UNIT 8  ALEXANDER POPE: AN ESSAY ON MAN

Structure

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8.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit will analyze and explicate Alexander Pope’s An Essay on Man (1733-4), through relevant extracts from the text, a poem in which the poet attempts with cheerful optimism to “vindicate the ways of God to Man,” arguing that “WHATEVER IS, IS RIGHT”. This unit will also comment briefly on the biographical and historical background of Alexander Pope, and try to discover the subtle connections between Pope the man and the artist in the context of the age in which he was writing.

8.1 INTRODUCTION

This unit will introduce Alexander Pope in the biographical, literary and historical perspective and try to examine the relationship between the man and the artist. As you already know, the age of Alexander Pope is sometimes called the classic Age and sometimes the Augustan age of English Literature. It may be well to explain the senses in which these terms should be understood. The epithet ‘Classic’ we may take to denote, first, that the poets and the critics of this age believed that the works of the writers of the classical antiquity (really of the Latin writers) presented the best models and the ultimate standards of literary taste, and, secondly, in a more general way, that, like these Latin writers, they had little faith in the promptings and guidance of individual genius, and much in laws and rules imposed by the authority of the past. Pope expressed the principle of classicism in the following lines in his Essay on Criticism (1711):

“Tis more to guide than spur the Muse’s stand;
Restrain his fury, than provoke his speed”

So the Muse had to be guided, the fury had to be restrained, and the speed had to be checked by a masterly control.

The other epithet “Augustan” was applied in the first instance as a term of high praise, because those who used it believed that the Age of Augustus was the golden age of Latin literature, and, therefore the age of Pope was regarded as the golden age of English literature.
This unit will then go on to analyze and respond to Pope’s *An Essay on Man* with
the help of suitable extracts from Epistle I, and see how the poem illuminates and
explains the premises of contemporary moral philosophy in the form of popular
and accessible verse. The four Epistles that make up *An Essay on Man* variously
explore the relationship of human kind to the Newtonian universe (“a mighty
maze! But not without a plan”) and they offer observations on human limitation,
passion, intelligence, sociability, and the potential for happiness.

### 8.2 ALEXANDER POPE (1688-1744)

Alexander Pope was born in London in 1688 – the year of the Revolution and of
John Bunyan’s death. His father, a prosperous linen – draper, was a Roman
Catholic; and on account of his religion, Pope was excluded from the public
schools and universities. As a result, he picked up most of his knowledge in a
haphazard way. So although Pope read widely, he never became an accurate
scholar. This want of sound learning somehow creeps into his work.
Extraordinarily precocious (in his own famous words, he “lisped in numbers for
the numbers came”) he published his *Pastorals* in 1709 and his *Essay on
Criticism* in 1711.

Pope lived with his parents first at Binfield, on the skirts of Windsor Forest, and
then at Chiswick, till the completion of his translation of Homer, the financial
success of which enabled him in 1719 to buy a house at Twickenham. At
Twickenham, he passed the rest of his life, and there he died in 1744.

Pope’s poetic career neatly falls into three periods – an early and a late period of
original work divided by a period (1715-25) of translation. To the period before
1715, belong a number of miscellaneous poems of which the most important are
*Pastorals* (1709), short poems on spring, summer, autumn and winter, closely
fashioned on Virgil; *Essay on Criticism* (1711) which is a remarkable
performance for a man of twenty one, and *Windsor Forest* (1713) in which the
landscape is copied out of the Greek and Latin poets. In this period also comes
out Pope’s mock-heroic poem *The Rape of the Lock* which can certainly be
regarded as his masterpiece. It appeared first in 1712, and later in an enlarged
form in 1714. The characteristic miniaturizing effect of Pope’s use of the mock-
heroic has been related by many critics to the fact that he was only four feet and
six inches’ tall and suffered from the curvature of the spine.

The translation of Homer’s *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* – the former made single-
handed and the latter with much help from the others represents the labour of
Pope’s second period. The translation of *Iliad* was published in instalments
between 1715 and 1720; and the translation of *Odyssey* appeared in 1725-26.

