating, though not very directly, his belief in this kind of aestheticism where he believes that all artists have a certain natural inclination towards certain kinds of productions, and they should perhaps stick best to that.

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His declamations or set speeches are commonly cold and weak, for his power was the power of nature; when he endeavoured, like other tragick writers, to catch opportunities of amplification, and instead of inquiring what the occasion demanded, to show how much his stores of knowledge



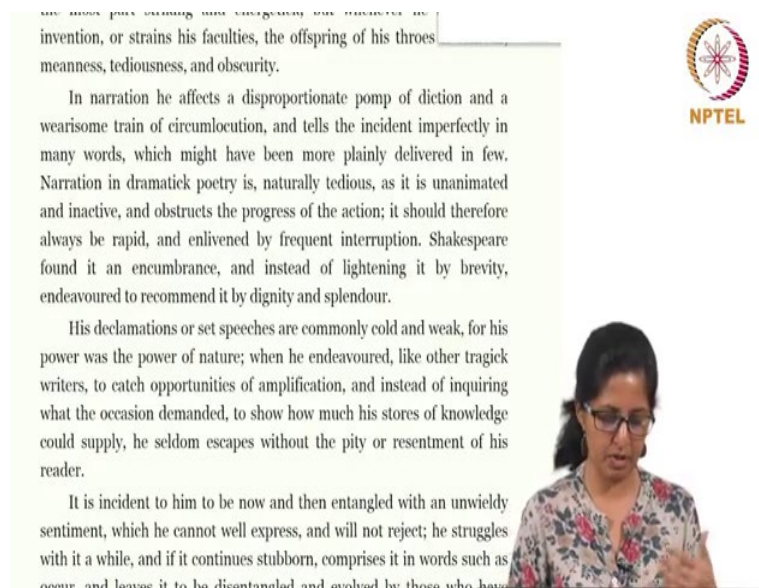
And interestingly, in this discussion of the faults, there are very few examples that he gives, which also leads us to suspect that he is perhaps deliberately trying to bring in, deliberately trying to do this sort of nitpicking in order to find acceptance, find credibility, and also give a sense of balance to the kind of critical approach that he is putting forward. Now there is a problem that he identifies with the mode of narration. He tells the incident imperfectly, in many words, which might have been plainly delivered in few. So to that there is also another side to this observation that Shakespeare actually had to ensure that everyone is getting the story because the props were very limited during that time, and one had to depend entirely on narration. There were not techniques to show flashbacks and that was not really an in thing then. So one had to rely entirely on the power of narration and how that would be received by the audience. So, too many details and too many words and sometimes a lot of repetitions were needed to ensure that the plays were really making sense.

And one also needs to keep in mind the conditions of production, the conditions of theatrical staging, then, and they had to depend entirely on the loud voice that the artists had on stage. So such repetitions and these sort of recurrences and sometimes using a series of words instead of very cryptically and plainly stating that those were the necessities of those times as well.

“Narration in dramatic poetry is naturally tedious”, of course, Johnson is also very well-aware of that fact, “as it is unanimated and inactive and obstructs the progress of the action; it

should therefore always be rapid and enlivened by frequent interruption. Shakespeare found it an encumbrance, and instead of lightening it by brevity, endeavored to recommend it by dignity and splendor.” We are not even sure whether this is properly a criticism. It is more like a criticism which is laced with compliments as well. And of course, he is critical of the lack of brevity. But he also shows how very well-dignified and splendid, those articulations were, those tedious, long, poetic renditions, they were also splendid and very dignified.

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It is incident to him to be now and then entangled with an unwieldy sentiment, which he cannot well express, and will not reject; he struggles with it a while, and if it continues stubborn, comprises it in words such as occur and leaves it to be disarticulated and evaded by those who have

But there is a problem again, with the declamation or set speeches. Johnson is of the opinion that those were commonly cold and weak, “For his power was the power of nature, when he endeavored like other tragic writers, to catch opportunities of amplification, and instead of inquiring what the occasion demanded, to show how much his stores of knowledge could supply, he seldom escapes without the pity or resentment of his reader.” And we also have a very different attitude towards the set speeches that we find in Shakespeare's works. If you could think of some of those examples such as the very famous speech made by Mark Antony in his work, *Julius Caesar*, we know that this has an almost universal and continuing quality, which continues to enthrall audience of different kinds.

So, this is a very subjective opinion that Johnson has, we realize, and it is also heavily rooted in the neoclassical tradition where anything which is devoid of intellect and wit is seen as lacking or it is seen as an extravagance. But on the contrary, we also realize that looking back on the Romantic period, this entire period of neoclassicism, it is seen as a display of extravaganza, it is seen as a lot of arrogant display of intellect and wit and entirely devoid of

emotions. We also need to evaluate Johnson's criticism of Shakespeare in this context as well, but nevertheless, it is important for us to remember that this is certainly the work which cemented and consolidated the literary reputation of Shakespeare as a writer.



