

JRF SPECIAL PDF

Alexander Pope

1 Pope's Biography

1.1 Who He Was

Alexander Pope (1688–1744) was the leading English poet and satirist of the early eighteenth century. He was such a dominant figure that the **Augustan Age** is also called the "**Age of Pope.**" He is best known as the great master of the **heroic couplet**, and as a sharp satirist of the vanities and follies of his society. After Shakespeare, he is the **second-most quoted writer in the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*.**

CONCEPT

What is the heroic couplet? A pair of rhyming lines written in **iambic pentameter** (ten syllables, five stressed beats per line). The couplets are called "heroic" because they were used to tell heroic or epic stories. Pope made this neat, balanced, witty couplet the signature verse form of the age.

1.2 Birth, Family, and Education

Detail	Information
Born	1688 , in London
Died	1744
Family faith	Roman Catholic
Education	Self-taught ; learned Greek and Latin from a priest and at Catholic schools, later French and Italian
Period	Augustan / Neoclassical age
Famous for	Mastery of the heroic couplet ; satirical verse

Pope was born to **Catholic parents**, and his faith shaped his whole life. Because of the **Test Acts**, which discriminated against Catholics, he was barred from attending a university. He educated himself instead, reading widely and learning languages **through the act of translation**. His chief literary models were the classical poets **Homer, Virgil, and Horace**, and the English poets **Chaucer** and **Shakespeare**.

In **1700** his family moved to **Binfield** in **Windsor Forest**. As a boy Pope was struck by **Pott's disease** (a form of tuberculosis of the spine) that **stunted his growth** — he never grew above **four feet six inches** — and permanently damaged his health. His faith, his illness, and his small stature left him feeling isolated for much of his life.

1.3 His Literary Circle and Politics

In London, Pope made many literary friends, including the comic dramatists **William Wycherley** and **William Congreve**. He became a close friend of the scientist **Isaac Newton**, and later wrote the **epitaph for Newton's monument**. (Newton was the man the essayist **Joseph Addison** called "**the miracle of the present age.**")

CONCEPT

The Newton couplet: Moved by Newton's discoveries, Pope wrote the famous lines: *"Nature and Nature's Laws lay hid in Night, / God said, Let Newton be! and all was Light."* The couplet praises Newton's discovery that **white light contains all the colours** — that white light splits into a spectrum of colours through a prism.

Pope's closest allies were the **Tory** (conservative) writers **Jonathan Swift**, **John Gay**, and **John Arbuthnot**. Together they founded the satirical **Scriblerus Club**, which mocked **ignorance and pedantry** through the invented figure of a foolish scholar, **Martinus Scriblerus**. ("Pedantry" means a fussy obsession with petty rules and details.) Pope was also, for a time, friends with the **Whig** writers Addison and **Richard Steele**.

During the **Jacobite Rebellion of 1715**, which opposed the new king **George I**, many of Pope's Tory friends lost their standing and some were imprisoned. As a Catholic sympathetic to the Tories, Pope had to be careful; he eventually moved to **Twickenham**, since Catholics were no longer welcome in central London.

1.4 The Three Periods of His Work

Pope's career is usually divided into three stages.

- **Early period (to 1715):** original verse and criticism — *Pastorals*, *An Essay on Criticism*, *The Rape of the Lock*, and *Windsor Forest*.
- **Period of translation (1715–1725):** his great verse translations of **Homer's *Iliad and Odyssey***.
- **Late period:** satire in the manner of **Horace** — *The Dunciad*, *An Essay on Man*, the *Moral Essays*, and the *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot*.

His verse won him **financial independence** — rare for a writer of his time — largely through the subscription sales of his Homer. The Romantic poet **Lord Byron** later named Pope a major influence and saw his own satire *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* as a continuation of Pope's tradition.