After the publication of his translation of Homer, Pope confined himself almost
wholly to satire and didactic poetry. The principal works of the third period are:
Four *Moral Essays* (1731-35), *The Dunciad* (1728), *An Essay on Man* (1733-34),
*Imitations of Horace* (between 1733 and 1737), and *Epistle to Dr.
Arbuthnot* (1742).

*The Dunciad*, a long and elaborate satire on the “dunces” – the bad poets and
pretentious critics of Pope’s day, used the mock-epic machinery and was
obviously influenced by Dryden’s *Mac Flecknoe*. But the inspiration for
Dunciad came also from Pope’s innumerable quarrels with all sorts of people. In 1742, Pope produced the New Dunciad in continuation of the earlier poem, and in 1743 this was added as Book Four to a new edition of The Dunciad, the hero being changed from Theobald to Colley Ciber, the Poet Laureate.

In An Essay on Man, a poem in four Epistles (containing portions only of a larger plan that was never carried out), Pope undertakes a defence of the moral government of the universe and an explanation of the physical and moral evil in it, on the optimistic postulate that “WHATEVER IS, IS RIGHT”. It must be noted here, however, that Pope was not a philosopher and he had no natural leanings towards philosophy, and no training for it. It was simply the influence of others, and especially of his Deistic friend Lord Bolingbroke, which induced him to dabble in it. Consequently, An Essay on Man has been branded by many critics as confused and even self-contradictory. But the poem contains many passages which are justly famous and are still often quoted for their rhetorical beauty and power.

Pope’s last years were spent in a rented riverside house at Twickenham, where he played out his own version of the Horatian retirement. Imitating a landed gentleman, he indulged in a mock-heroic, miniaturized version of landscape-gardening, designing a whimsically romantic “grot” in a tunnel which linked the water front with his back garden. Before his death, Pope received his last sacrament, never having abandoned his catholic religion.

The artist Alexander Pope has been critically evaluated as the embodiment of the kind of intelligence which was currently known as “wit”, and which the classical age cultivated and admired. He has also been regarded as a marvelously clever and adroit literary craftsman. The neat, compact, antithetic and epigrammatic style of writing which was the Classical ideal, assumed perfection in his hands. He is also considered to be the most consummate master of the classic couplet, which he trimmed of some of the licences which Dryden is supposed to have permitted himself. Pope’s perfect models were followed with great fidelity by all other poets who used the couplet till the early nineteenth century.

**Self-check Exercise I**

a) Explain briefly the principle of classicism as enunciated by Alexander Pope.

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b) State briefly why Pope was excluded from the public schools and universities.

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\[8.3\] **AN ESSAY ON MAN: EPISTLE I (1733-4)**

In his *An Essay on Man*, Alexander Pope turns to the philosophical which he hoped would crown his poetic career. Pope published *An Essay on Man* anonymously so as to wrong-foot his enemies, who were not sure whether to condemn it as Pope’s, or to praise it as superior to anything Pope could have achieved. In four heroic-couplet Epistles addressed to the Tory politician Lord Bolingbroke, Pope attempts with cheerful optimism to “vindicate the ways of God to man”, arguing that “WHATEVER IS, IS RIGHT”. Pope expounds the medieval and Renaissance concept of a “chain of being”, with its primitive blend of theology and natural philosophy, and reconciles it uneasily with the modern empirical science of Sir Isaac Newton. The work becomes a kind of handbook of popular Enlightenment notions throughout Europe and has been extensively translated.

*An Essay on Man* expresses the Deist view that God can be apprehended through nature, and not only through revealed scriptures Epistle I makes significant observations on the nature and state of Man with respect to the universe. The poem introduces man as a “mighty maze” but not without a plan. The Epistle now goes on to vindicate the ways of God to Man:

“Say first, of God above, or Man below,
What can we reason, but from what we know?
Of Man, what see we but station here,
From which to reason, or to which we refer?
Thro’ worlds unnumber’dtho’ the God be known,
’Tis ours to trace Him only in our own.”
Thus the poet places God above, and Man below, and goes on to argue that our reasoning can be based only on knowledge. God is known through numberless worlds, but Man has to find Him only in his own. Thus a strong relationship is already established between God and man.

