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## **Topic: Alexander Pope as a Critic – An Introduction**

Alexander Pope was born in a Roman Catholic family in 1688, the year in which the Glorious Revolution took place when the Catholic King James II was replaced by William III of Orange. This resulted in the rule of anti-Catholic laws which affected the lives of all the Catholics including Alexander Pope. He could not get formal education in school, could not hold a public post, and had to leave London to stay with his mother in Windsor Forest where many of the Catholics leaved. He was privately educated at home. He faced physical problems also. He was a hunchback and he was only four and a half feet tall; he suffered from tuberculosis also. He always needed somebody to support him. In spite of all these restrictions, Pope produced great works of literature and literary criticism which placed him as one of the greatest writers in the literary canon of English literature. His famous works are *The Rape of the Lock*, *The Dunciad*, *An Essay on Man*, *An Essay on Criticism* etc. The first two works mentioned above are mock heroic poems. *An Essay on Man*, written in verse, is an attack on all the human beings who do not see the limitations of reason, think themselves to self-reliant and question authority with pride. *An Essay on Criticism* has an underlying appeal to return to nature, to return to what is past, to return to the classical and to return to Catholicism.

*An Essay on Criticism* has been described by many critics as a defense of ‘nature’ and ‘wit’. The term ‘nature’ carries several meanings for Pope. It means external nature, it means human nature and it means nature of poetry as well. Similarly, the word ‘wit’ also carries several meanings, such as, cleverness of expression, ability to perceive similarities between different things and to understand hidden relationships underlying the appearances of objects. In this work, Pope gives some guidelines which should be followed while criticizing a work of literature. According to Pope, criticism is an art and it is directed towards a noble cause only if it is governed by the same principles that that apply to literature also. A critic must take into account a literary piece as a whole. He/she should not be impressed by a portion of it or the ornamental language of it. Again, a critic should have a moral sensibility and a sense of balance

and proportion as well. Pope urges that a critic must be reasonable. Here, reason does not mean secularism or reason of Enlightenment, but reason as universal human nature constrained by theological framework. Humility should be the guiding light of a critic. We can safely say that Pope's guidelines are not only a literary critic but it can also be followed to develop a better self.

Pope's classicism is to be found in his concepts of Wit and Nature. According to him, "True Wit is Nature to Advantage drest, / What oft was Thought, but ne'r so well Exprest." If wit is the dress of nature then nature has to be expressed as it is by a critic. Again the idea of organic unity of a work of art is stressed here. It is pride that leads a critic or a poet dwell in subjective assumptions instead of organic whole and universal truth. Only humility can restrict a poet or a critic from venturing into personal whims, and lead him/her to follow the classical traditions. Pope views classical literary traditions and nature with a similar lens. For him the ancients did not invent the rules of nature but discovered them. "Those Rules of old discover'd, not devis'd, / Are Nature still, but Nature Methodiz'd." Thus, Pope not only guides his contemporary literary artists the true way of approaching literature, but also creates a ground for himself and lets the readers assume how his literary attempts are going to be in future.

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