

JOHN DRYDEN'S AN ESSAY ON DRAMATIC POESY: QUESTIONS WITH ANSWERS

This handout was prepared by Dr. William Tarvin, a retired professor of literature. Please visit my free website www.tarvinlit.com. Over 500 works of American and British literature are analyzed there for free.

THE ANSWER KEY IS PROVIDED AT THE END OF THIS HANDOUT.

Text used: Charles Kaplan and William David Anderson, eds. Criticism: Major Statements, 4th ed. New York: Bedford, 2000.

I. INTRODUCTION

1. During the 1600s, _____ became the center of literary criticism.
2. French dramatists at that time sought to imitate _____ plays, many of which observe the unities of action, time, and place.
3. These French writers believed that a play was more believable to an audience
 - if it portrayed only one action (no subplots): Unity of _____;
 - if it represented a short time period (the _____ day preferred by Aristotle): Unity of _____; and
 - if it was set in a confined or fixed place (one house or one street): Unity of _____.
4. French dramatists and critics looked down on English playwrights who, they felt, were not following these unities in their plays.

They noted, for instance, that England's greatest dramatist Shakespeare typically used sub_____ ; his plays sometimes covered _____ or even decades; and the action of his plays freely shifted from one _____ to another, even from one continent to another.
5. This French criticism of England's greatest writer upset John _____ (1631-1700), the major writer in England from 1660 to 1700.

He wrote An Essay on Dramatic Poesy to answer this _____ criticism.

Note: **“Poesy” is an old-fashioned form of “poetry.”**

II. AN ESSAY ON DRAMATIC POESY

1. Using Kaplan and Anderson's headnote on p. 136, briefly summarize their comments on the dramatic setting of the essay, what they call "a dramatization of a debate."

It opens with reference to a _____ battle between the British and _____ on June 3, 1665, in the English Channel. Four gentlemen are observing the battle from a barge floating in the _____ River. After the battle, which the English navy wins, as they are rowed back to shore, the gentlemen begin a discussion of the literary position of _____ in world literature.

2. Why do the editors suggest that Dryden places this discussion of literature after a naval battle?

Their debate over literature becomes another kind of _____ dispute. The larger naval battle in which the English defeat the Dutch prefigures the outcome of the debate aboard the _____, in which _____ writers will be declared the winner against _____ writers.

However, the debaters are shown as being superior to the politicians who make _____. At the end of the essay, the four critics exit the barge and go their separate ways. Although not agreeing on every aspect of their literary discussion, they are still gentlemen, who _____ on their right to disagree. Thus in a sense they are superior to countries, which as the opening shows too often resort to _____.

3. After the battle, as they are being rowed back to their docking place, the four Englishmen in the barge—given the aliases or "borrowed names" (137) of Crites, Eugenius, Lisideius, and Neander—begin to debate the current state of _____ literature.

NOTE: The following four approaches to literary criticism are used in the following analysis. I define them briefly here:

- (1) **MIMETIC APPROACH:** A literary work is judged by how well it imitates the real world since "mimetic" means "imitative." This approach concentrates on the world outside the literary work.
- (2) **OBJECTIVE APPROACH:** A literary work is judged by how well it integrates internal aspects of the work, such as theme, characters, plot, symbolism, etc. This approach focuses on the literary work itself.
- (3) **AFFECTIVE APPROACH:** A literary work is judged by its effect on its reader or its audience. "I liked that novel" is a simple use of the Affective Approach. This approach centers on the reader or audience of a literary work.
- (4) **EXPRESSIVE APPROACH:** A literary work is judged by how well it conveys the author's feelings or ideas. This approach concentrates on the author of a literary work.

4. Preparatory to the debate, the four men first agree on a definition of a play. Copy this definition, given on page 141. Of the four approaches to literary criticism—mimetic, objective, affective, and expressive—which ones are contained in this definition?

A play is a “_____ and _____ of _____ nature, representing its _____ and humours [moods] [MIMETIC], and the _____ of _____ to which it [human nature] is subject [OBJECTIVE], for the _____ and _____ of mankind [AFFECTIVE].

5. The men debate many critical issues, but clearly two stand out:

(1) Are _____ Greek and Roman dramatists better than modern-day playwrights (a debate usually termed the Ancients vs. the _____)?

(2) Are modern-day _____ dramatists better than their _____ counterparts?

6. **CRITES** favors the _____ (141-45). His name comes from the Greek word meaning “critic, or a person knowledgeable about a subject such as literature.

He expounds the extreme classic view that the Greeks and Romans fully discovered those reasonable and perennial _____ to which the modern drama can do no better than conform.

He praises the observance of the _____ in drama, something which is absent from modern plays, he contends: “If by these _____ . . . we should judge our modern plays, . . . that which should be the _____ of a _____, takes up in some of them an age; instead of _____, they are the epitomes [modern plays present all] of a man’s life; and for _____ of _____ (which the stage should represent) we are sometimes in more _____ than the map can show us” (144). (Here the MIMETIC and OBJECTIVE Approaches are used.)

