

## Meet Alexander Pope

**Directions:** Read the following excerpt from Samuel Johnson's *The Lives of the Poets*, and answer the questions.

Alexander Pope was born in London, May 22, 1688, of parents whose rank or station was never ascertained: we are informed that they were of *gentle blood*; that his father was of a family of which the Earl of Downe was the head, and that his mother was the daughter of William Turner, Esquire, of York, who had likewise three sons, one of whom had the honour of being killed, and the other of dying, in the service of Charles the First; the third was made a general officer in Spain, from whom the sister inherited what sequestrations and forfeitures had left in the family.

This, and this only, is told by Pope; who is more willing, as I have heard observed, to shew what his father was not, than what he was. It is allowed that he grew rich by trade, but whether in a shop or on the Exchange was never discovered, till Mr. Tyers told, on the authority of Mrs. Racket, that he was a linen-draper in the Strand. Both parents were papists.

Pope was from his birth of a constitution tender and delicate; but is said to have shewn remarkable gentleness and sweetness of disposition. The weakness of his body continued through his life, but the mildness of his mind perhaps ended with his childhood. His voice, when he was young, was so pleasing, that he was called in fondness the *little Nightingale*.

Being not sent early to school, he was taught to read by an aunt, and when he was seven or eight years old, became a lover of books. He first learned to write by imitating printed books; a species of penmanship in which he retained great excellence through his whole life, though his ordinary hand was not elegant.

When he was about eight, he was placed in Hampshire under Taverner, a Romish priest, who, by a method very rarely practised, taught him the Greek and Latin rudiments together. He was now first regularly initiated in poetry by the perusal of Ogylby's *Homer*, and Sandys's *Ovid*: Ogylby's assistance he never repaid with any praise; but of Sandys he declared, in his notes to the *Iliad*, that English poetry owed much of its present beauty to his translations. Sandys very rarely attempted original composition.

From the age of sixteen the life of Pope, as an author, may be properly computed. He now wrote his pastorals, which were shewn to the Poets and Criticks of that time; as they well deserved, they were read with admiration, and many praises were bestowed upon them and upon the Preface, which is both elegant and learned in a high degree; they were, however, not published till five years afterwards. . . .

The same year was written the *Essay on Criticism*; a work which displays such extent of comprehension, such nicety of distinction, such acquaintance with mankind, and such knowledge both of ancient and modern learning, as are not often attained by the maturest age and longest experience. It was published about two years afterwards, and being praised by Addison in the *Spectator* with sufficient liberality, met with so much favour as enraged Dennis, "who," he says, "found himself attacked without any manner of provocation on his side, and attacked in his person, instead of his writings, by one who was wholly a stranger to him, at a time when all the world knew he was persecuted by fortune; and not only saw that this was attempted in a clandestine manner, with the utmost falsehood and calumny, but found that all this was done by a little affected hypocrite, who had nothing in his mouth at the same time but truth, candour, friendship, good-nature, humanity, and magnanimity."

Not long after, he wrote *The Rape of the Lock*, the most airy, the most ingenious, and the most delightful of all his compositions, occasioned by a frolick of gallantry, rather too familiar, in which Lord Petre cut off a lock of Mrs. Arabella Fermor's hair. This, whether stealth or violence, was so much resented, that the commerce of the two families, before very friendly, was interrupted. Mr. Caryl, a gentleman who, being secretary to King James's Queen, had followed his Mistress into France, and who being the author of *Sir Solomon Single*, a comedy, and some translations, was entitled to the notice of a Wit, solicited Pope to endeavour a reconciliation by a ludicrous poem, which might bring both the parties to a better temper. In compliance with Caryl's request, though his name was for a long time marked only by the first and last letter, C—1, a poem of two cantos was written (1711), as is said, in a fortnight, and sent to the offended Lady, who liked it well enough to shew it; and, with the usual process of literary transactions, the author, dreading a surreptitious edition, was forced to publish it.

The event is said to have been such as was desired; the pacification and diversion of all to whom it related, except *Sir George Brown*, who complained with some bitterness that, in the character of *Sir Plume*, he was made to talk nonsense. Whether all this be true, I have some doubt; for at Paris, a few years ago, a niece of Mrs. Fermor, who presided in an English Convent, mentioned Pope's work with very little gratitude, rather as an insult than an honour; and she may be supposed to have inherited the opinion of her family.

At its first appearance it was termed by Addison *merum sal*. Pope, however, saw that it was capable of improvement; and, having luckily contrived to borrow his machinery from the *Rosicrucians*, imparted the scheme with which his head was teeming to Addison, who told him that his work, as it stood, was a *delicious little thing*, and gave him no encouragement to retouch it.

This has been too hastily considered as an instance of Addison's jealousy; for as he could not guess the conduct of the new design, or the possibilities of pleasure comprised in a fiction of which there had been no examples, he might very reasonably and kindly persuade the author to acquiesce in his own prosperity, and forebear an attempt which he considered as an unnecessary hazard.