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Not that always where the language is intricate the thought is subtle, or the image always great where the line is bulky; the equality of words to things is very often neglected, and trivial sentiments and vulgar ideas disappoint the attention, to which they are recommended by sonorous epithets and swelling figures.

But the admirers of this great poet have never less reason to indulge their hopes of supreme excellence, than when he seems fully resolved to sink them in dejection, and mollify them with tender emotions by the fall of greatness, the danger of innocence, or the crosses of love. He is not long soft and pathetic without some idle conceit, or contemptible



And he is also talking about the way in which sometimes Shakespeare just gives up and allows language to be entangled in many confusions. And he says, “Not that always where the language is intricate the thought is subtle, or the image always great where the line is bulky; the equality of words to things is very often neglected, and trivial sentiments and vulgar ideas disappoint the attention to which they are recommended by sonorous epithets and swelling figures.” This is a mismatch. He identifies that just the way there is a mismatch between the characters, the status that these characters embody and the way they are presented, in the same way, in emotion and language, he finds a gross mismatch and sometimes trivial sentiments are being given a lot of attention through sonorous epithets and swelling figures where they may not need it at all.

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and terror and pity, as they are rising in the mind, are checked and
blasted by sudden frigidity.

A quibble is to Shakespeare, what luminous vapours are to the
traveller; he follows it at all adventures, it is sure to lead him out of his
way, and sure to amuse him in the mire. It has some malignant properties





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So, this is also the problem that he identifies in terms of the narration; as and when the readers are pumped up to engage in an emotion of terror and piety, they also find that the narration is not holding up to their expectations and they are immediately checked and blasted by sudden frigidity. One could have varied opinions about it, but it is important to see where Johnson intervenes, where Johnson comes from at this point of time. He is also heavily rooted in the neoclassical tradition where language and its gravity is extremely important for those writers.

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“Now, a quibble is to Shakespeare, what luminous vapors are to the traveler, he follows it at all adventures, it is sure to lead him out of his way.” And the quibble was one of the essential things, one of the essential charms of Shakespeare's plays, but Johnson finds it extremely distracting, and he thinks that it is something that had distracted Shakespeare also to a great extent. “A quibble is the golden apple for which he will always turn aside from his career or stoop from his elevation. A quibble, poor and barren as it is, gave him such delight that he was content to purchase it by the sacrifice of reason, propriety and truth. A quibble was to him the fatal Cleopatra, for which he lost the world and was content to lose it.” Again this criticism is very much laced, very much wrapped in this beautiful compliment of the quibble being the fatal Cleopatra, for which he was content to lose the world. So we do find the balanced way in which Johnson is endeavoring to critique Shakespeare's works.



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It will be thought strange, that, in enumerating the defects of this
writer, I have not yet mentioned his neglect of the unities; his violation of
those laws which have been instituted and established by the joint
authority of poets and of critics.

For his other deviations from the art of writing, I resign him to critical
justice, without making any other demand in his favour, than that which
must be indulged to all human excellence; that his virtues be rated with his
failings: But, from the censure which this irregularity may bring upon him,
I shall, with due reverence to that learning which I must oppose, adventure
to try how I can defend him.

His histories, being neither tragedies nor comedies, are not subject to
any of their laws; nothing more is necessary to all the praise which they
expect, than that the changes of action be so prepared as to be understood,



Now Johnson comes to the most serious fault that he identifies. “It will be thought strange that in enumerating the defects of this writer I have not yet mentioned his neglect of the unities, his violation of those laws which have been instituted and established by the joint authority of poets and critics.” So in case the readers of his time are wondering why Johnson has not yet mentioned the violation of unities, he has a response for this.

And we also find the way in which this argument is being built up. He is focusing on the things which are largely innocuous or things which could be neglected in order to perhaps defend Shakespeare from this greatest fault that all the others have been pointing out. We find that Johnson through this, he also becomes the first English critic to have his own opinion articulated in such clear terms about the case of unities. Here, we also need to keep in mind that hearing about the opinion that Aristotle had about the unities, we realize that it is only a passing mention that he had made about the unities but it had become so rigid in the classical times as well as in the proceeding decades that it became almost like an inviolable sort of thing when one is composing drama, when one is composing such forms of writing.

“For his other deviations from the art of writing, I resigned him to critical justice without making any other demands in his favor, than that which must be indulged to all human excellence that has virtues be rated with his failings. But from the censure which this irregularity may bring upon him, I shall with due reverence to that learning which I must oppose adventure to try how I can defend him.” Here lies a cardinal point in this entire essay.