2 Important Works

Work	Approx. Date	Genre	Significance
<i>Ode on Solitude</i>	written c. 1700, pub. 1709	Lyric ode	A Horatian ode ; written when Pope was a boy; on the joy of a quiet, simple life
<i>Pastorals</i>	1709	Pastoral poems	Four poems on the four seasons , modelled on Virgil

Work	Approx. Date	Genre	Significance
<i>An Essay on Criticism</i>	1711	Verse essay (criticism)	His statement of the rules of good criticism; full of famous phrases
<i>The Rape of the Lock</i>	1712 (rev. 1714, 1717)	Mock-epic poem	His magnum opus ; satire on aristocratic vanity over a cut lock of hair
<i>Windsor Forest</i>	1713	Topographical poem	His first political poem; describes nature and landscape
<i>Translation of Homer's Iliad</i>	1715–1720	Verse translation	Acclaimed translation that made his fortune
<i>Translation of Homer's Odyssey</i>	1726	Verse translation	Sequel to the <i>Iliad</i> ; sold by subscription
<i>The Dunciad</i>	1728	Mock-epic satire	Attack on bad writers and cultural decay; crowns a "King of Dullness"
<i>An Essay on Man</i>	1733–1734	Philosophical poem	Aims "to vindicate the ways of God to Man"; "Whatever is, is right"
<i>Moral Essays</i>	1731–1735	Verse epistles	Four poems on human nature, addressed to friends and patrons
<i>Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot</i>	1735	Verse satire	His defence of his own life and satire; portraits of his enemies

CONCEPT

Order they were published: *An Essay on Criticism* (1711) → *The Rape of the Lock* (1712) → *Windsor Forest* (1713) → *The Dunciad* (1728) → *An Essay on Man* (1733–34) → *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot* (1735). Several famous "Hill" poems are by other men: *Grongar Hill* is by **John Dyer** and *Cooper's Hill* is by **John Denham**, while *Absalom and Achitophel* is **Dryden's** — none of these is by Pope.

3 Important Works in Detail

The Rape of the Lock, his masterpiece, is covered on its own in Section 4.

3.1 An Essay on Criticism (1711)

In one line: a poem that lays down the rules for good writing and good criticism — and gives English some of its most quoted phrases.

Despite its title, *An Essay on Criticism* is a **poem**, written in **heroic couplets**, completed when Pope was very young. It sets out his views on what makes good **literary criticism**: a critic needs both **knowledge and taste**, should follow the example of the ancients, and should judge a work as a whole rather than fault-finding over details. Pope drew on the classical critics **Aristotle**, **Horace**, and **Quintilian**, and on the French critic **Boileau**.

The poem answers a debate of the day: should poetry be **natural**, or should it obey the **fixed rules** inherited from

classical literature? Pope's answer is that the true rules are simply "**Nature methodised**" — good art follows nature, and the ancient rules are nature's own order discovered and written down.

EXAM ESSENTIAL

- It is a **poem in heroic couplets**, not prose, though called an "essay."
- Influences: **Aristotle, Horace, Quintilian, and Boileau.**
- Famous lines from it: "**A little learning is a dangerous thing,**" "**To err is human, to forgive divine,**" and "**For fools rush in where angels fear to tread.**"
- The phrase "**keep your piece nine years**" in the *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot* (advising patience before publishing) refers to **Horace's advice in *Ars Poetica*.**

3.2 Windsor Forest (1713)

In one line: a poem in praise of the English countryside around Pope's boyhood home, and his first venture into politics.

Windsor Forest describes the landscape and history of **Windsor Forest**, near where Pope grew up. It is an early example of **topographical poetry** — poetry that describes a particular place and its natural scenery. It was also Pope's **first political poem**, ending with praise of the peace of his day. The poem caught the attention of **Jonathan Swift**, and the two men went on to found the **Scriblerus Club** together.

CONCEPT

What is topographical poetry? Poetry that paints a real place — a hill, a river, a forest — and reflects on its scenery, history, and meaning. *Windsor Forest* is one of the early English examples of the form.

