

Alexander Pope (1688-1744)

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Paper-I
"Alexander Pope"

Pope is one of the most dominating poets of the Neo-classical Age in England. His range is limited; he wrote mainly satiric and didactic verse. But in this narrow range, he is the undisputed master. He is a great influence and reference point to a large number of poets. His poetry is a remarkably clear and adequate reflection of the spirit of his age. Also, he is the only man of letters of the 18th century who gave his entire life to letters.

Pope's poetic works fall into three groups corresponding to the early, middle and later period of his life. The major works of the first period are Pastorals, Windsor Forest, Essay on Criticism and the famous The Rape of the Lock. The second period is remarkable for his translation of Homer (Iliad Odyssey). The important works of the third period are Dunciad and The Epistles which includes the famous Essay on Man and An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot.

Pope is a great satirist of England. He has no superiors in the rapid-rapier thrusts which confound and demolish the opponent. His satires shine with electric brilliance. His satirical mood is defined as two-fold - jovial when manners are his subject as in The Rape of the Lock and scornful when men are his subject as in The

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Donald. In the former case he continues and even improves upon the tradition of Dryden; in the latter he is a mere lampooner. While Dryden upgrades his victims to make them laughable, Pope degrades them to produce the same effect. Dryden enlarges, Pope reduces. However, in artistic finish, he is Dryden's superior.

Pope is also a great composer of didactic verse. His Essay on Criticism is the best example. It contains both the theory and practice of the neo-classical school of poetry. It is regarded as a store-house of critical maxims, For fools rush in where angels fear to tread. To err is human, to forgive divine, A little learning is a dangerous thing are off-quoted lines. The Essay on Man 'vindicates', to quote Pope's own words, the ways of God to Man. The four epistles in it discuss man's relation to the universe, to himself, to society and to happiness. Its central argument is whatever is, is right.

Pope is regarded as the "most correct poet" of England. His claim to correctness is based on the correctness of form and expression, and not of thoughts or emotions. We may not agree with much that he says, but he says it in the best possible manner. He himself said,

True wit is like nature, to advantage dressed
What of was thought, but never to be well
expressed

His style is marked with clearness, and precision and careful analysis. It is epigrammatic, too. He says what he says in the

fewest possible words. He perfected the art of heroic couplet. Unlike Dryden, he uses closed couplets, that is to say, the sense does not run on from one couplet to another. His couplets are characterized by brevity and preciseness. They are well polished, refined and correct. There is no looseness in them. Each couplet stands by itself, and is well balanced and compact.

Pope is the poet who represents best the early 18th century. He is a fine spokesman in his age. His works truly reflect the spirit of his times. The Essay on Criticism sums up the art of poetry. It is an enumeration of the literary creed of the Augustan Age. The Rape of Lock mirrors the entire social life of the 18th century London. It is a mirror to the fashions and fables of the age. The Dunciad shows light on the miserable life of literary hacks and on the jealousy and the quarrels of authors. Finally, The Essay on Man sums up the philosophy of the age - its view of God, man and society. He however, deals with only the surface glitter and ignores the reality behind.

Pope's place in the hierarchy of English poets has often been debated. Wordsworth and Coleridge depreciated him. Matthew Arnold called him, with Dryden, "Classics of our prose". On the other hand, he has received warmest praise from Swift, Addison and Warburton. Long considers him "in many respects a unique figure". And when Dr. Johnson was once asked whether

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Pope was a poet, he asked in return, "If Pope be not a poet, where is poetry to be found"? He may not be a poet of the first order, but he definitely takes a first place in the second order of poets. His faults and demerits notwithstanding, he remains one of the most popular poets of English Language.