The poem goes on to unfold yet another aspect of Man by observing:

“Presumptuous Man! the reason wouldst thou find,
Why form’d so weak, so little and so blind?
First, if thou canst the harder reason guess,
Why form’d no weaker, blinder and no less?
Ask of the mother earth, why oaks are made
Taller or stronger than the weeds they shade?”

Pope suggests here a natural plan in the ways of God to Man. He begins by denouncing Man as a “presumptuous” being, complaining about his being made weak and small. The poet asks Man to take comfort in thinking why he has not been made weaker and even smaller. Mother Earth, representing Nature, may be asked why oak trees have been made taller than the weeds they are out to protect. So Pope is already suggesting an optimistic view of life by observing that Man should remember that it could have been worse. Besides, Nature provides a particular size to every object for a certain purpose. And it is in the nature of the things that they should be exactly what they are made to be.

Pope next switches on to yet another stand by observing pointedly:

“Respecting Man, whatever wrong we call
May, must be right and relative to all”

Pope’s optimistic stand is still further strengthened here when he asks the “respecting” Man to understand that whatever we may call wrong must be right and only relative to everything else. The modern scientific principle of relativity has been artistically suggested here. “Presumptuous” Man has now become “Respecting” Man, and the tone of Pope has mellowed down, and the optimistic point of view of Pope spills over into yet another positive realization:

“Then say not Man’s imperfect, hear’n in fault;
Say rather, Man’s as perfect as he ought:
His knowledge measur’d to his state and place;
His time a moment, and a point his space.
If to be perfect in a certain sphere,
What matter, soon or late, or here or there?
The blest today is as completely so
As who began a thousand years ago.”

So Man is brought out as “as perfect as he ought” to be. Man is not imperfect. Man should realize that he may be perfect in a certain sphere of life, and once one has achieved success it does not matter whether he had become successful soon or late.
Now God comes out as seeing everyone with an equal eye:

“Who sees with equal eye as God of all,
A hero perish, or a sparrow fall
Atoms or systems into rain hurl’d
And now a bubble burst, and now a world”

Here the poet suggests strongly that everyone is equal in the eyes of God, as He sees with an equal eye a hero dying or a sparrow falling. For God, atoms hurled in the rain making the world come to pieces are as important in the eyes of God as a bursting bubble.

So the poet now advises philosophically:

“Hope humbly then; with trembling pinions soar,
Wait the great teacher Death, and God adore,
What future bliss be given, not thee to know,
But gives that Hope to be thy blessing now
Hope springs eternal in the human breast
Man never Is, but always To be blest.”

The poem now achieves a new philosophical dimension in which Man is advised to be hopeful but with humility. He should only wait for the profound teacher Death and praise God. Man does not know what future happiness is actually waiting for him. Hope is a blessing which springs forever in the body of Man, and blessings are in fact, only waiting to be showered on him.

And Epistle I ends with the following piece of advice:

“Cease then, nor ORDER Imperfection name,
Our proper bliss depends on what we blame.
Know thy own point: This kind, this due degree
Of blindness, weakness, Heav’n bestows on thee.
Submit – In this, or any other sphere
Secure to be as blest as thou canst bear….
And, spite of Pride, in erring Reason’s spite
One truth is clear, WHATEVER IS, IS RIGHT.”

These concluding lines of Epistle I give a brilliant poetic expression to a mood of enlightened confidence which characterizes the period. An optimistic philosophy of life is enunciated when Pope observes that Man’s proper happiness actually depends on what he complains about. Man should try to have a self-realization and submit to the Divine will and accept that whatever is, is right.

So An Essay on Man First Epistle artistically prepares us for the opening lines of the second Epistle:

“Know then thyself, presume not God to scan;
The proper study of Mankind is Man.”

