



EPISTLE TO DR.
ARBUTHNOT
BY
ALEXANDER POPE

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CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

- An epistle is a literary creation in the form of a letter. It is meant to be read by the person to whom it has been addressed as well as by the readers in general.
- This epistle was written by Pope to Dr. Arbuthnot. He has presented some varied views in the epistle. However, all the views have been presented to suggest that it was his duty to expose impudence and that he was not afraid of serious opposition if he was performing his duty as a writer.
- The structure of the letter is such that it could be divided into seven parts.
- Pope has used personal views, personal experiences, personal wishes and personal advices to convince Dr. Arbuthnot that the way he treated his satires was the best thing for him to do.
- Pope has established himself as a fearless and responsible writer through this epistle.

CONCERNED FACTS

- 'John Arbuthnot', to whom the epistle has been dedicated, was a physician.
- Pope wrote this epistle after Arbuthnot had written to him about the lethal disease he was suffering from.
- It was published in 1735
- The poem includes 419 lines.
- It has been written in heroic couplets.

ALEXANDER POPE

(Born May 21, 1688, London, England—died May 30, 1744, Twickenham, near London), poet and satirist of the English Augustan period, best known for his poems *An Essay on Criticism* (1711), *The Rape of the Lock* (1712–14), *The Dunciad* (1728), and *An Essay on Man* (1733–34).



ANALYSIS

- Pope decided to write this epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot as a gratitude for the concern shown by the latter towards him. Arbuthnot had cautioned him about the possible dangers of naming people openly while ridiculing them, particularly the influential ones.
- Although Pope responded to his concern in the form of this epistle but he did not show any sign of agreement with his concern.
- Pope took this occasion to express his fearlessness openly. He did not even avoid mentioning some people openly in this work as well whom he disliked. The only assurance he has given to the doctor is that he is not afraid of anyone and that he is satisfied with his own position in the society.
- He has also given some general philosophical ideas in the letter by mentioning the conduct of some people. For instance, he has talked against the tendency of people to flatter someone.

SUMMARY

❖ The 'Epistle' is a satire in verse form written by Pope. Pope wrote this poem dedicating it to 'Dr. Arbuthnot' after realizing that the latter was suffering from a fatal disease. Being a bold satirist, it had been quite usual for Pope to attract very rude criticism against him. Dr. Arbuthnot, a close friend, had advised him about not naming the people in his satires. For naming whom, Pope could land up in prison. So, one of the reasons for which Pope wrote the epistle was to thank the physician for his concern.

The epistle could, very conveniently, be divided into seven parts.

❖ The **first part** expresses the poet's dislike for fake admirers. He mentions how he was fed up of meeting such people and how desperately he desired to avoid them. These sections talk about the artists whose own skills are not worthy enough. They try to convince Pope to amend their works so that they could be successful. So, in this section, Pope mentions the negatives of being famous.

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In part two, Pope tries to convince Dr. Arbuthnot that he would not let his satires be dangerous. He won't 'name Queens, Ministers or Kings'. He is sure though that whoever he ridicules would care more to mend his ways rather than attacking him. However, it is to be noted that Pope is not serious in expecting that the lords and writers he ridiculed would not feel hurt. However, he states clearly that he is more afraid of fake friends than the enemies.

Part three is his attempt to summarize his life as a writer. He frankly states that his physical abilities could not have led him to do anything else. Pope seems to be serious in this part of the poem and the seriousness gets reflected in the way he simplifies his syntax here.

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SUMMARY

Part Fourth is a counter attack on those who had denounced Pope. He stated that some critics puzzled him by attacking his inoffensive poems written during his early career; some critics were the editors who were, more or less, obsessed to find petty mistakes; some opposed him because he had not supported their unworthy works. He tells Dr. Arbuthnot that he would be attacked whatever he did. He also mentions Addison as a noteworthy opponent. However, he states that Addison presented a bad example by considering himself perfect.

Part five has been used by Pope to establish a connection between intellectual and financial independence. He analyzes intellect as a means for earning money giving his own example. He also presents his belief that the money he had earned attracted fools to him. However, it made him independent.

