

Paper: 02; Module No: 24: E Text

Alexander Pope: Life and Works

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(B) Description of Module:

Items	Description of Module
Subject Name:	English
Paper No & Name:	02; English Literature 1590-1798
Module No & Title:	24; Alexander Pope: Life and Works
Pre-requisites:	The reader is expected to be familiar with the poetic trends of the Neo-Classical Age
Objectives:	To familiarize the reader with the poems and persona of Pope while providing a commentary on contemporary society
Key Words:	Neoclassicism, Protestant, Catholic, Aristocratic, Homer

Module 24: Alexander Pope: His Life and Works

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24.1 Introduction:

Heaping praise on Alexander Pope, William J. Long writes that he was, in his time, ‘ “the poet” of a great nation’ (265). Regarded as one of the most accomplished satirists, Pope also mastered the rhyme scheme known as the heroic couplet (a rhyme scheme consisting of lines written in iambic pentameter used mainly in narrative and epic poems). He was, undoubtedly, one of the most successful exponents of Neoclassical poetic creed which focused on imitating the works of the classical masters while trying to make poetry a more rational enterprise. Pope not only used language brilliantly but also projected his contemporary times in a very clear and adequate manner. Devoted wholeheartedly to literature, unlike many of his contemporaries, Pope was able to stand his ground as a revered literary figure despite facing many religious prejudices and physical obstacles.

24.2 Pope's Life:

Alexander Pope was born in 1688 in a Roman Catholic family. While his father was a rather well-to-do linen-draper, Pope lost the privilege of going to public schools due to his religious adherence as the accession of the Protestant William the Orange to the British throne made sure that the Catholics were barred from attending public schools and public events in and

around London. As a result, the self-taught Pope, in spite of being an ardent reader, grew up with inaccurate knowledge on many subjects. Regarding the disadvantages of Pope, David Daiches, in *A Critical History of English Literature*, writes: “Pope was a Roman Catholic at a time when Roman Catholics in England still suffered Civil disabilities; he was also sickly and malformed” (622). However, Daiches also opines that these disadvantages might have gone on to contribute to Pope’s unique individuality “as opposed to what one might call the social and Augustan qualities” (622).

The lack of privileges, while growing up, did not facilitate Pope’s early literary career and the lack of formal learning is reflected in his early pieces such as *Pastorals* (1709) and *Essay on Criticism* (1711). It is the audacious translations of Homer that brought him fame and fortune enabling him to shift from the humble Binfield to the more aristocratic Twickenham where he spent the rest of his life. Once Pope overcame some of the initial hurdles, he went on to become the most celebrated poet of his time that thrived on didactic and satirical verses. Regarding Pope’s poetic achievements Long asserts, “There is hardly an ideal, a belief, a doubt, a fashion, a whim of Queen Anne’s time, that is not neatly expressed in his poetry” (264). In spite of his aversion to make open political comments, Pope was certainly a man of his age and used poetry as his medium of making political statements. In this regard, Pat Rogers observes how his works reflect:

the most urgently debated topics of the moment, whether war and peace, the Jacobite risings, the South Sea Bubble, the Atterbury plot, the Excise crisis or the development of the patriot opposition to Walpole. When he wrote a poem on the highly contentious Treaty of Utrecht in 1713, along with dozens of willing poetasters, his work *Windsor-Forest* stood almost alone in mentioning the notorious slave contract that formed part of the diplomatic deal. (2)

24.3 Pope’s Works:

For the sake of convenience, literary historians tend to divide Pope’s works into three broad groups--the early, the middle and the last phase. In the early part of Pope’s literary career, he wrote several minor poems such as *Pastorals* (1709) *Windsor Forest* (1713)(a kind of descriptive poetry or local poetry), *Messiah: A Sacred Eclogue* (1712)(a combination of, what Daiches terms, “Virgil’s fourth Eclogue with the messianic parts of Isaiah in couplet verse of high formal gravity.” (624)), *Essay on Criticism* (1711) and *The Rape of the Lock*

(1712). The second phase of his poetic career comprises of his famous Translations; and the third phase consists of works like *The Dunciad* (1728-1743) and the *Epistles*. Among his works in the first phase, *Essay on Criticism* and *The Rape of the Lock* deserve critical attention.