Indeed, with great craftsmanship, Pope really vindicates the ways of God to Man in his An Essay on Man Epistle I, and artistically presents Man as a “mighty maze” but “not without a plan”. The poet admits that Man is befogged by Pride and wrong Reason. But in spite of these hurdles one truth is obviously clear,:

WHATEVER IS, IS RIGHT.
Self-check Exercise II

a) Explain briefly the message you get from the following lines:

“Thro’ worlds unnumber’d tho’ the God be known,
‘T is ours to trace Him only in our own”

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b) Comment critically on the main idea of the following lines:

“Ask of thy mother earth, why oaks are made
Taller or stronger than the weeds they shade?”

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c) Discuss briefly the significance of these lines:

“Respecting Man, whatever wrong we call
May, must be right and relative to all”

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8.4 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have examined Alexander Pope in the biographical, literary and historical perspective and moved on to a critical discussion of his poem *An Essay on Man* with special reference to Epistle I. On the basis of some important extracts from the actual text, we have discovered that Pope’s *An Essay on Man* puts across an optimistic philosophy of life which is that WHATEVER IS, IS RIGHT.

8.5 SUGGESTED READING


Fairer, David, *Pope’s Imagination* (Manchester, 1984)


8.6 ANSWERS TO SELF-CHECK EXERCISES

Self-check Exercise I

a) According to Alexander Pope, the poetic Muse had to be restrained rather than provoked. This meant that little faith was to be put on the prompting and guidance of individual genius and much on the laws and rules imposed by the authority of the Past.
b) Pope was excluded from the public schools and universities because he was a Roman Catholic.

c) *The Dunciad* is a long satirical on the dunces – the bad poets and pretentious critics of Pope’s day.

**Self-check Exercise II**

a) The message Pope gives here is that though God is known through many worlds, Man has to find Him only in his own. So the best way to know God is through man’s self-realization.

b) The poet suggests that it is only a natural process of the earth that the oak trees should be taller and stronger than the weeds they are made to protect.

c) These lines are significant because here Pope politely addresses Man as self-respecting, and assures him to note that whatever may appear to be wrong to him is actually only right, and a matter of sheer relativity.

d) Pope here gives an optimistic message when he affirms that Man should not consider himself as imperfect, and that Heaven has made any mistake. Actually, man is as perfect as he ought to be.

e) This is the final optimistic message of *Epistle I of An Essay on Man* where Pope concludes that in spite of all the human Pride and defective Reason, WHATEVER IS, IS RIGHT
An Essay on Man (1734) - Pope's best-known and most frequently quoted poem. Opening lines of Epistle I: Awake, my St. John! leave all meaner things / To low ambition, and the pride of kings. 2 THE DESIGN HAVING proposed to write some pieces on human life The disputes are all upon these last, and I will venture to say, they have less sharpened the wits than the hearts of men against each other, and have diminished the practice, more than advanced the theory of morality. If I could flatter myself that this Essay has any merit, it is in steering betwixt the extremes of doctrines seemingly opposite, in passing over terms utterly unintelligible, and in forming a temperate yet not inconsistent, and a short yet not imperfect, system of ethics. Complete summary of Alexander Pope's An Essay on Man. eNotes plot summaries cover all the significant action of An Essay on Man. The disorders which man sees in the universe are actually parts of some larger perfection which man's limited knowledge cannot perceive. Man's prideful speculations, not the external universe, are the cause of his misery. Within man himself, there is also an order based on the workings of self-love (the faculty of desire) and reason (the faculty of judgment). Right living depends upon the two working in harmony, since neither is good or evil in itself. Rather, good or evil arises out of their proper or improper use. Human society also partakes of this universal order. An Essay on Man. Moral essays and satires by Alexander Pope. INTRODUCTION. Pope's life as a writer falls into three periods, answering fairly enough to the three reigns in which he worked. Under Queen Anne he was an original poet, but made little money by his verses; under George I. he was chiefly a translator, and made much money by satisfying the French-classical taste with versions of the "Iliad" and "Odyssey." Under George I. he also edited Shakespeare, but with little profit to himself; for Shakespeare was but a Philistine in the eyes of the French-classical crit