3.3 The Dunciad (1728)

In one line: a mock-epic that crowns the "King of Dullness" and watches stupidity slowly swallow the whole world of art and learning.

The Dunciad (the word means "epic of the dunces") is a **mock-epic satire** attacking the bad writers and "hack" authors of Pope's day — those who, he said, wrote anything at all just for money, with no real art. The idea was inspired by **Dryden's** satire *Mac Flecknoe* (1682). It is a **broad attack** on declining literary and cultural standards, not merely an attack on one person: it satirizes a whole crowd of writers and the commercialism of the age, and offers a **pessimistic view of the civilization of the time**.

The poem imagines **"Dulness"** as a goddess who reigns over a world of intellectual decay and crowns a new **"King of Dullness."** In the early version the chief target was the editor **Lewis Theobald** (who had attacked Pope's edition of Shakespeare); in the later four-book version the throne passes to the playwright **Colley Cibber**. Book by book, the kingdom of Dulness grows until, at the close, **stupidity wins** and the world sinks into "universal Darkness."

EXAM ESSENTIAL

- A **mock-heroic satire** on **bad writers and bad writing** (1728); inspired by **Dryden's *Mac Flecknoe***.
- It is a **pessimistic commentary on the whole civilization** of the time — its scope is **broad**, not limited to **Theobald** alone.
- The "King of Dullness" / hero is **Colley Cibber** in the revised version (**Lewis Theobald** in the original).
- The title of **Nirad C. Chaudhuri's** autobiography *Thy Hand, Great Anarch* (1987) is taken from a line of *The Dunciad*.

3.4 An Essay on Man (1733–1734)

In one line: a philosophical poem arguing that the universe is a perfect, ordered whole, so man should accept his place in it — "Whatever is, is right."

Like the *Essay on Criticism*, this "essay" is really a **poem in heroic couplets**. It is made up of **four epistles** (verse letters) and is **dedicated to Lord Bolingbroke**, the friend whose philosophy lies behind it. Its stated aim is **"to vindicate the ways of God to man"** — that is, to **justify God's ways to man** — echoing **Milton's** aim in *Paradise Lost*.

Pope's argument is that the universe is a perfectly ordered system, the **"Great Chain of Being,"** in which every creature has its fixed place — humans ranking above animals and plants because of reason, but below God. Man cannot fully understand this whole design, so he should not be proud, and should not try to **"imitate God."** Instead he should accept his place and strive to be good. The poem's settled conclusion is that, seen from the standpoint of the whole, **"Whatever is, is right."**

The four epistles treat man's relation to (1) the **universe**, (2) **himself**, (3) **society**, and (4) **happiness**. The poem won lavish praise: **Voltaire** called it "the most beautiful, the most useful, the most sublime didactic poem ever written," and **Immanuel Kant** read passages of it to his students.

CONCEPT

What is the "Great Chain of Being"? The old idea that all creation forms a single ordered ladder, from God at the top down through angels, humans, animals, and plants. In *An Essay on Man*, accepting one's rung in this chain — neither too proud nor despairing — is the path to wisdom and contentment.

EXAM ESSENTIAL

- A **philosophical poem** in **four epistles**, in **heroic couplets**, dedicated to Lord Bolingbroke.
- Its aim: **"to vindicate the ways of God to man"** (compare Milton's *Paradise Lost*).
- Key ideas: the **"Great Chain of Being"** and the conclusion **"Whatever is, is right."**
- Famous lines: **"Hope springs eternal in the human breast," "Know then thyself, presume not God to scan; / The proper study of mankind is man," "Act well your part; there all the honour lies,"** and **"An honest man's the noblest work of God."**

3.5**Moral Essays (1731–1735)**

In one line: four verse epistles on human character and the right use of wealth, written to friends and patrons.