24.4 *Essay on Criticism*:

Essay on Criticism, published in 1711, in the words of David Daiches, is “essentially a turning into polished epigrammatic couplets of the main critical ideas of the time” (626). Written in heroic couplets, the work is an attempt to sum up the ideas of Aristotle, Horace, Boileau and the eighteenth century classicists. Paul Baines writes that in this poem “Homer is celebrated as the pre-critical fount of Western literature, with Virgil as a sort of post-critical example of how one might recapture ‘nature’ by observing the rules formulated by the classical critics” (12). The poem, more importantly, is lauded as a “storehouse of critical maxims” (Long 266) and is a revelation of the genius that Pope was to become. Part-I deals with what Pope considers the ‘true taste’ (or the lack of it) and ‘relation between Art and Nature’ (Daiches 626). Pope is sometimes scathing in his criticism of the critics who, he feels, lack this very essence of true taste:

In Poets as true Genius is but rare,
True Taste as seldom is the Critick's Share;
Both must alike from Heav'n derive their Light,
These born to Judge, as well as those to Write. (qtd. From *Poetry Foundation*)

Nature for Pope was nothing more than common sense and throughout the first part he harps on the value of this common sense. Pope’s view of nature, therefore, is atypical of the Neoclassical views on nature and can certainly be read as an antithesis to how the Romantics’ perceived nature . There is also a sustained glorification of the ancient critics (like Aristotle) and poets (like Homer and Virgil) who show how ‘nature can best be followed’ (Daiches, 627).

In Part-II, Pope shows that imperfect learning and wrong, immature understanding of the text(s) would ultimately lead to faulty and prejudiced criticism. The following lines reveal how Pope feels about such short-sighted critical approaches:

A little learning is a dang'rous thing;
Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring:
There shallow draughts intoxicate the brain,

And drinking largely sobers us again. (qtd. From *Poetry Foundation*)

In Part-III, Pope goes on to lay down some fundamental rules that must be followed by a critic in order to provide balanced and worthy criticism of a text. While doing so, he again praises the ancients and glorifies them as models to be followed; once again, revealing his indebtedness to the classical masters. The following lines aptly sum up Pope's critical attitude towards the critics of the age:

Such once were critics; such the happy few,
Athens and Rome in better ages knew.
The mighty Stagirite first left the shore,
Spread all his sails, and durst the deeps explore
He steer'd securely, and discover'd far,

Led by the light of the M^oonian Star. (qtd. From *Poetry Foundation*)

The 'mighty stagirite' here is Aristotle whose critical works should be emulated by contemporary critics as he "presents a thumbnail history of criticism" (Daiches 628). The poem ends with a eulogy of his friend, William Walsh, who died recently.

An Essay on Criticism, as Paul Baines observes, reveals Pope's great awareness of "the tensions between theory and practice, imagination and judgment, and the ongoing European debate about the relative claims of Ancient and Modern learning, which Swift had satirised in *The Battle of the Books* (1704)" (12). In a way it reflects all the basic issues of Neoclassical poetic creed of which Pope is one of the greatest exponents. Moreover, the poem reveals early glimpses of Pope's genius as a satirist. His subtle dig at John Dennis, couched beautifully under the garb of satire, is what Paul Baines appreciates in his critical work.

The poem, however, as pointed out earlier, is known more for its brilliant use of maxims such as "For fools rush in where angels fear to tread", "To err is human, to forgive divine", "A little learning is a dangerous thing". Regarding the brilliant use of maxims, Long's observation that "these lines and many more like them from the same source, have found their way into our common speech, and are used, without thinking of the author, whenever we need an apt quotation" (266), must be taken into consideration as well. Moreover, Paul Baines's words aptly sum up the linguistic mastery Pope shows early in his career: "Full of quotation, allusion and example, it offers a mediation between extreme critical positions and points towards an accessible community of judgement" (12).

