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Alexander Pope: The Portrait of the Artist as a Critic

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“Laugh where we must, be candid where we can;

But vindicate the ways of God to Man.”—Alexander Pope

Beginning in 1688 the entire face of Britain was transforming, especially in the England where the political battles between Tories and Whigs, Catholics and Protestants, fools and formidable intellects were in open conflict within Parliament and throughout the streets of London. The Glorious Revolution brought about two events which would eventually shape the nation into its state of dissention and reformation, namely the subjugation of Catholic citizens and the establishment of Parliament as the primary governing body of Britain. As history shows us time and time again, with rapid change comes rapid opposition and uncertainty, and both of these forces would breed a massive dissention within domestic communities and aimed at the whole British system. Although the Glorious Revolution was bloodless and an open military conflict was avoided, other forms of opposition to monarchic and governmental policies gained prominence, particularly the political satire. This time period provided the catalyst to an age of criticism where man's

decisions were to be met with a barrage of scrutiny and analysis from those with the agency and intellect to find a soapbox.

Perhaps the most important, and almost undeniably the most brilliant, social critic of the time came in the 4' 6" form of Alexander Pope (1688-1744). Pope brought a fury to the art of social critique, first clashing swords with a pretentious literary society built on the false pretences of intellectual superiority, and later in his life challenging the entire social structure of Britain created by corruption interwoven into Parliament proceedings and an egocentric aristocracy. This paper will examine the evolution of Alexander Pope from a literary figure to a timeless artist whose works still provide insight into social and political interactions. By looking at the effects of his poetical and satirical works on a constantly reforming nation between 1668 and 1744, as well as Pope's wider encompassing influence on political dissent and man's self image we can, as a modern audience, view the happenings of the eighteenth century as well as gain insight into the still recurring themes in our own world.

To understand both the fifty-six year life of Alexander Pope, and also the transcendence of his works throughout time, first requires an examination into the characteristics which played essential roles in the creation of his literary works. Starting from the age of 12 when Pope wrote his first acclaimed work of poetry, the character traits purveying life to his writing for the next forty-two years began taking shape. Family background is particularly significant when a protégée becomes accomplished at such a young age, and therefore, Pope's family heritage, especially his Catholic faith, plays a large role in the creation of Pope. From an early age he was set in opposition with policies regarding Catholics, and the aggression with which his work must be pursued in order to gain prominence is most likely the reason that Pope was able to accomplish so many works in such a short span of life. There was also his constant struggle with Potts Disease, forcing

Pope outside of the parameters of normal social interaction and requiring the young boy to forge a sharp intellect to shield him from physical criticism.

But not only did these manifestations of pure fate play a role in Pope's evolution, but the character traits acquired throughout Pope's lifetime provided a further aid to his future greatness. Among the personal qualities shaping the influential Alexander Pope was his fervour, passion, anger, ambition, and an underlying vanity. But the tempering elements of Pope's personality play the most important role in his success, namely his good humour, sympathy, humanitarianism, courage, devout loyalty to those who he graced with favour, and a pure genius characteristic of those few who understand and strive for the preservation of art in its purest and most deified state. Pope sought to explain the forces of nature and man within the span of human understanding—the goal of the artist.

But that was the artist Pope. There is also much to be said about the flesh and blood man, Alexander Pope. Through his writing he was constantly exposed to the higher literary circles, and formed many strong bonds with the premiere satirists of his time. To his friends he was loyal, brilliant, and always willing to put his authorial skills to paper in order to assist their works. Perhaps the most telling and complimentary account of Pope's loyal, if not sometimes misanthropic, nature comes from his good friend and literary mentor Jonathan Swift during a period of Swift's failing health in a letter addressed to Pope on October 12, 1727:

You are the best and kindest friend in the world, and I know nobody alive or dead to whom I am so much obliged; and if ever you made me angry, it was for your too much care about me. I have often wished that God Almighty would be so easy to the weakness of mankind as to let old friends be

acquainted in another state; and if I were to write an Utopia for heaven, that would be one of my schemes (Dobree, 66).

The same sentiments are expressed continually in letters to, and accounts of Alexander Pope, as Swift's portrait of Pope is reinforced by Henry Bolingbroke in a moment of remembrance for his recently deceased companion: "I never in my life . . . knew a man that had so tender a heart for his particular friends, or a more general friendship for mankind" (Dobree, 93).

But with as much respect as Pope gained from his friends, he was met with the same amount of vehemence by his enemies. The conflicts Pope experienced in the literary circles of London play a role of immeasurable importance in the formation of his views on mankind and political manoeuvring. These circles were cutthroat, highly pedantic, and endowed in the political landscape of the time, picking sides between the declining Tories and the rising Whigs. None of these aspects of literary life appealed to Pope, but as a rising poet, the intellectual society held an appeal which would fade as his personal conflicts within these literary cliques came to a head.

