

Alexander Pope (1688-1744)

Essay on Man; The Rape of the Lock; An Essay on Criticism; Epistles (A, 1120-1177)

As a Catholic, Alexander Pope was unable to go to University, vote, or hold public office, but this wired precocious man—probably the most brilliant-in-youth poet of British literature—rapidly made his way to the heights of London literary life. He was an avid reader, deeply alert to the Classics, and above all a frequenter of those coffee-houses which were springing up everywhere in London. Literary talk was to flourish in those locales, as it was to do throughout the 18th century, in part replacing the Salons of aristocrats, where in earlier centuries the ruling intellectuals met. The tastes of the moment changed, as did the composition of literary groups, but Pope remained for decades a leader of cultural life—in a way worthily succeeding Dryden, who had been such an eminence a half century earlier.

Question: How does Pope's poetry fit the Enlightenment project?

We know the basic outlines of eighteenth century rational humanism, the Enlightenment perspective we have seen announcing itself in the work of Dryden and Swift. (In 18th century England, as throughout Europe, there was to be an explosion of empirical science; building on the theoretical insights of the previous century, in Newton and Descartes.) The heart of that perspective was faith in man, and in the orderliness of the reasonable universe that frames man. *How does Pope's poetry exemplify that perspective?* In the *Essay on Man*, Pope sums it up—and notice his genius at summarizing the human condition—by announcing that “whatever is is right.” In his *Essay on Criticism*, Pope recurs to Nature as the model for art, and when it comes to details he turns to the art of the Greeks as the model form of nature, “nature methodized.” The “natural,” in this sense, is man’s artistic foundation. Whatever is natural is right. This too is the Enlightenment perspective. And *The Rape of the Lock*? How is this elegant poem part of the Enlightenment project? One way of looking at the poem is as a cry of support for women’s dignity and private space. Another is, as a satire on the least natural aspect of human affairs, the hypertrophy of elegance in social behavior.

Comparative Literature:

1. Scholarship on the eighteenth century abounds. I recommend a look at Basil Willey, *The Eighteenth Century Background* (1940), for a well written general study of the cultural climate of 18th century English literature. You will see how Pope’s view of nature—and that of his contemporaries—was tinted by both contemporary developments in natural science and by the view that the culture held of ‘science,’ and of the “workings of nature.” You can supplement Willey with the classic *The Great Chain of Being* (1936) by A.O. Lovejoy, a history of the idea—intimately congenial to Pope—that all of God’s creations were perfectly sorted out by him, and exist as a descending chain of being from him.