24.5 *The Rape of the Lock*

Though the translations of Homer would bring Pope financial success later, it was the publication of *The Rape of the Lock* (1712) that truly marked the birth of a genius. *The Rape of the Lock*, though written when Pope was merely 24, is widely considered to be one of Pope's greatest achievements. When the first edition of this poem was published, Pope was living at Binfield in Windsor forest. The young Pope became friendly with a neighboring Catholic family, the Blounts of Mapledurham. The family had two young sisters: Martha, nineteen, and Patty, seventeen. One of the cousins of this Blount family was a lively woman called Arabella Fermor (Belinda) and one of the distant relatives of the family was Lord Petre (Baron) whose family and the Fermors had a good relationship until Lord Petre stole a lock of hair from Arabella's head sometime in the year 1711. This created a gulf between the families. Pope, after being requested by John Caryll, a catholic friend of Pope and also the godfather of Martha, decided to write a poem that would reconcile these families.

In an 'Introduction' to the the poem, Harriet Raghunathan writes: "[H]e wrote the poem very quickly, in two weeks, and presumably gave manuscript copies of the poem to Arabella's family and some of his own friends" (xviii). Although written in a hasty manner, this mock-heroic poem on the event narrated above is a work of "delicate imagination, subtly ironic wit, mock-heroic extravagance, the most perfect control over cunningly manipulated verse..." (Daiches 628). To make a drawing room fiasco a poem of (mock) epic proportion requires genius and that Pope was able to deliver reveals his skills; as David Daiches points out: "*The Rape of the Lock* is more than a jest; it is, in Arnold's phrase, a criticism of life" (629). The poem is probably the most polished example of the mock-heroic poetic tradition surpassing its predecessors such as Dryden's *Macflecknoe* (1678), Boileau's *Le Lutrin* (1674), and Garth's *The Dispensary*.

The mock-heroic tone is established from the beginning--with an invocation of 26 lines-- and the fifth line-- "Slight is the subject, but not so the praise"--strongly establishes this tone. The description, then, moves to Belinda's toilet as she dresses up, or rather arms herself, to face the world. The imagery, drawn straight out of the cupboard of epic poetry, must be noted:

And now, unveil'd, the toilet stands display'd,
Each silver vase in mystic order laid.
First, rob'd in white, the nymph intent adores
With head uncover'd, the cosmetic pow'rs. (Pope 13)

However, the subtle subversion of the epic diction by the use of words such as ‘cosmetic’ instead of ‘cosmic’ is what makes this poem a mock-epic par excellence.

The obvious purpose of the mock-heroic is to project the trivial events in a manner that can be paralleled to the grand events of epic poetry. However, humor is the key ingredient of any mock-epic poem and Pope’s poem is a fine achievement in that regard. Harriet Raghunathan, in this context, suggests, “Pope’s purpose was to to laugh at the quarrelling families...together again. When he presents their quarrel in ridiculous terms with the silver bodkin from Belinda’s hair replacing the sceptre of Agamemnon...it is the disproportion between the two cultures that makes the whole thing so comic” (xxiii). It is the constant juxtaposition of the serious and the trivial, be it through the game of ombre or through Umbriel’s journey into the cave of spleen that makes the poem a monumental achievement.

Divided into five cantos, *The Rape of the Lock*, besides being an example of a high-class satire, is also important as a commentary on the contemporary social realities and customs. The first edition, published in 1712, though, had only two cantos and the grand success of the poem encouraged him to increase the length by three more cantos. However, the enlargement, done mainly by introducing supernatural creatures such as the guardian angels, was not merely an act of whim, as Harriet Raghunathan points out, “According to Warburton, Pope required ‘some very extravagant system’ as the basis for his epic machinery, or supernatural beings, as only by such a system would the poem be ‘intentionally debased’ as the mock heroic requires” (xxix). The primary source of Pope’s supernatural machinery was *Le Comte de Gabalis*, a short novel, written by Abbe Montfaucon de Villars. Written in 1670 and translated by P. Ayres in 1680, the work is “satire on the Rosicrucians who, although they claimed medieval origins, were essentially a loosely organised society of educated men...dating from the early 17th century” (Raghunathan, xxix).