Now we also realize that Johnson's major objective over here, major aim over here is to defend Shakespeare from the most dominant criticism of that period against Shakespeare, that he had violated the unities. And he also realizes, and he is also spelling it out very clearly over here that he needs to go against that very learning on which his entire critical foundation is based upon, “with due reverence to that learning, which I must oppose”.

He is staying rooted in the neoclassical tradition, but he is also going against the grain of it. It is a very important milestone, a literary history over here, which is why the preface to Shakespeare is also seen as one of the important texts, which defines the cardinal points, the cardinal trajectory, the cardinal movements within literary history.

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those laws which have been instituted and established by authority of poets and of critics.

For his other deviations from the art of writing, I resign him to critical justice, without making any other demand in his favour, than that which must be indulged to all human excellence; that his virtues be rated with his failings: But, from the censure which this irregularity may bring upon him, I shall, with due reverence to that learning which I must oppose, adventure to try how I can defend him.

His histories, being neither tragedies nor comedies, are not subject to any of their laws; nothing more is necessary to all the praise which they expect, than that the changes of action be so prepared as to be understood, that the incidents be various and affecting, and the characters consistent, natural and distinct. No other unity is intended, and therefore none is to be sought.

In his other works he has well enough preserved the unity of action. He has not, indeed, an intrigue regularly perplexed and regularly unravelled; he does not endeavour to hide his design on PREFACE TO SHAKESPEARE for this is seldom the order of real events, and Shakespeare is the poet of nature: But his plan has commonly what Aristotle requires, a beginning, a middle, and an end; one event is concatenated with another, and the

We will also quickly wrap up with this and in the final session, we shall take a look at how he successfully defends Shakespeare's violation of the unities. Here we shall quickly look at how he brings in Aristotle to the scene and then it is almost like a case which is already won. “His histories being neither tragedies nor comedies are not subject to any of their laws, nothing more is necessary to all the praise which they expect than that the changes of action be so prepared as to be understood that the incidents be various and affecting and the characters consistent, natural, indistinct. No other unity is intended and therefore none is to be sought.”

Before he starts defending the violation of the three unities, he is arguing that Shakespeare's characters are consistent, natural and distinct. Yet now, we also need to identify some of the inconsistencies and some of the contradictions which are inherent in Johnson's writing. But we also need to realize the larger aim within which he is working, the larger objectives of this

text, which is to cement the literary reputation of Shakespeare, not to completely devalue him in any way but to give a balanced sense of criticism to him and to rescue him from one of these greatest charges being leveled against him. And he also realizes that he is also at such a historical time where he needs to act as this rescuer, to provide such an extensive preface defending him.

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I shall, with due reverence to that learning which I must oppose, to try how I can defend him.

His histories, being neither tragedies nor comedies, are not subject to any of their laws; nothing more is necessary to all the praise which they expect, than that the changes of action be so prepared as to be understood, that the incidents be various and affecting, and the characters consistent, natural and distinct. No other unity is intended, and therefore none is to be sought.

In his other works he has well enough preserved the unity of action. He has not, indeed, an intrigue regularly perplexed and regularly unravelled; he does not endeavour to hide his design only to discover it, for this is seldom the order of real events, and Shakespeare is the poet of nature: But his plan has commonly what Aristotle requires, a beginning, a middle, and an end; one event is concatenated with another, and the conclusion follows by easy consequence. There are perhaps some incidents that might be spared, as in other poets there is much talk that only fills up time upon the stage; but the general system makes gradual advances, and the end of the play is the end of expectation.

To the unities of time and place he has shewn no regard, and perhaps a narrow view of the mistakes on which they stand will diminish their

So, he then brings in Aristotle, “His plan”, Shakespeare's plan, “has commonly what Aristotle requires, a beginning, a middle and an end; one event is concatenated with another and the conclusion follows by easy consequences. These are perhaps some incidents that might be spared, as in other poets there is much talk that only fills up time upon the stage; but the general system makes gradual advances and the end of the play is the end of expectation.”

Here also he is moving against, contradictory to what he had already said that the conclusions were quite hasty, that he had not given ample time to develop the climax. But all said and done, what he is here trying to pursue; the argument that he is trying to pursue over here is that the violation of unities is perhaps no big deal. And there are other things, multiple things that would make up for that absence. So in the final session where we shall focus on the section where Johnson defends the violation of unities, we will also see how a neoclassical critic goes out of his way to extend the balanced criticism and also to defend another writer's violation which was seen as a gross violation during his time. So with this, we wrap up for today. I thank you for your attention, and I look forward to seeing you in the next class.