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In part six, Pope clarifies that he considered ridiculing folly to be his duty. He states here that if a person has got exceptional verbal power, it becomes his duty to rebuke impertinence. Here, he has presented a portrait of Lord Hervey who had satirized his works and personality quite rudely at some point of time.

In the final part, he expects Arbuthnot to believe Pope to be having certain qualities. He clarifies that he was neither proud nor servile. He did not give any importance to threats from his opponents. He had had to face really serious things like his father's death and, when compared to them, the views of the society towards him did not matter at all. So, the epistle is a response to Dr. Arbuthnot's concern for Pope but also gives expression to the latter's personal views, qualities as a poet and harsh feelings towards some critics.

SHORT QUESTIONS

1. What is an Epistle?

Epistle, in its original sense, means simply a letter. Over the ages the term has come to denote only formal letters which though addressed to a particular person are concerned with public rather than personal matters and express a universal feeling on a particular occasion. The epistle is written for an audience with a conscious artistry, in an elaborate style, to develop an argument or theme. In the classical times the word 'epistola' acquired the additional significance of an imperial decree.

2. What Pope's physical deformities are as described in the poem? How does he use them to his advantage?

He was physically deformed and extremely stunted in growth. Tubercular disease of the bone later known as Pott's disease at the age of 12 had caused a curvature in his spine so that he measured a mere 4 feet 6 inches in height. Humpbacked, he became almost a cripple and suffered from severe bodily weakness in need, as Dr. Johnson tells us, of wearing stays in order to be able to stand. He later called it 'a long disease' (line 132):

~onscious throughout of his misshappen and grotesque body,

Pope was so hurt by the caricature of his figure, 'the pictur'd shape' (line 353), that he ranked it among the most atrocious injuries he received from his enemies.

LONG QUESTIONS

Q.1 What is the theme of the poem An Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot?

- The poem is an autobiography on Pope's life and on his motives and reasons for being a poet and a satirist. It is an attempt at self-justification, self-education, and self-definition. The poet is defending his personal integrity. He writes an *Apologia pro vita sua*, explaining how he has been forced to change from a poet of 'pure Description' (line 14) to one of satire and how he was motivated in doing so not by malevolence but the simple desire to live in peace and honour with family and friends. It includes self-defence also against the libels and slanders of some of the literary third-raters.:

“A clerk, foredoom'd his father's soul to cross,
Who pens a stanza, when he should engross?”

- Pope's views on good, lasting poetry are also indirectly revealed. He is full of disdain for the professional/hack writers who write only, or mostly the panegyric and whose pen is controlled from outside. They thus become the dummies and their patrons the prompters, the ventriloquists (line 318). Pope's logic was that one should write poetry to share values or communicate something worthwhile, not just to earn because then it cannot be good art. The poem also describes, to an extent, the process of Pope's personal development, his growth as a satirist. His earlier works defined the nature of a thing, and not just the static stage of being. Perhaps Pope fears that just like the fools satirized in the poem he himself may be cursed because the form he has chosen to write in is useless or harmful. Hence he insists on their imperviousness:

“You think this cruel? take it for a rule,
No creature smarts so little as a fool”

Q.2 Comment on Pope's An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot as a typical example of Augustan satire

Pope's An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot follows all the conventions of Augustan satire. It is written in heroic couplets of great metrical regularity (the Elizabethan dramatist, for instance, sometimes thinks it a virtue to depart from strict iambic pentameter, the Augustan satirist almost never does). There is a balance to many of the lines that is also typically Augustan, with a caesura between two (often contrasting) descriptive phrases:

A cherub's face, a reptile all the rest;

Beauty that shocks you, parts that none will trust,

Wit that can creep, and pride that licks the dust.

The poem is full of classical allusions and its principal targets are given Latin names. Joseph Addison is comparatively mildly satirized as Atticus but Lord Hervey is savagely attacked as Sporus. Here, the name is indicative of the savagery, since Sporus was a slave boy whom the Emperor Nero was popularly supposed to have castrated and married.

REFERENCES

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