While borrowing from the work of Villars, Pope makes additions and alterations whenever he feels necessary. The introduction of the sylphs, who were unable to protect Belinda inspite of having supernatural powers, unlike the more powerful supernatural figures of epic poetry, allowed Pope to establish his mock-heroic style more convincingly. Alastair Fowler, regarding the use of supernatural machinery asks whether the supernatural machines can be taken seriously (189). One is compelled to feel that these machines are evoked more for decoration and subversion of the epic form. This parody of the epic culminates in the third canto when the baron approaches with the scissor to chop off Belinda’s hair and Ariel, inspite

of predicting an impending danger to Belinda, retires helplessly. The inability of Ariel reinforces the limitation of these supernatural agents:

Just in that instant, anxious Ariel sought
The close recesses of the virgin's thought;

.....

Amaz'd, confus'd, he found his pow'r expir'd,
Resign'd to fate, and with a sigh retir'd.

The rest of the poem is a revelation of Pope's mastery over the language and form as some of the sections, such as the episode of Cave of Spleen, "adds just that touch of gravity needed to bring out the moral echoes...[of] the poem as whole" (Daiches, 631). Moreover, the poetic form allows him to satirize many prevailing practices of the contemporary society and to use the same as a medium of social and political commentary.

In recent times, however, the poem has been studied by feminist critics as an indictment of Pope's misogyny. The projection of Belinda, undoubtedly, is deeply problematic if she is perceived through feminist lenses as Ellen Pollak shows that Belinda is "embodiment of self-enclosed narcissism" embedded in the "vision of the heroine worshipping her own image in the mirror" (159). Women in literature, since time in memorium, have been projected as narcissists and Pope certainly makes no attempt to make Belinda an exception. The projection of Belinda as a self-enclosed narcissist and a frivolous woman reveals the covertly misogynistic attitude of Pope and brings him closer to all those writers whom Kate Millet critiques in *The Sexual Politics* for projecting women in a patriarchal and sexist manner. Belinda's narcissism can, moreover, be paralleled with, what Ellen Pollak calls "man's display of booty" (Pope 175) and such parallels are undoubtedly a revelation of Pope's blatant sexism. Even when (for instance in Canto-III) Pope invests in Belinda's heroic qualities and seems to glorify Belinda's authoritative powers, the mock-heroic structure of the poem reinstates the apparent triviality of all her acts. It is such projections that was probably enough to trigger a discourse on how women should be perceived in social and domestic spheres; and the culminating point of this discourse is undoubtedly Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* published in 1792.

24.6 The Second Phase and Pope's Translations:

Pope's successes continued with the publication of the translations of Homer's classics for "interpret[ing] Homer in the elegant, artificial language of his own age" (Long 267). Long

further shows how “Homeric characters lose their strength and become fashionable men of the court” (267) to suit the contemporary taste. Hence, some critics refuse to celebrate the work of Pope as masterly and authentic translations; rather the greatness of these works lie in Pope’s use of Heroic grandeur to make these poems entertaining for the people of his age. Besides being a successful translator, Pope also became a member of the Scriblerus club which was a 18th century literary club comprising of tory intellectuals such as Jonathan Swift, John Gay, Thomas Parnell, John Arbuthnot and Pope himself. The main purpose of this club was to mock the society using the literary hack Martin Scriblerus who dwelt in using pretentious jargons. The association of these five intellectuals led to the publication of *Memoirs* (1741) which only Pope and Swift lived to see.