The *Moral Essays* are a set of **four verse epistles** on questions of moral philosophy and human nature — the springs of human action, the characters of men and women, and the proper use of riches. Their tone is satirical, exposing the vanity and hypocrisy of society. They are addressed to four people close to Pope: **Lord Cobham**, **Martha Blount** (his lifelong friend and companion), and his patrons **Lord Bathurst** and **Lord Burlington**.

EXAM ESSENTIAL

- A series of **four** verse epistles on moral themes; satirical in tone.
- Addressed to **Lord Cobham, Martha Blount, Bathurst, and Burlington**.

3.6 Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot (1735)

In one line: Pope's verse defence of his own life and his satire, written to a dying friend, studded with cruel portraits of his enemies.

This satire is a **verse letter** to Pope's friend the physician **Dr. John Arbuthnot**, who was gravely ill. In it Pope **defends his career as a satirist**, explains why he writes, and sets out his principles of honesty and integrity. It contains famous, savage **portraits of his enemies** — most notably a sketch of **Joseph Addison** (under the name "Atticus") and of **Lord Hervey** ("Sporus"). At the close, Pope turns to his own family and pays a tender tribute to his **father**.

CONCEPT

"The good man walked innoxious through his age": Near the end of the *Epistle*, Pope describes a humble, peaceable man — *"Born to no pride; inheriting no strife, / ... / The good man walked innoxious through his age."* This portrait is of **Pope's own father**, praised for living a quiet, blameless life untouched by ambition or quarrel.

EXAM ESSENTIAL

- A **verse satire** addressed to **Dr. John Arbuthnot**; Pope's **defence of his own satire**.
- Contains portraits of his enemies, including **Joseph Addison** and **Lord Hervey**.
- The lines **"Fop at the toilet, flatt'rer at the board, / Now trips a lady, now struts a lord"** are from this poem.
- The passage **"Born to no pride... The good man walked innoxious through his age"** describes **Pope's father**.

3.7 Translations of Homer's Iliad and Odyssey (1715–1726)

In one line: Pope's verse translations of Homer's two great epics — a landmark that made his fortune.

Pope had loved **Homer** since childhood. He translated the **Iliad** (published 1715–1720) and then, encouraged by its success, the **Odyssey** (1726). The work was sold by **subscription** — readers paid in advance and received a volume each year — a financial innovation that brought Pope **independence and wealth**. The translations were widely admired but also debated: some felt that Pope's

polished couplets read more like a poem of his own than like the rugged original.

EXAM ESSENTIAL

- **Pope translated Homer** — both the **Iliad** (1715–20) and the **Odyssey** (1726).
- **Samuel Johnson** praised the *Iliad* as "**a performance which no age or nation could hope to equal.**"
- The classical scholar **Richard Bentley** said: "**It is a pretty poem, Mr. Pope, but you must not call it Homer.**"

3.8 Other Works to Know

- ***Ode on Solitude*** (written c. 1700, published 1709): a short lyric on the contentment of a quiet, private life, written when Pope was a boy. It is a **Horatian ode** — calm, personal, and reflective in the manner of the Roman poet **Horace**, rather than the grand public manner of the Pindaric ode. It ends: "*Thus let me live, unseen, unknown; / Thus unlamented let me die.*"
- ***Three Hours after Marriage*** (1717): a satirical play written **jointly** by Pope, **John Gay**, and **John Arbuthnot** — all members of the **Scriblerus Club**.
- ***Imitations of Horace*** (1733–1738): poems that update Horace's satires with modern references, mocking corruption under **George II** and **Robert Walpole**.

CONCEPT

What is a Horatian ode? A reflective, personal, even-toned ode after the manner of **Horace** —

meditative and intimate, unlike the loud, public, celebratory **Pindaric** ode. Pope's *Ode on Solitude* is a clear example.

4 The Rape of the Lock

This is Pope's most important and most important work, so we will study it carefully.

4.1 The Big Idea

In one line: a young woman has a lock of her hair snipped off at a party, and Pope blows up this tiny event into a grand mock-epic to laugh at the vanity of fashionable society.