Immediately upon Pope's ascension onto the literary scene he was met with criticism of both his work and his physical stature, which had become increasingly deformed and mangled with Potts Disease. The main administrator of Pope's early criticism was John Dennis, another prominent critic and poet of the time. In retaliation to what he sensed to be unfair scrutiny and nitpicking, Pope's *Essay upon Criticism* (1711) alluded to Dennis, who took extreme offence to the public battery. Dennis then published *Reflections, Critical and Satyrical, upon a late Rhapsody called an Essay upon Criticism* (1711), critiquing the heralded essay as well as personally attacking Pope by saying that "had he been born of Grecian parents, 'his life would have been no longer than that of one of his Poems, the Life of half a Day'" (Dobree, 13). This feud would continue throughout Pope's life, and play a

defining factor in his satire, with Dennis and poet Ambrose Phillips assuming the main antagonist roles to Pope's poetry.

Among these feuds lies a character which would provide shape for Pope's political satire, his one time friend Joseph Addison. Addison was a loyal Whig, and also very prominent in London's literary scene, especially with the success of his play *Cato* (1712). With the Tories still controlling much of the government at the time of *Cato's* publication, Addison looked to Pope to write a prologue to the play in order to dispel unwanted criticism from the nobles in Parliament. Although Pope made a point to avoid party politics he was a Catholic, and the Tories offered more in terms of Catholic freedom than the Whigs (Dobree, 29). Addison's play benefited from Pope's intervention, but as more rumours of Pope's Tory allegiance surfaced, Addison betrayed Pope by supporting Thomas Tickell's translation of the *Illiad* (1715) strictly out of political alliances and biases. The double-crossing by Addison would manifest itself and sustain Pope's outrage throughout his career, constantly taking new form within different characters and under different connotations of social and political corruption: "The urbane hypocrisy Addison had shown, and the perversion of his judgement (chiefly on political grounds: he had instigated Tickell's 'Whig' translation) were lessons Pope had not need to learn twice. The satirical portrait he had drawn at the time [later] re-emerges in the *Epistle [to Dr Arbuthnot]* as an archetype of civilised treachery" (Rosslyn 126). These early life occurrences provided Pope with the fire that would shape his later social poetry like *The Dunicad* (1728) and *The Essay on Man* (1734).

In terms of Pope's reflections of his time period it is interesting to analyse his disownment of political alliances in a time where the bicameral governmental system was splitting the English nation in two. Early in his career Pope avoided political commentary at all costs, but as he matured and found alliances with political men such as Henry

Bolingbroke, Pope let the world of politics replace literary London as the subject to his satires. This shift in subject matter proves misleading in regards to Pope's political leanings, since by this time the Whigs had firmly established their dominance over the political landscape in the shape of Robert Walpole, and the new group of writers associating with Pope were all open supporters of the Tory agenda. The aspect of Pope's works that give his pieces not only greater influence during his own lifetime but a time-transcendent quality is his condemnation of power structures and powerful men themselves, not their political parties or backgrounds. When speaking of men with ambitions for power, "he calls them enemies of all mankind, denies them the virtues of true wisdom and bravery by calling them "wickedly wise" and "madly brave," thus pointing out the absurdity of referring to a villain as great . . .

"In each ... guilt and greatness equal ran,

And all that rais'd the Hero, sunk the Man" (293-94; TE 3-1: 155)"

(Broich, 182)

In this analysis we can see that Pope's poetry and criticisms do not limit themselves within the span of the then current political happenings, but take on a thematic element, incorporating supporters from all political spheres and a timeless relevance.

Now, after examining Alexander Pope's personal growth and his evolution into a prominent and widely read social commentator of his time, we must examine his wider-encompassing influence: the transcendence of his work and the struggles of his life which brought his particular attention to the themes of man, nature, and the poetic form, within his works.

During the eighteenth century it was becoming increasingly popular not only to criticize a work of a particular artist, but the entire genre with which one operated within.

Starting late in the seventeenth century mock epic was growing in readership, first with the popularity of Boileau's *Le lutrin* (1674) and later with Dryden's *Flecknoe* (1676), Dryden of course being one of Pope's idols with a huge influence on his later works (Oxford Dictionary of National Biography). We can later see, in John Gay's *A Beggars Opera* (1728), how a clever satirist could use the elements of an opera to point out inconsistencies seen within everyday society to the romantic nature of opera. Pope also mastered this technique of criticism first made popular by Miguel Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (1605/1615) by criticizing the modern epic in *The Rape of Lock* (1712). Although a lover of Homer, Virgil, and Milton, the creation of an epic in eighteenth century England was only an idea to be poked fun at by Pope, who took the trivial quarrel between Arabella Fermor and her would be lover, Lord Petre, and romanticized them in verse.