Addison's counsel was happily rejected. Pope foresaw the future efflorescence of imagery then budding in his mind, and resolved to spare no art, or industry of cultivation. The soft luxuriance of his fancy was already shooting, and all the gay varieties of diction were already at his hand to colour and embellish it.

His attempt was justified by its success. *The Rape of the Lock* stands forward, in the classes of literature, as the most exquisite example of ludicrous poetry. Berkeley congratulated him upon the display of powers more truly poetical than he had shewn before; with elegance of description and justness of precepts, he had now exhibited boundless fertility of invention.

He always considered the intermixture of the machinery with the action as his most successful exertion of poetical art. He indeed could never afterwards produce any thing of such unexampled excellence. Those performances, which strike with wonder, are combinations of skillful genius with happy casualty; and it is not likely that any felicity, like the discovery of a new race of preternatural agents, should happen twice to the same man.



## Pope's "Essay on Criticism"

Read these excerpts carefully, and complete the exercise.

### From Part I

'Tis hard to say, if greater want of skill  
Appear in writing or in judging ill:  
But, of the two, less dangerous is th' offense  
To tire our patience, than mislead our sense.  
Some few in that, but numbers err in this, 5  
Ten censure wrong for one who writes amiss.  
A fool might once himself alone expose,  
Now one in verse makes many more in prose.  
'Tis with our judgments as our watches, none 10  
Go just alike, yet each believes his own.  
In poets as true genius is but rare,  
True taste as seldom is the critic's share;  
Both must alike from Heaven derive their light,  
These born to judge, as well as those to write.  
Let such teach others who themselves excel, 15  
And censure freely who have written well.  
Authors are partial to their wit, 'tis true,  
But are not critics to their judgment too?

### From Part II

True wit is nature to advantage dressed,  
What oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed:  
Something, whose truth convinced at sight we find.  
That gives us back the image of our mind.  
As shades more sweetly recommend the light, 5  
So modest plainness sets off sprightly wit.  
For works may have more wit than does 'em good.  
As bodies perish through excess of blood.  
Others for language all their care express,  
And value books, as women men, for dress; 10  
Their praise is still—the style is excellent;  
The sense they humbly take upon content.  
Words are like leaves: where they most abound.  
Much fruit of sense beneath is rarely found.  
False eloquence, like the prismatic glass, 15  
Its gaudy colors spreads on every place.  
The face of nature we no more survey.  
All glares alike, without distinction gay;  
But true expression, like the unchanging sun,  
Clears and improves whate'er it shines upon; 20  
It gilds all objects, but it alters none.  
Expression is the dress of thought, and still  
Appears more decent, as more suitable;  
A vile conceit in pompous words expressed  
Is like a clown in regal purple dressed; 25  
For different styles with different subjects sort,  
As several garbs with country, town and court.  
Some by old words to fame have made pretense,  
Ancients in phrase, mere moderns in their sense.  
Such labored nothings, in so strange a style, 30

Amaze the unlearned, and make the learned smile.  
 Unlucky, as Fungoso in the play,  
 These sparks with awkward vanity display  
 What the fine gentleman wore yesterday;  
 And but so mimic ancients wits at best, 35  
 As apes our grandsires, in their doublets dressed.  
 In words, as fashions, the same rule will hold.  
 Alike fantastic, if too new, or old:  
 Be not the first by whom the new is tried,  
 Nor yet the last to lay the old aside. 40

.....  
 True ease in writing comes from art, not chance,  
 As those moves easiest who have learned to dance.  
 'Tis not enough so harshness gives offense,  
 The sound must seem an echo to the sense.

—Alexander Pope

Show how these excerpts reflect Neoclassical approaches to each of the following:

1. balance and clarity
  
2. emphasis on the intellectual
  
3. attitude toward emotion
  
4. view of imagination
  
5. use of satire

## The Quotable Mr. Pope

With the exception of Shakespeare, Alexander Pope is probably the most frequently quoted of all English poets. Read and respond to each of the following memorable couplets with an example (from school, politics, the arts, or your own life) that exemplifies the couplet.

1. 'Tis with our judgments as our watches; none  
Go just alike, yet each believes his own.
2. Good nature and good sense must ever join;  
To err is human, to forgive divine.
3. True ease in writing comes from art, not chance,  
As those move easiest who have learned to dance.
4. Words are like leaves; and where they most abound  
Much fruit of sense beneath is rarely found.
5. Be not the first by whom the new are tried,  
Nor yet the last to lay the old aside.
6. Some praise at morning what they blame at night,  
But always think the last opinion right.
7. We think our fathers fools, so wise we grow;  
Our wiser sons, no doubt, will think us so.
8. Trust not yourself; but your defects to know,  
Make use of every friend—and every foe.
9. Hope springs eternal in the human breast:  
Man never is, but always to be blest.
10. A little learning is a dangerous thing;  
Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring.