

In your opinion, how effectively does Sidney defend poetry, in *The Defence of Poesie*, against its detractors?

Sir Philip Sidney's '*The Defence of Poesie*' is considered the first noteworthy treatise on the subject of literary-criticism written in English and draws heavily upon ideas found in classical literature. Atkins clarifies that Sidney's 'ideas [are] drawn from various quarters, from Plato and Aristotle chiefly, but from Horace, Cicero, and Plutarch, from patristic writings, from Italian and other sources as well.'¹ Sidney's *The Defence of Poesie* is a response to the attack on poetry during the sixteenth century primarily by the satirist Stephen Gosson. In his work *The Schoole of Abuse*, addressed to Sidney, Gosson declared that poetry is 'a waste of time, the mother of lies and the nurse of abuse.'² Directly opposed to this, the basis of Sidney's defence is that, through the three main divisions of poetry, a reader is more likely to discover their virtue. In Sidney's mind, the purpose of poetry is 'delightful teaching'. That is, through poetry one can learn the intricate meanings of the world in a delightful, beautiful manner more easily than one would through such means as philosophy and histology. However, Bates challenges this, inferring that she and Gosson 'fear[s] that poetry's pleasure will all too often lead in the opposite direction.'³ In short, that if the pleasure does not also bring profit it is worthless. Yet this argument holds little weight, as profit can be monetary, or – as Sidney argues – valuable regarding knowledge gained. Sidney illustrates this by using examples of philosophers such as Plato, who used the literary form to express and share their knowledge. The following paragraphs shall analyse how effective Sidney's defence of poetry is and the arguments held for and against his defence.

Sidney's defence is broken into three sections:

¹ J.W.H. Atkins, *English Literary Criticism: The Renaissance* (London: 1945) p.125

² Stephen Gosson, *The Schoole of Abuse* (London: The Shakespeare Society, 1841) pp. 09-44

³ Catherine Bates, *On Not Defending Poetry: Defence and Indefensibility in Sidney's Defence of Poesy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017) p.5

1. The emphasis on the high regard in which the ancients held poetry. This is then furthered by the etymological method of arguing. Following this is Sidney's assertion on the inventiveness of poetry.
2. The genres of poetry and their corresponding definition and purpose.
3. People's objections to different forms of poetry and Sidney's personal counterarguments.

In true renaissance humanist manner, throughout his work Sidney remains conscious that his defence is of fiction and the poet's knowledge that what is retained within his work is not literal truth. Still, almost contrary, Sidney emphasises that there is indeed a type of truth within poetry, that of delightful teaching. Sidney proceeds to mention that even the less learned of people have 'their hard dull wittes softened and sharpened with the sweete delights of Poetrie.'⁴

The predominant argument against poetry, is that it does not have profound academic enlightenment such as those found in science and philosophy, and that even children find it (poetry) laughable and pointless. Classical philosophers, such as Plato are used as prime examples of this. In Plato's *The Republic*, it is foretold that there will be no need for poetry in an ideal world, as it is frivolous.⁵ Plato also specifies 'that writers of poetry and prose both make very serious errors about mankind.'⁶ Plato goes on to say that people's morals and sense of justice get mixed up with the actual truth, particularly when such virtues are lauded in poems and stories. Homer's *The Odyssey* is given as an example more than once, with mention of the poet imitating someone he is not.⁷

However, the above puts much emphasis is put upon what poetry doesn't do, rather than what it *does* do. Berry strongly believes that 'the paradox of the *Defence* is that Sidney's 'personal desires' did not centre on poetry. His real vocation, by birth, class, training and election, was service to the state.'⁸ Though it's true that

⁴ Sir Philip Sidney, *The Defence of Poesie*, *Luminarium* (2026), <<https://www.luminarium.org/renascence-editions/defence.html#%28text%29>> [Accessed 27 April 2026].

⁵ Plato and G.R.F. Ferrari, *The Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018)

⁶ Ibid, *The Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018) p.80

⁷ Homer, *The Odyssey* (London: Penguin Group, 2003)

⁸ Edward Berry, 'The Poet as Warrior on Sidney's Defence on Poetry', *The English Renaissance*, 29.01 (1981), 21-34 (p. 21) <https://doi.org/10.2307/450452>

Sidney had a privileged upbringing, being the godson of King Philip of Spain and an Elizabethan courtier, Sidney's defence is written primarily from the eyes of a humanist.⁹ This is evidenced by the reverence in which Sidney discusses not only notable works of classic writers, but also other 'barbaric' societies such as the Britons and Persians:

VVales, the true remnant of the auncient Brittons, as there are good authorities to shew, the long time they had Poets which they called Bardes: so thorow all the conquests of Romans, Saxons, Danes, and Normans, some of whom, did seeke to ruine all memory of learning from among them, yet do their Poets even to this day last: so as it is not more notable in the soone beginning, then in long continuing.¹⁰

Sidney's main line of defence is the return to the classics as the original way people brought knowledge to the community. Poetry is the 'art of imitation', both literally and figuratively, and knowledge is gained from looking to the past as well as imitating the experiences of the present. Kimbrough supports this, clarifying that 'Sidney does not here pronounce the poet superior to the philosopher and historian, but he shows himself coming close to a conception of "poesy" as an imitation of nature.'¹¹ Both, in Sidney's eyes are equal and help with the distribution of knowledge.

Despite the emphasis anti-literary enthusiasts put upon Plato's *The Republic* as an ideal utopia in a philosophical world, and the subsequent denouncement against poetic works, Sidney makes clear that the two aren't in opposition to each other. The argument that Plato glorified a world in which there is no literary accomplishments holds no weight as Plato's own style of writing relies heavily upon the literary form.

'What do you mean?' he said.

⁹ Research, *The History of Parliament: British Political, Social and Local History* (2020) <<https://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1558-1603/member/sidney-philip-1554-86>> [Accessed: 27 April 2026]

¹⁰ Sir Philip Sidney. *The Defence of Poesie*, *Luminarium* (2026), <<https://www.luminarium.org/renascence-editions/defence.html#%28text%29>> [Accessed: 27 April 2026]

¹¹ Robert Kimbrough, *Sir Philip Sidney* (Gale: New York, 1971) p.39

‘Well, for a start,’ I said, ‘if they have to fight, I take it their opponents will be rich men. They by contrast will be warrior-athletes, won’t they?’

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘For what that’s worth.’

‘Think about boxing, Adeimantus. Don’t you think a single boxer, with the finest possible training, could easily fight two rich, fat people who were not boxers?’¹²

The text above provides a clear example of classical rhetoric – a pre-literary oral form committed here to paper. Halloran claims that:

The master of rhetoric was the man who had interiorized all that was best in his culture and applied this knowledge in public forums, influencing his fellow citizens to think and act in accord with their common cultural heritage.’¹³

Though this does indeed relate to philosophy, it is also a distinguishing feature of literature, including poetry: that is the widespread application and sharing of knowledge. In Sidney’s view ‘the final end is to lead and draw us to as high a perfection as our degenerate souls... can be capable of.’¹⁴

I believe Sidney presents an effective defence of poetry in the humanist standpoint of the time. As Tearle states, ‘for Sidney, poetry ‘is an art of imitation’: as he points out, Aristotle (in his *Poetics*, the very first work of literary criticism in all of Western literature) said as much. Poetry involves metaphor, and metaphor is a form of imitation, comparing one thing to another. Poetry is, then, ‘a speaking picture’ whose aim is ‘to teach and delight’.¹⁵ All of which I agree with. Indeed, the Grade Saver study guide supports this viewpoint, claiming that ‘Sidney was just one writer of the time to take exception to Puritan hypocrisy but it is his *Defence of Poesy* which

¹² Plato and G.R.F. Ferrari, *The Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018) p. 114

¹³ S.M. Halloran, ‘College English’, *On the End of Rhetoric, Classical and Modern*, 36.6 (1975) p. 621 <<https://doi.org/10.58680/ce197516969>> [Accessed: 28 April 2026]

¹⁴ Philip Sidney, *The Defence of Poesie*, *Luminarium* (2026), <<https://www.luminarium.org/renascence-editions/defence.html#%28text%29>> [Accessed: 27 April 2026]

¹⁵ Oliver Tearle, *Interesting Literature, A Summary and Analysis of Sir Philip Sidney’s an Apology for Poetry* (2026), <<https://interestingliterature.com/2021/07/sir-philip-sidney-an-apology-for-poetry-summary-analysis/>> [Accessed 01 May 2026]

has stood the test of time.¹⁶ Not only did his defence successfully counter Gosson's attack on poetry, but it paved the way for other literary writers to flourish and even write defences of their own. Percy Bysshe Shelley is one such poet, writing an unpublished piece called *A Defence of Poetry* that reinforced Sidney's own work.¹⁷ The fact that other authors were inspired by Sidney's works and continued to expand upon it shows the defence's worth. Though Sidney did have his opposers, renaissance humanists and poets were in favour of his defence. Relying heavily on what poetry can *do*, as opposed to what it might possibly *cause*, Sidney was able to neutralise Gosson's worries and show the value that poetry (and literature) can have upon an individual and a society.

Word count: 1, 322

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