24.7 The Third Phase and the Epistles:

In the rest of his career, Pope dedicated himself to write moral and satirical pieces like *An Essay on Man* (1733-34), *An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot* (1735) and *The Dunciad* (published in three different versions between 1728 to 1743). Besides *The Rape of the Lock*, the former is the best known and the most quoted work of Pope. This work is written to rationalize Milton’s famous proclamation at the beginning of *Paradise Lost*, “justify the ways of God to man”, in a subversive manner: “vindicate the ways of God to Man”. Since Pope had no final answer to the question, he wrote four epistles “concerning man’s relations to the universe, to himself, to society, and to happiness” (Long 268). Like the ‘*Essay on Criticism*’ the text abounds in wonderful lines like: “Hope springs eternal in the human breast; /Man never Is, but always To be blest. /The soul, uneasy, and confin'd from home, /Rests and expatiates in a life to come.”, “Do good by stealth, and blush to find it fame.”, “All Nature is but art, unknown to thee /All chance, direction, which thou canst not see;/All discord, harmony not understood; /All partial evil, universal good” and so on.

An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot is a kind of a biographical, satirical apologia addressed to his friend Dr. John Arbuthnot. He claims that though he is a peaceful man, he is goaded to write satires by fools and knaves. This seems to be a poetic expression to vent out frustration resulting from somewhat undeserving criticism since the time of publication of his translation of *The Illiad*. From the very beginning this frustration is revealed in a scathing manner:

The dog-star rages! nay 'tis past a doubt,
All Bedlam, or Parnassus, is let out:
Fire in each eye, and papers in each hand,

They rave, recite, and madden round the land. (qtd. From *Poetry Foundation*)

The intimate address to 'John' Arbuthnot gives the poem a colloquial tone that runs throughout the poem (Daiches 637). The projection of Atticus and Sporus, the satirical portrait of Addison and John Harvey, are the most talked about sections of the poem. Here, Addison is presented as a talented yet jealous man; whereas Harvey is projected as sexually perverse, vindictive and malicious human being. Another remarkable feature of the poem is its use of heroic couplet. Regarding the masterly use of the rhyme scheme in this poem, David Daiches writes, "[T]he heroic couplet is used with a flexibility and a playful yet deadly wit to a degree not easily found in Pope's earlier work is a moving benediction on his friend, who was to die less than two months after the Epistle to him was published" (638). Moreover, by trifling several other poets for their lack of talent, Pope does his best to distinguish himself, as shown by Ebahim Zarei and Hossein Pirnajmuddin, "from those 'puppy'-like poets who endeavor to satisfy the needs of the patrons" (71) and to establish himself as greater than his contemporaries as he "frequently associates himself with Horace and other great writers" (70). Zarei and Pirnajmuddin further writes, "He does not consider himself as pretentious like those poets who please their patrons by groveling gestures. He is in fact repelled by the race of writers who pay homage to and flatter patrons such as Bufo" (71).

The *Dunciad*, on the other hand, is perhaps the most sustained satirical work of Pope. Much like the poem mentioned before, it is an attack on those half-witted critics who failed to recognize his talent. Pope started to conceive this poem when he was attacked by Lewis Theobald in *Shakespeare Restored* (1726) where he derides Pope's edited works of Shakespeare where he tried to present Shakespeare in a way that would suit the taste the contemporary audience. The poem is not an organized mock-heroic poem like *The Rape of the Lock* but rather a collection of several episodes. There are employments of techniques used in epic poems such as the invocation. For instance, in Book-I, Pope starts with an invocation and often employs language typical of an epic. A sense of doom pervades all through the poem and also ends with the same feeling as, it seems, Pope had lost all his hope for civilization. Though brilliantly written, the readers of the following generation may feel a bit confused about why Pope decided to devote so much of his time in indulging with his critics. However, as shown by David Daiches, "*The Dunciad* may have been in its day primarily a blow by Pope against his enemies; but it survives as a blow for civilization--" (643).

24.8 Conclusion:

In the wake of the contemporary literary theory, Pope is perceived, by some, as a misogynist, especially because of his projection of Belinda, by the feminists. Hence, in spite of being a master of his trade, any discussion on Pope gives birth to polarizing opinions on him. However, in the field of satire he was truly an eclectic genius who kept on pushing the boundaries; and it is primarily as a master satirist that his legacy would live on; and like *The Dunciad* Pope himself was able to survive as a “blow for civilization” (Daiches 643) and that is exactly how his legacy lives on.

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