

An Apology for Poetry



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF PHILIP SIDNEY

Sir Philip Sidney was a child of privilege, born to Sir Henry Sidney, Elizabeth I's governor of Ireland, and Lady Mary Dudley. His godfather was King Philip II of Spain; his uncle Robert Dudley was one of Elizabeth's closest advisers. Philip was educated to join his family's tradition of service, first at the Shrewsbury School and then at Oxford. Following a three-year tour of Europe (1572-1575), where he perfected his languages and became familiar with European politics, Sidney returned to Elizabeth's court and embarked on a career as diplomat and parliamentarian. A man of broad interests, he befriended leading artists and scholars of the day (including poet Edmund Spenser and alchemist John Dee), and was the dedicatee of more than 40 books on subjects as diverse as painting, law, poetry, and botany. Despite his education and social background, Sidney struggled to land a job of any real importance (he was knighted in 1583 only so that he could stand in for a nobleman in an important royal ceremony) and so directed his energies into creative work. He finished the 180,000-word heroic prose romance the *Arcadia* in 1580, and in 1582 wrote *Astrophel and Stella*, which is considered the most important English sonnet sequence after Shakespeare's. Around the same time, he wrote *An Apology for Poetry*, introducing Continental ideas about literature to England. Later he started but did not finish an expansion of the *Arcadia* as well as a paraphrase of the Psalms. Sidney was renowned for his gentlemanly manners, and, fitting with his status, none of his works were printed and sold in his lifetime. In 1585, he was appointed joint-administrator of the British ordnance, which oversaw the distribution of arms in the kingdom. In this capacity he volunteered to serve in England's war with the Spanish in the Netherlands, where, in defense of a supply convoy, he was grazed by an enemy bullet, and died from infection soon after. He is buried in St. Paul's cathedral in London.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Philip Sidney wrote during the English Renaissance, a period of extraordinary cultural and social change that lasted from the early 16th century to the mid-17th century. More specifically, he wrote during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I (1558-1603). The Renaissance (which means "rebirth") began in the late 1300s in Italy with the rediscovery of many classical texts and the revival of Latin and Greek language learning. Johannes Gutenberg's invention of the printing press in the 1440s allowed for the mass production of books and the circulation of

ideas across the continent and into England. At the same time as antiquity was rediscovered, European explorers sailed to the "New World," the discovery of which challenged traditional narratives of history and started a race to colonize America. Soon after, Martin Luther and others launched the Protestant Reformation, leading to decades of conflict between Christian sects. All of this cultural, political, and technological change led writers and thinkers to re-evaluate contemporary society in relationship to the newly discovered worlds of antiquity and America. Writers like Sidney began to write in modern languages, rather than Latin, allowing for a wider, less elite readership for their work but also fostering new feelings of nationalism. Sidney's "An Apology for Poetry"—with its classical structure and numerous classical references, its references to pan-European literature, and its nationalistic elevation of English over other modern languages—reflects many of the intellectual and cultural currents of its time.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Sidney wrote "An Apology for Poetry" in response to Elizabethan writers like Stephen Gosson, whose pamphlet *School of Abuse* (1579) accused poets and playwrights for problems in English society. "An Apology for Poetry" draws on a number of classical works of literary criticism, most notably Plato's dialogues (particularly the *Republic* and *Ion*), Aristotle's *Poetics*, and Horace's *Art of Poetry*, as well as Renaissance texts like the philologist Joseph Julius Scaliger's *Poetics* (1560). It should be read alongside other Renaissance literary criticism, like George Puttenham's *Arte of English Poesie* (1589). Sidney was not just a literary theorist, he was also a practicing poet, whose sonnet sequence *Astrophel and Stella* (1582) helped bring Petrarchan sonnet into English literature and was likely a source for Shakespeare's *Sonnets* (1609). "An Apology for Poetry" also influenced later writers, most notably Percy Bysshe Shelley in his "A Defense of Poetry" (written 1821, published 1840).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** An Apology for Poetry
- **When Written:** c. 1580
- **Where Written:** England
- **When Published:** 1595
- **Literary Period:** Elizabethan Period; English Renaissance
- **Genre:** Essay; Oration
- **Climax:** Although the essay does not have a narrative climax, Sidney writes an emphatic conclusion in which he condemns poetry's critics to oblivion.

An Apology For Poetry Summary

Lingsheng Yao



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Table of Contents An Apology For Poetry Summary

1. Understanding the eBook An Apology For Poetry Summary
 - The Rise of Digital Reading An Apology For Poetry Summary
 - Advantages of eBooks Over Traditional Books
2. Identifying An Apology For Poetry Summary
 - Exploring Different Genres
 - Considering Fiction vs. Non-Fiction
 - Determining Your Reading Goals
3. Choosing the Right eBook Platform
 - Popular eBook Platforms
 - Features to Look for in an An Apology For Poetry Summary
 - User-Friendly Interface
4. Exploring eBook Recommendations from An Apology For Poetry Summary
 - Personalized Recommendations
 - An Apology For Poetry Summary User Reviews and Ratings
 - An Apology For Poetry Summary and Bestseller Lists
5. Accessing An Apology For Poetry Summary Free and Paid eBooks
 - An Apology For Poetry Summary Public Domain eBooks
 - An Apology For Poetry Summary eBook Subscription Services
 - An Apology For Poetry Summary Budget-Friendly Options

6. Navigating An Apology For Poetry Summary eBook Formats
 - ePub, PDF, MOBI, and More
 - An Apology For Poetry Summary Compatibility with Devices
 - An Apology For Poetry Summary Enhanced eBook Features
7. Enhancing Your Reading Experience
 - Adjustable Fonts and Text Sizes of An Apology For Poetry Summary
 - Highlighting and Note-Taking An Apology For Poetry Summary
 - Interactive Elements An Apology For Poetry Summary
8. Staying Engaged with An Apology For Poetry Summary
 - Joining Online Reading Communities
 - Participating in Virtual Book Clubs
 - Following Authors and Publishers An Apology For Poetry Summary
9. Balancing eBooks and Physical Books An Apology For Poetry Summary
 - Benefits of a Digital Library
 - Creating a Diverse Reading Collection An Apology For Poetry Summary
10. Overcoming Reading Challenges
 - Dealing with Digital Eye Strain
 - Minimizing Distractions
 - Managing Screen Time
11. Cultivating a Reading Routine An Apology For Poetry Summary
 - Setting Reading Goals An Apology For Poetry Summary
 - Carving Out Dedicated Reading Time
12. Sourcing Reliable Information of An Apology For Poetry Summary
 - Fact-Checking eBook Content of An Apology For Poetry Summary
 - Distinguishing Credible Sources
13. Promoting Lifelong Learning
 - Utilizing eBooks for Skill Development
 - Exploring Educational eBooks
14. Embracing eBook Trends
 - Integration of Multimedia Elements

- Interactive and Gamified eBooks

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