The Rape of the Lock (1712) is a **mock-epic** (or mock-heroic) poem — a poem that uses the lofty machinery of epic (gods, battles, grand speeches) to treat a **trivial subject**, so that the gap between grand style and silly subject becomes the joke. It is written in **heroic couplets**, and it gently mocks the **vanity and frivolity of the aristocracy** of early-eighteenth-century England.

The poem was written at the request of Pope's friend **John Caryl**, who told him of a real quarrel: **Lord Petre** had cut off a lock of hair belonging to **Arabella Fermor**, and the two Catholic families had fallen out. Pope turned the incident into comedy, hoping to laugh the families back into friendship. In the poem **Belinda** stands for Arabella Fermor, and **the Baron** for Lord Petre.

CONCEPT

What does the title mean? "Lock" means a curl of **hair**; "rape" is used in its older sense of **to snatch, seize, or carry off** (as in Latin *rapere*). So the title means "the theft of the lock of hair" — and the mock-grand word "rape" is itself part of the joke.

4.2**Key Numbers and Structure**

Item	Detail
First published	1712 , in two cantos (anonymously)
Expanded	1714 , to five cantos (under Pope's name)
Final revision	1717 , adding Clarissa's speech
Total cantos	Five
Length	Around 600 lines
Verse form	Heroic couplets
Based on a real event	The cutting of Arabella Fermor's hair by Lord Petre

The poem grew through **three versions**. The first (1712) had only **two cantos**. The 1714 version expanded it to **five cantos** and added the "**machinery**" of the sylphs. The final 1717 version added the moralising **speech of Clarissa**.

CONCEPT

Why is it "mock-epic"? Pope borrows every device of serious epic — an invocation, supernatural guardian spirits, a journey, a feast, single combat, and a grand transformation at the end — but applies them to a

card game, a cup of coffee, and a snipped curl. The huge style on the tiny subject is the satire.

4.3 What Happens, Canto by Canto

Belinda wakes late after a dream in which her guardian **sylyph, Ariel**, warns her to beware of men that day. She brushes the warning aside and sits at her dressing table, where she adorns herself in a scene Pope describes like a **sacred rite** — half worship, half vanity. Pope repeatedly compares the radiant **Belinda to the sun**.

She sails up the **River Thames** to a party at **Hampton Court**. On the boat the **Baron** admires her two beautiful locks of hair and secretly resolves to **steal one**. The anxious Ariel summons a small army of sylphs — **Brillante, Momentilla, Crispissa**, and others — and assigns each to guard a part of Belinda's dress and jewels.

At Hampton Court, Belinda plays a card game called **ombre** and wins. Over coffee, **Clarissa** hands the Baron a pair of **scissors**. He tries twice and fails, but on the third attempt **cuts off the lock**. At the crucial moment, Ariel looks into Belinda's heart, finds "**an earthly lover lurking**" there, and — realising she is not as pure-minded as he thought — gives up and lets the mischief happen. Belinda shrieks in dismay; the Baron crows in triumph.

In the uproar that follows, Belinda's friend **Thalestris** urges her boyfriend **Sir Plume** to demand the lock back, but his speech is so feeble the Baron ignores it. **Clarissa** then delivers a calm speech: **beauty fades**, so a woman should value lasting things like **good humour** and the ability to

take a joke. Belinda ignores this wisdom, and a mock-battle breaks out between the two families. In the scuffle the lock is **lost** — and Pope ends by declaring that it has **risen to the heavens as a star**, immortalising Belinda's name.

CONCEPT

Why does the sylph fail to protect Belinda?

Ariel cannot stop the Baron because, looking into Belinda's heart at the last moment, **he discovers an earthly lover lurking there**. Her secret wish for a suitor means she is not the pure, untouched maiden the sylphs guard, so Ariel withdraws and the lock is cut.

