

Alexander Pope - Biography and Works

Alexander Pope was the most influential poet and critic of the 18th century or the neoclassical period of English literature. He is the first professional poet of English literature also. Because the Catholics were not allowed to live within ten miles of London, his family had to move to a village.



Alexander Pope (1688-1744)

The London society was extremely degraded, immoral and snobbish. The upper-class was corrupted, lazy and vain. Ladies did nothing more than gossip and make-up. Even the royal family and ministers were no better. In general, the people of London gave too much attention to the small and needless things of outward show; they confused the meaningful and meaningless things in life. Pope wrote powerful satires about that corrupted culture. He wrote in heroic couplets, with two rhymed lines of 10 syllables each. His polished, concise verse shows a keen feeling for sound and rhythm. Pope has become one of the most quotable poets. He wrote many famous lines, including a couplet from *An Essay on Criticism*.

Pope's careers can be divided into three periods. During the first period, from about 1709 to 1717, he wrote *An Essay on Criticism* (1711). This witty poem about criticism and writing made him famous at the age of 23. Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* (1712) is the most famous mock-epic poem in the English language. In the poem, Pope satirizes the vanities of fashionable people. It tells about a pretty young woman whose lock of hair is snipped off by a suitor at a party. *The Rape of the Lock* is a parody of classical epic, which parodies the phony culture of London in the grand language of the epic.

During the second period, from 1715 to 1726, Pope devoted him to translating and editing. His translation of the Greek epic poem Iliad (1715-1720) made him financially independent. With the profits Pope bought a villa at Twickenham in 1719, and spent most of his remaining years there writing.

During the last period, Pope wrote his most serious satires. They express his belief in the value of common sense, a moral life, friendship, poetry and good taste. *An Essay on Man* (1733-1734) is a long, ironic, philosophical poem. Pope's four Moral Essays (1731-1735) are satirical poems in the form of letters. One of these poems lightly exposes the follies that Pope saw in women, and other ridicules people who misuse wealth.

Pope's last major works was *The Dunciad* (1728-1743), an attack on dunces. The poem ridicules dull writers, biased critics, overly scholarly professors, and stupid scientists. Pope particularly ridiculed the critic Lewis Theobald and the writer Colley Cibber.

Pope was born in London and at age of 12, he suffered a tubercular spinal infection. As a result, he grew to an adult height of only 4 feet 6 inches (137 centimeters) and developed a hunchback. Pope was extremely sensitive about his appearance. He died in his villa on 30th May 1744.

Essay on Criticism by Alexander Pope: An Overview

Alexander Pope's *Essay on Criticism* is an ambitious work of art written in heroic couplet. Published in 1711, this poetic essay was a venture to identify and define his own role as a poet and a critic. He strongly puts his ideas on the ongoing question of if poetry should be natural or written as per the predetermined artificial rules set by the classical poets.



Alexander Pope (1688-1744)

This essay by Pope is neoclassical in its premises; in the tradition of Horace and Boileau. Pope believes that the value of literary work depends not on its being ancient or modern, but on its being true to Nature. This truth to Nature is found in true wit. Nature is to be found both in the matter and in the manner of expression, the two being inseparable. When the poet is asked to follow Nature, he is actually asked to “stick to the usual, the ordinary, and the commonplace.” He is to portray the world

as he sees it. The truth of human nature is to be found in common humanity, not in any eccentricity. Pope argued that human nature is ever the same. The proper object of imitation is the fundamental form of reality for Pope and the basic rule of art is to “follow nature” – “nature methodized. He does not negate the possibility of transgressing the rules if the basic aim of poetry is achieved and this transgression brings hope closer to the idea of the sublime. Clearly, the poet must have a strong sense of literary tradition in order to make intelligent judgments as the critic must have it too. Pope notes Virgil’s discovery that to imitate Homer is also to imitate nature. Pope says an artist imitates the nature. His nature is the combination of two elements society (human nature) and rules of classical artists-“nature is methodized”. Classical artist already discovers the natural rules and laws. Now, it is not necessary to go to nature again because to follow the classical artist is to go to the nature. So, sources of art are society and ancient artists.

Pope’s primary concern in this essay is his advice mainly for critics, and secondarily for artists or poets. Pope claims that artists possess genius whereas critics possess taste (classical taste developed by classical artist). By taking the ideas of classical artists, a critic has to judge the text. Artist can’t go beyond his intention, he is limited within his desires. He should not be over ambitious and over imaginative but critics can go beyond their intention. Artist has to undergo practice, learning and experiences. Which are equally important to critics too. Pope says, “A little learning is a dangerous thing”. So, critic must not be proud. A critic if has pride, can’t take out the real essence from the text. To be good critic, one should have courage, modesty and honesty. Decorum, for Pope, is the proper balance between expression and sound of content and form and it comes under versification. Pope considers wit as the polished and decorated form of language. Style and thought should go together. Artist uses ‘heroic couplet’ (form) to express the heroic subject matter (content). Pope implies that if the artist needs to break rules and regulation, he should use poetic license.

Alexander Pope as a Satirist

Posterity has remembered Alexander Pope for his satires. Undoubtedly, while shaping his growth in the direction demanded by classicism, the feeling for which he strengthened more and more within himself. Pope developed his talent for satire and argument in verse.



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It is in this province of literature that he has written his strongest works. It is not pure, poetry which benefited, but the vigor of temperament that reveals itself produced its most characteristic fruits.

In fact Pope's satire is inspired not by any large view of human its vices and weaknesses; no such dark misanthropy as glares at and horrifies us, and flashes of which are seen in Byron, no such moral sincerity as we find in Juvenal. His satires do not blend anger and pure fun the kind of which we find in Burns. "Personal animosity is the feather with which Pope's satiric arrows are fledged." Thus to do full justice to *The Dunciad*, *Moral Essays* and *Imitation of Horace* the reader must be fully familiar with the social background of the age. As, for example, in 1725 he published an edition of Shakespeare which was vehemently criticized by Lewis Theobald in his *Shakespeare Restored* (1726). Theobald suggested many valuable restorations and emendations and exposed Pope's inefficiency as a critic. As retaliation, Pope made him the hero of his *Dunciad*, a violent satire of which three books were published anonymously in 1728. For a poet of Pope's stature the *Dunciad* is a movement of misapplied power.

The Rape of the Lock which is, a mock-heroic poem is, however, Pope's greatest satiric poem. As such the characters are to a large extent, mocking versions of epic characters. The portraits are not realistic; they are not meant to mock at the follies and foibles of the aristocratic society of Pope's times. The objective being to expose human follies, especially the feminine, characterization is naturally from the general rather than the individual point of view.

Exaggeration is one mode through which a portrait assumes ironic or satiric light. The excessive praise bestowed on Belinda's charms, for instance, Belinda shedding her gaiety on all and sundry like the sun sheds its light, suggests flippancy and inconstancy in character.

Another mode of satiric portraiture adopted by Pope is through describing these very ordinary human beings in epic terms, thus achieving the desired comic effect through ironic juxtaposition. Comparison of Belinda's toilet ritual to "sacred rites" does not elevate her to the position of a goddess, but satirizes her as a human being for the excessive vanity. The Baron is constantly spoken in terms of the knight-errant of the Middle Ages. All his actions, from his aspiration to "the prize", his ritual prayer at the altar of love, to his "heroic" gestures after cutting the lock and finally his defeat are a mockery of higher characters. In the process, his vacuity, superficiality, foppishness and vapidness are revealed—for the prize he aspires to is a lock of hair, his altar is made of ridiculous items, he is inspired by coffee, and is defeated by a pinch of snuff. The "heroism" is superbly punctured to reveal the conceited fop of the eighteenth century. For the sake of variety, Pope does not have merely mock-heroic portraits: Sir Plume is a minor figure, but he is a directly satiric portrait of an ineffectual, ridiculously vapid fop. Pope builds up his picture with the aid of a few traits typical of the dandy of that age—the snuff box, the cane, meaningless oaths. We are directly told of his "earnest eyes" and "round unthinking face." There is no subtlety here, but straightforward satire.

Pope does not indulge in satirizing particular individuals in *The Rape of the Lock*. Through the satiric portraits, he presents a satirical picture of the age. Belinda, Thalestris, the Baron and Sir Plume are typical of that society. The characteristics they are given are those common to the "high" society of eighteenth century London.

To conclude, Pope's method of satiric portraiture varies, not only from portrait to portrait, but within the characterization of a single person itself. He uses the mode most fitting to the situation concerned. He appears to praise, but the result is quite the opposite—one is all the more clearly aware of the essential smallness and ridiculousness of the character involved. This is Pope's mastery of ironic portraiture.