AN ESSAY ON CRITICISM
ALEXANDER POPE

INTRODUCTION TO RESTORATION AGE

Restoration literature, English literature written after the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660 following the period of the Commonwealth. Some literary historians speak of the period as bounded by the reign of Charles II (1660–85), while others prefer to include within its scope the writings produced during the reign of James II (1685–88), and even literature of the 1690s is often spoken of as "Restoration." By that time, however, the reign of William III and Mary II (1689–1702) had begun, and the ethos of courtly and urban fashion was as a result sober, Protestant, and even pious, in contrast to the sexually and intellectually libertine spirit of court life under Charles II. Many typical literary forms of the modern world—including the novel, biography, history, travel writing, and journalism—gained confidence during the Restoration period, when new scientific discoveries and philosophical concepts as well as new social and economic conditions came into play. There was a great outpouring of pamphlet literature, too, much of it poltroco-religious, while John Bunyan's great allegory, Pilgrim’s Progress, also belongs to this period. Much of the best poetry, notably that of John Dryden (the great literary figure of his time, in both poetry and prose), the earl of Rochester, Samuel Butler, and John Oldham, was satirical and led directly to the later achievements of Alexander Pope, Jonathan Swift, and John Gay in the Augustan Age. The Restoration period was, above all, a great age of drama. Heroic plays, influenced by principles of French Neoclassicism, enjoyed a vogue, but the age is chiefly remembered for its glittering, critical comedies of manners by such playwrights as George Etherege, William Wycherley, Sir John Vanbrugh, and William Congreve.

ALEXANDER POPE

1688–1744
In the Spring of 1688, Alexander Pope was born an only child to Alexander and Edith Pope. The elder Pope, a linen-draper and recent convert to Catholicism, soon moved his family from London to Binfield, Berkshire in the face of repressive, anti-Catholic legislation from Parliament. Described by his biographer, John Spence, as "a child of a particularly sweet temper," and with a voice so melodious as to be nicknamed the "Little Nightingale," the child Pope bears little resemblance to the irascible and
outspoken moralist of the later poems. Barred from attending public school or university because of his religion, Pope was largely self-educated. He taught himself French, Italian, Latin, and Greek, and read widely, discovering Homer at the age of six.

At twelve, Pope composed his earliest extant work, *Ode to Solitude*; the same year saw the onset of the debilitating bone deformity that would plague Pope until the end of his life. Originally attributed to the severity of his studies, the illness is now commonly accepted as Pott’s disease, a form of tuberculosis affecting the spine that stunted his growth—Pope's height never exceeded four and a half feet—and rendered him hunchbacked, asthmatic, frail, and prone to violent headaches. His physical appearance would make him an easy target for his many literary enemies in later years, who would refer to the poet as a “hump-backed toad.”

Pope's *Pastorals*, which he claimed to have written at sixteen, were published in Jacob Tonson's *Poetical Miscellanies* of 1710 and brought him swift recognition. *Essay on Criticism*, published anonymously the year after, established the heroic couplet as Pope's principal measure and attracted the attention of Jonathan Swift and John Gay, who would become Pope’s lifelong friends and collaborators. Together they formed the Scriblerus Club, a congregation of writers endeavoring to satirize ignorance and poor taste through the invented figure of Martinus Scriblerus, who would serve as a precursor to the dunces in Pope's late masterpiece, the *Dunciad*.

1712 saw the first appearance of the *The Rape of the Lock*, Pope's best-known work and the one that secured his fame. Its mundane subject—the true account of a squabble between two prominent Catholic families over the theft of a lock of hair—is transformed by Pope into a mock-heroic send-up of classical epic poetry.

Turning from satire to scholarship, Pope in 1713 began work on his six-volume translation of Homer's *Iliad*. He arranged for the work to be available by subscription, with a single volume being released each year for six years, a model that garnered Pope enough money to be able to live off his work alone, one of the few English poets in history to have been able to do so.

In 1719, following the death of his father, Pope moved to an estate at Twickenham, where he would live for the remainder of his life. Here he constructed his famous grotto, and went on to translate the *Odyssey*—which he brought out under the same subscription model as the *Iliad*—and
to compile a heavily-criticized edition of Shakespeare, in which Pope "corrected" the Bard’s meter and made several alterations to the text, while leaving corruptions in earlier editions intact.

Critic and scholar Lewis Theobald’s repudiation of Pope’s Shakespeare provided the catalyst for his *Dunciad*, a vicious, four-book satire in which Pope lampoons the witless critics and scholars of his day, presenting their "abuses of learning" as a mock-*Aeneid*, with the dunces in service to the goddess Dulness; Theobald served as its hero.

Though published anonymously, there was little question as to its authorship. Reaction to the *Dunciad* from its victims and sympathizers was more hostile than that of any of his previous works; Pope reportedly would not leave his house without two loaded pistols in his pocket. "I wonder he is not thrashed," wrote William Broome, Pope's former collaborator on the *Odyssey* who found himself lambasted in the *Dunciad*, "but his littleness is his protection; no man shoots a wren."

Pope published *Essay on Man* in 1734, and the following year a scandal broke out when an apparently unauthorized and heavily sanitized edition of Pope’s letters was released by the notoriously reprobate publisher Edmund Curll (collections of correspondence were rare during the period). Unbeknownst to the public, Pope had edited his letters and delivered them to Curll in secret.

Pope's output slowed after 1738 as his health, never good, began to fail. He revised and completed the *Dunciad*, this time substituting the famously inept Colley Cibber—at that time, the country's poet laureate—for Theobald in the role of chief dunce. He began work on an epic in blank verse entitled *Brutus*, which he quickly abandoned; only a handful of lines survive. Alexander Pope died at Twickenham, surrounded by friends, on May 30, 1744.

Since his death, Pope has been in a constant state of reevaluation. His high artifice, strict prosody, and, at times, the sheer cruelty of his satire were an object of derision for the Romantic poets of the nineteenth century, and it was not until the 1930s that his reputation was revived. Pope is now considered the dominant poetic voice of his century, a model of prosodic elegance, biting wit, and an enduring, demanding moral force.
SUGGESTED READINGS

1. A HISTORY OF LITERARY CRITICISM, M.A.R. HABIB (Ch - 12)
2. A CRITICAL HISTORY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE, DAVID DAICHES (vol 2, ch - 15)

REFERENCES

1. BRITANNICA
2. POETS.ORG
By Alexander Pope. Si quid novisti rectius istis, Candidus imperti; si non, his utere mecum [If you have come to know any precept more correct than these, share it with me, brilliant one; if not, use these with me] (Horace, Epistle I.6.67). PART 1. A The gen'rous critic fann'd the poet's fire, And taught the world with reason to admire. Then criticism the Muse's handmaid prov'd, To dress her charms, and make her more belov'd; But following wits from that intention stray'd 'Tis hard to say, if greater Want of Skill Appear in Writing or in Judging ill, But, of the two, less dang'rous is th' Offence, To tire our Patience, than mis-lead our Sense: Some few in that, but Numbers err in this, 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 Go just alike, yet each believes his own. In Poets as true Genius is but rare, True Taste as seldom is the Critick's