7. **EUGENIUS** likes the _____ (145-53). His name literally means “a well-born genius.” He states that since modern-day science has disproved most of the scientific theories “in the time of _____,” then “it follows that [present-day] poesy [drama] and other arts” are also “still nearer to _____” (146) than classical drama.

He also cites many places where classical plays violate the _____, and he adds that modern writers are better than their classical counterparts in dealing with “_____ -scenes” (151). (Here MIMETIC and OBJECTIVE standards are used.)

8. **LISIDEIUS** contends that modern-day _____ dramatists are superior to English playwrights (153-59) because they follow the _____ rules for decorous imitation of nature.

His name is probably based on the royal emblem of France, the fleur-de-lis. The last two syllables of that word (“lis” and de”) are similar in spelling to the first two syllables of Lisideius.

Like their classical counterparts, the French playwrights observe the _____, do not incorporate distracting subplots—“under_____” (153)—and do not mingle _____ with comedy: “There is no theatre in the world has any thing so absurd as the English _____” (154). (Here MIMETIC and OBJECTIVE criteria are being set.)

He attacks English dramas as unrealistic when it portrays _____ battles, violent events, and deaths. He says that French dramas always portray deaths _____ since _____ “can never be [realistically] imitated on stage, so “the audience cannot [help] _____ when the actors are to _____” (157). (The AFFECTIVE Approach is employed here.)

9. **NEANDER** (who represents _____ himself) praises modern-day English drama. Neander is formed from two Greek words meaning “new man.”

The arguments of the first three critics had all rested on the first term in the definition of a play given earlier (141), the word “just.” That is, they have all tried to set a value on drama according to the degree of its verisimilitude: Does it follow the rules and the unities?

However, Neander redirects the discussion by centering on the word “_____” (160) in this definition. He concedes that it is true that _____ drama follows the classical rules of drama better than English dramas. Yet, too strict an adherence to these rules has meant that French dramas are lifeless. They have all “the beauties of a _____, but not of a _____” because they are “not _____” with “passions” and feelings (160). (The MIMETIC Approach is used at this point.)

He praises the _____ of tragic and comic elements and the use of “underplots” by English playwrights as adding realistic variety to a play (161). French plays he finds are “the _____ I have ever read” (161), consisting mainly of long set “_____ . . . which _____ us with [their] length” (161). He says that the “_____ and replies” of English plays are more lifelike (162). (Here the OBJECTIVE Approach is used to justify a MIMETIC interpretation.)

As for Lisideius’s contention that the audience will not accept certain actions, such as death, to occur on stage, Neander asks the commonsensical question: For “why may not our _____ as well suffer itself to be deluded with the _____ of [an onstage death], as with any other thing in the play?” (163). That is, since we know that everything on the stage is make-believe, not _____ life, why should we ridicule the presentation of an onstage death as unrealistic and not make-believe? (This presents an AFFECTIVE Approach.)

As for the unities, Neander again takes a commonsensical approach: Certain dramatic plots benefit from the unities of _____, _____, and _____, but “strictly” (164) to force them on all plays will produce “_____” (164) in the action and decrease audience-pleasing variety: “For, if you consider the plots, [English plays] are fuller of _____” (165). He admits the English sometimes break the rules, but they can add so much more zest to the play when they do. (These are OBJECTIVE criteria.)

10. Neander then makes his (Dryden's) famous comparison of Shakespeare and his contemporary Ben Jonson.

He hails Shakespeare as "the largest and most _____ soul" of "all modern, and perhaps ancient, poets" (166). When Shakespeare "describes anything, you _____ than see it, you _____ it too. Those who accuse him to have wanted [lacked] _____ [formal education], give him the greater commendation: he was _____ learned [he learned about life by studying nature and human nature, not books]." (Here an EXPRESSIVE Approach is used in analyzing Shakespeare's genius.)

Neander adds, "If I would compare [Ben Jonson] with Shakespeare, I must acknowledge him [Jonson] the more _____ poet, but Shakespeare the greater _____ [possessor of wisdom]. Shakespeare was the _____, or father of our dramatic poets; Jonson was the _____, the pattern of elaborate writing. I _____ [Jonson], but I _____ Shakespeare" (167).

ANSWER KEY

I.

1. France.
2. classical Greek.
3. action; one; time; place.
4. plots; years; place.
5. Dryden; French.

II.

1. naval; Dutch; Thames; English drama.
2. international; barge; English; French; war; agree; war.
3. dramatic.
4. just; lively; human; passions; changes; fortune; delight; instruction.
5. (1) classical; Moderns. (2) French; English.
6. Ancients; rules; three unities; rules; business; day; one action; one spot; ground; countries.
7. Moderns; Aristotle; perfections; unities; love.
8. French; classical; three unities; plots; tragedy; tragic-comedy; onstage; offstage; dying; laughing; die.
9. Dryden; lively; French; statue; man; animated; mingling; coldest; speeches; tire; short speeches; imagination; probability; real; time; place; action; absurdities; variety.
10. comprehensive; more; feel; learning; naturally; correct; wit; Homer; Virgil; admire; love.