Within *The Rape of Lock*, Pope addresses several themes which recur in both his earlier and later works. Particularly in this poem, however, there are criticisms of women's role in society, relations between aristocracy, and, the overall workings of the epic.

One of the main themes addressed in *The Rape of Lock* is the functioning of women in society. Beauty is portrayed as the most important aspect to a woman's success, and the loss of Belinda's hair is a blow not only to her beauty, but her ability to maintain her former status of beauty. Beauty becomes one of Pope's main focuses, and his vilification of superficial values are disguised within the sarcastic tone of the mock epic:

Some Nymphs there are, too conscious of the Face,

For Life predestin'd to the *Gnomes* embrace.

These swell their Prospects and exalt their Pride,

When Offers are disdain'd, and Love deny'd (Pope, I. 79-82)

Literary critic Ian Jack comments on Pope's inclusion of false beauty in his mock epic, saying, "By making it 'sacred' Belinda, and the whole *beau monde* which she represents, is guilty of a serious moral fault. Pope's moral judgment is implicit throughout . . . (Jack 79).

Pope's critical portrayal of women of the time period could be seen as purely social commentary or perhaps something more personal, instead stemming from his failure with women due to his small, deformed stature. This focus on external beauty no doubt frustrated a man whose exterior was not particularly appealing, while his genius and emotional span were unmatched in his time. Once again we can draw a contradiction between the actual life of Pope and how his works have taken on a life and commentary of their own.

In *The Rape of Lock*, Pope also comments on the feud ensuing from Lord Petre's cutting of Fermor's lock of hair. By making this the lofty topic of his epic, he speaks to its trivial nature, and the overall trivial nature of warring political and aristocratic relations:

In the simple mock-heroic . . . the subject of the poem is compared to something great and made ridiculous by the comparison. It is 'a sort of [deliberate] transgression against the rules of proportion and mechanics: it is using a vast force to lift a feather'" (Jack 78).

It was Pope's goal that his portrayal of Petre and Fermor's feud might not only draw attention to the triviality of these arguments, but also the epic as a whole, which had come under great scrutiny during a time where men and women were becoming more and more disillusioned with grandeur and the supernatural.

But mocking the epic form might not have been done simply for the sake of destroying an outdated art form in a new era, but creating a new and more practical form which includes all of the faults, chaos, and vulgarities of a time period. Pope was very

conscious and critical of the rules under which poetry was constructed. This can be seen with his inclusion of mythical elements such as nymphs and gnomes in *The Rape of Lock*, as well as his deification of Belinda's lock of hair, which is supposed to parody the kidnapping of Helen of Troy. In fact, in one of Pope's poems, he speaks of his restructuring of poetic rules, a reformation which to this day plays a huge importance in the constant evolution of literary artistry:

From *vulgar Bounds* with *brave Disorder* part,
And *snatch* a *Grace* beyond the Reach of Art ... (ll. 146–9, 154–5, *Poems*)

This restructuring of old cemented forms like the epic into modernized and deformed pieces of literature was revolutionary in its time, but has since been popularized and is a part of almost every literary generation (Henry Miller, Jack Kerouac, and today, Chuck Palahniuk). *The Rape of Lock* examines political relationships, love, and the faults of an entire humanity. Its sphere of influence in reshaping literary boundaries is inestimable.

In conclusion, the life of Alexander Pope exemplifies a time period in eighteenth century Britain, a Britain of political uprisings, conspiracies, dissent, double-dealing, and a movement away from social norms, a movement with a critical/cynical eye. Through his dealings with the London literary crew at the time, particularly Joseph Addison, his good friends on both sides of the political fence within Parliament, and his works satirizing the inner-workings of domestic and political interactions, we can see the forces that shaped his poetry. Alexander Pope lived through personal betrayals and a time of rapid political change, and with nothing else but his genius and a pen, chronicled the themes which form the heart of all our backwards human to human dealings. He was loyal to his friends, cleverly satirized his enemies, remained ambiguous in his political beliefs, and, before we proclaim him a saint, got drunk off of his own moral justifications. His transcendence through time deals not with

his fame and fortune in eighteenth century society, but the truths he saw within that society that continue to recur throughout history. He lived with a rage and a passion that crafted him into a brilliant and emotional poet, a historical paradigm of brilliance, but all the while remaining unashamedly human. His personal faults and overzealous nature can often be seen in his works, displaying the imperfection of the critic, but Pope's simplicity in his goals to understand nature and man, the undeniable truth in which he sought to live within have formed a foundation for responsible social criticism and a guide for understanding the webs of political and personal relationships of the eighteenth century and those which still remain prominent today.

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