Life and Works of Alexander Pope

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Alexander Pope, the greatest poet and verse satirist of the Augustan Period, was born to Alexander Pope and Edith Turner on May 21, 1688, in London where his Roman Catholic father was a prosperous linen merchant. He had a Catholic upbringing. Ironically, young Pope was born at a time when rights of the Catholics to teaching, education, voting and holding public office was banned due to the enactment to the Test Acts which uplifted the status of the Church of England. After the Glorious Revolution of 1688 his family moved out of London and settled about 1700 at Binfield in Windsor Forest. He had little formal schooling, largely educating himself through extensive reading. Additionally, he equipped himself with studying various languages. It was with the know-how of the language that he read works of various poets as such English, French, Italian, Latin and Greek. Sir William Trumbull, a retired statesman of literary interests who lived nearby, did much to encourage the young poet. So did the dramatist and poet William Wycherley and the poet-critic William Walsh, with whom Pope became acquainted when he was about 17 and whose advice to aim at "correctness" contributed to the flawless texture and concentrated brilliance of Pope's verse.

A sweet-tempered child with a fresh, plump face, Pope contracted a tubercular infection in his later childhood and never grew taller than 4 feet 6 inches. He suffered curvature of the spine and constant headaches. His features, however, were striking, and the young Joshua Reynolds noticed in his "sharp, keen countenance … something grand, like Cicero's." His physical appearance, frequently ridiculed by his enemies, undoubtedly gave an edge to Pope's satire; but he was always warmhearted and generous in his affection for his many friends.

He was best known for his satirical verse and for his translation of the works of Homer. He was raised as a Catholic, which proved to be a matter of concern as Catholics were barred of their fundamental rights and forcefully ousted from London. He nevertheless did not let this hamper his learning ability and read on everything he could lay his hands on. Since an early age, he was inspired by the works of classical literary figures Horace, Juvenal, Homer, Virgil, William Shakespeare, Geoffrey Chaucer and John Dryden.
Career

His first ever work entitled, *Pastorals* was published in 1709 in the sixth part of Tonson’s Poetical Miscellanies. The work was widely appreciated and guaranteed him much fame and publicity.

It was after the positive reception of his work *Pastorals* that he was inspired to write further. In 1711, he came up with *An Essay on Criticism*. Much like its predecessor, this work too was much appreciated and liked. Written in a heroic couplet style, which was a developing genre of poetry then, the work was written as a response to whether poetry should be written in a style that is natural or follow the predetermined rules of the classical works. No other poet in the history of English literature has handled the heroic couplet with comparable flexibility and brilliance which he inherited from John Dryden.

Same year, he made friends with Tory writers John Gay, Jonathan Swift, Thomas Parnell and John Arbuthnot. Together with them, he formed the satirical Scriblerus Club. The main aim of the club was to bring upon works with satirical take on ignorance and pedantry through the creation of a fictional character of Martinus Scriblerus.

Year 1712 witnessed the release of two of his poetry works, *Messiah* and *The Rape of the Lock*. The following year, he came up with the poetry, *Windsor Forest*. Furthermore, he even wrote articles in the publications, ‘The Guardian’ and ‘The Spectator’. From 1715 to 1720, he indulged in translating the works like *Iliad*. In the meanwhile, the political situation worsened with the death of Queen Anne and the rise of the conflict between Hanoverians and the Jacobites. In 1717, he came up with three works, *Eloisa to Aberland, Three Hours After Marriage* and *Elegy to the Memory of the Unfortunate Lady*. From 1723 to 1725, he penned *The Works of Shakespeare* in six volumes. From 1725 to 1726, he came up with the work, *Translations of the Odyssey*. It was the success of his earlier *Translations of the Iliad* that inspired him to come up with this work. In 1727, he came up with the work, *Peri Bathous* or the *Art of Sinking in Poetry*. Year 1728 witnessed the release of his work, *The Dunciad*. From 1733 to 1734, he worked on ‘Essay on Man’, which was a philosophical poem written in heroic couplet style. Though he originally intended the work to be a centrepiece of the proposed system of ethics, he did live long to expand it or complete it. In 1735, he came up with his work, ‘The Prologue to the Satires’. From 1733 to 1738, he came up with ‘Imitations of Horace’. Post 1738, he limited his work. He worked towards coming up with a
patriotic epic in blank verse, titled Brutus, he could not succeed further than the opening lines.

He dedicated much of his later life revising and expanding his masterpiece *The Dunciad*. He came up with the fourth book, which was a sequel to the first three books, entitled, *The New Dunciad*. He then came up with *The Dunciad in Four Books* which was a revised version of the original three books and a slightly revised version of the fourth book published in 1743. Unlike the predecessor, he changed the protagonist of the work from Tibbald to Bays.

**Personal Life and Legacy**

Though he never went into the nuptial bliss, he allegedly was romantically involved with Martha Blount. He suffered from major health complications ever since he was a child. At the age of twelve, he was inflicted with the Pott’s disease which caused deformation of his body. Furthermore, it inhibited his growth at 4ft 6 inches and caused a hunchback. It was due to the disease that he faced other health complications such as respiratory problems, high fevers, inflamed eyes and abdominal pain. His health worsened in 1740s and consequently led to his demise on May 30, 1944 in his villa. He was surrounded by friends at the time of his death. Remarkably, a night before his death, he called on a priest and received his Last Rites of the Roman Catholic Church. He was interred in the nave of the Church of England Church of St Mary the Virgin in Twickenham.

**Pastorals**

*The Pastorals*, published in 1709, had been written some years earlier, when the poet was between 16 and 17. These are four artificial poems on the seasons (Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter) in imitation of Virgil. *Windsor Forest*, published in 1713, is a descriptive poem of four hundred lines, combining pastoral descriptions with historical and political passages.

**Didactic Poems**

The *Essay on Criticism* was written in 1709 and published in 1711. It was the first real evidence of his great qualities. *Moral Essays* are ethical poems in the form of epistles. *Essay on Man* is a philosophical poem dealing with man’s relation to the universe, to himself, to society and to happiness. Besides the *Essay on Man* there are five other epistles known as *Moral Essays*. These are respectively the *Character of Man*, the *Characters of Woman*, *Of the Use of Riches*, *Of Taste* and *A Letter to Addison*. 
Satiric Poetry

The Rape of the Lock (1712, two cantos) is a mock-heroic poem. Describing with admirable gravity and raillery the incidents connected with the rape of a lock of Belinda. The Poem is a dainty little gem and Pope’s most perfect piece. It is the epic of the reign of Queen Anne. The Dunciad is long satire in the form of an epic on cheap literary writers and persons who had offended Pope. Imitations of Horace (1733) are a group of biting satires depicting contemporary figures and manners, in imitation of Horace. An Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot (1735) is a cutting satire on some of Pope’s enemies.

Lyrical

The Ode on St. Cecilia’s Day (1713) shows that intense lyric feeling and the lyric form were beyond his powers. Eloisa to Abelard (1717) is more emotional than anything else Pope wrote. It is based on the well-known story of the lovers who, after a long course of calamities, retired each to a different convent and devoted the remainder of their days to religion. The Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady (1717) is about a woman who finds in suicide an escape from a hopeless love.

Translations

Pope also engaged in poetic imitations and translations. His Messiah (1712), published by Sir Richard Steele in the Spectator, was an imitation of Virgil's fourth Eclogue, based on passages from Isaiah; and his early "translations" of Chaucer included the Temple of Fame (1715). In later life Pope published reworkings of several of John Donne's satires. But Pope's versions of Homer were his greatest achievement as a translator. The Iliad of Homer and The Odessey of Homer were looked upon by Pope’s contemporary as the finest poetical achievement of the time. He undertook the translation because he needed money—the result of a sharp drop in the interest from his father's French annuities. The translation occupied him until 1720, and it was a great financial success, making Pope independent of the customary forms of literary patronage. Parnell and William Broome were among those who assisted with the notes, but the translation was entirely Pope's own. It has been highly praised by subsequent critics.

Editorial Work

Pope also undertook several editorial projects. Parnell's Poems (1721) was followed by an edition of the late Duke of Buckingham's Works (1723),
subsequently suppressed on account of its Jacobite tendencies. The trial of his friend Francis Atterbury, Bishop of Rochester, for complicity in a Jacobite plot also caused Pope a good deal of concern. Then, in 1725, Pope's edition of *William Shakespeare* appeared. Pope's emendations and explanatory notes were notoriously capricious, and his edition was attacked by Lewis Theobald in *Shakespeare Restored* (1726), a work that revealed a superior knowledge of editorial technique and that gained for its author the unenviable distinction of becoming the original hero of *the Dunciad*.

As Pope grew older, he came to rely more and more on the faithful Martha Blount, and to her he left most of his possessions. He described his life as a "long disease" and asthma increased his sufferings in his later years. At times during the last month of his life he became delirious. He died on May 30, 1744, and was buried in Twickenham Church.