4.4 The Characters

Belinda

- The heroine, based on **Arabella Fermor**; the great beauty of the poem
- Pope repeatedly compares her to **the sun** for her dazzling, commanding charm
- Vain and proud of her hair; she ignores Ariel's warning and is the victim of the "rape"

The Baron

- Belinda's admirer, based on **Lord Petre**
- He covets and **cuts off her lock of hair** with scissors after three attempts

Ariel

- Belinda's chief **guardian sylph**; warns her in a dream
- Fails to protect her once he finds an **earthly lover** in her heart

Clarissa

- The woman who hands the Baron the **scissors**
- Delivers the **moral speech** (added in 1717) on the fading of beauty and the worth of **good humour**

Sir Plume

- A foolish, fashionable beau, the boyfriend of Thalestris
- Pushed to demand the lock back, he gives a weak speech and is ignored — a figure of dandyish vanity

Thalestris

- Belinda's friend, who stirs up the quarrel and urges Sir Plume to act

CONCEPT

The sylphs, gnomes, and sprites: Pope invents a whole tribe of tiny airy spirits as the poem's epic "machinery." The **sylphs** (led by Ariel) guard pretty, light-hearted women, while **gnomes** govern the gloomy and ill-tempered. Three of Uranus's moons — **Belinda, Umbriel, and Ariel** — are named after characters in the poem.

4.5 Famous Facts and Lines

The poem turns on Pope's **mock-heroic** method: epic grandeur lavished on the smallest of subjects, to expose how seriously fashionable society takes its trifles. Its most famous facts and quotations are high-yield for the exam.

EXAM ESSENTIAL

- A **mock-heroic poem** in **heroic couplets**; **five cantos**; about **600 lines**; based on a real incident.

- It exists in **two main versions, of two and four cantos** in its early forms before reaching five; it is **not** a tribute to Queen Anne but a social satire (dedicated to **Arabella Fermor**).
- Pope revised it three times; the **1717** revision inserted **Clarissa's speech** on good humour.
- At the end, the lock **turns into a star** — symbolising the immortality of beauty and the absurdity of the quarrel.
- In "*the sacred Rites of Pride*" at Belinda's dressing table, "**Pride**" means **both her vanity and pride as the first of man's sins**.
- Belinda is repeatedly compared to **the sun**.
- The sylph fails because he finds "**an earthly lover lurking**" in Belinda's heart.
- Famous opening lines: "**What dire offence from am'rous causes springs, / What mighty contests rise from trivial things.**"
- Closing image: "**This Lock, the Muse shall consecrate to Fame, / And 'midst the stars inscribe Belinda's name.**"

5 Criticism

Critic / Source	What they said
Samuel Johnson	Praised Pope's <i>Iliad</i> as " a performance which no age or nation could hope to equal. "
Richard Bentley	Said of the Homer translation: " It is a pretty poem, Mr. Pope, but you must not call it Homer. "

Critic / Source	What they said
Voltaire	Called <i>An Essay on Man</i> " the most beautiful, the most useful, the most sublime didactic poem ever written in any language. "
Immanuel Kant	So admired <i>An Essay on Man</i> that he read passages of it to his students.
Thomas De Quincey	Dismissed <i>An Essay on Man</i> as a dry, mechanical work — "a metrical multiplication table of commonplaces."
Lord Byron	Named Pope a major influence , seeing his own <i>English Bards and Scotch Reviewers</i> as a continuation of Pope's tradition.
Lewis Theobald	Attacked Pope's edition of Shakespeare in the pamphlet <i>Shakespeare Restored</i> (1726) — for which Pope made him the first "King of Dullness" in <i>The Dunciad</i> .

CONCEPT

The split verdict on Pope: Critics have long divided over Pope. Admirers praise his perfect wit, balance, and command of the couplet; doubters, from his own day onward, questioned his originality and his depth as a thinker. He remains, all the same, the central poet of the Augustan age — the **"Age of Pope."**