

ALEXANDER POPE

1688-1744

Poet of the Age of Reason

Sketches of Pope



Pope's Poetry "Essay on Criticism"

Of all the causes which conspire to blind
Man's erring judgment, and misguide the mind,
What the weak head with strongest bias rules,
Is pride, the never-failing vice of fools.
Whatever Nature has in worth denied,
She gives in large recruits of needful pride;
For as in bodies, thus in souls, we find
What wants in blood and spirits, swell'd with wind;
Pride, where wit fails, steps in to our defence,
And fills up all the mighty void of sense!
If once right reason drives that cloud away,
Truth breaks upon us with resistless day;
Trust not yourself; but your defects to know,
Make use of ev'ry friend--and ev'ry foe.

Alexander Pope -- Influences

- Descartes--the emphasis upon reason, order, harmony
- Leibnitz--Rational Theology



Alexander Pope Poetic Form

The Heroic Couplet

The heroic couplet's rhyme-scheme was ordinarily closed, rhymed couplets.

The meter was Iambic Pentameter.

The couplets often contrasted opposing ideas in an epigrammatic manner.

"Know then thyself, presume not God to scan;
The proper study of mankind is man." (93)

Themes in Pope's "Essay on Man"

- Evil happens naturally, the by-product of natural fault; it is not directly caused by God.
- Pride keeps us from seeing our role in God's world; we should not presume to judge God.
- God's universe must be coherent with logic and reason.
- Humans fit into an elaborate "chain of being," composed of lifeforms and inanimate objects which are all necessary for the whole mechanism to work.

St. John's Problem Why is There Evil?

"Laugh where we must, be candid where we can;
But vindicate the ways of God to man."
(Pope)

"The existence of evil in the world must at all times be the greatest of all problems which the mind encounters when it reflects on God and His relation to the world." (G. H. Joyce, a Jesuit Father)

Essay on Man: Pope's Theodicy

What Is the question?

How do Christians reconcile the terrible sufferings and evils that exist in the world with the traditional view that everything that is—time, space, matter, energy, goodness, and evil(?)—were created *ex nihilo* (out of nothing) by the great first cause, God? Could evil exist if God is really all-Good, all-Powerful, and all-Knowing?

God is all Good

God is all Powerful

God is Omniscient

Five Traditional Answers

- God is not all-Everything. He may not be all-Powerful or all-Knowing or all-Good.
- God is not the only ultimate spiritual force; Malignant deities may exist.
- Everyone is guilty of original sin and must be punished.
- Suffering is the only method by which people can come to choose good.
- Suffering is brief and insignificant in the long, eternal picture of things.

Leibniz's Rational Theology His Theodicy Influenced Pope

- Truths of philosophy and theology can't contradict.
- God chose from an infinite number of possible worlds. This then is the best of all possible worlds.
- Humanity is necessarily imperfect; the created works of God could not be as perfect as the creator.
- Man has free will. God has foreknowledge, but that does not predestine us.
- Man's rational nature, which is his soul, is the closest approximation of God's nature.

Leibniz's Rational Theology

"Nothing happens without a sufficient reason; that is, nothing happens without its being possible for one who should know all things sufficiently to give a reason showing why things are so and not otherwise." (Principles of Nature and of Grace)

Alexander Pope

Themes

PRIDE

"Ask for what end the heav'nly bodies
shine,
Earth for whose use? Pride answers, 'Tis
for mine';" (88)

Alexander Pope: Themes

The Great Chain of Being

"Above, how high progressive life may go!
Around, how wide! how deep extend below!
Vast chain of Being! which from God began,
Natures ethereal, human, angel, man,
Beast, bird, fish, insect, what no eye can see,
No glass can reach; from Infinite to thee,
From thee to nothing!" (92)

Alexander Pope: Themes

Rejection of Dynamism--Defense of a Mechanistic
world

[St. John asks:] "But errs not Nature from this gracious
end,
From burning suns when livid deaths descend,
When Earthquakes swallow, or when tempests sweep
Towns to one grave, whole nations to the deep?
'No, ('tis reply'd) the first Almighty Cause
Acts not by partial, but by gen'ral laws';" (88)

Alexander Pope: Themes

Rejection of Dynamism--Defense of a Mechanistic world

So if God is not to blame for bad physical events,
perhaps we should not blame Him for bad people
either:

If plagues or earthquakes break not Heav'n's design,
Why then a Borgia, or a Cataline? . . .
From pride, from pride, our very reas'ning springs;
Account for moral, as for nat'ral things;
Why charge we Heav'n in those, in these acquit?
In both, to reason right is to submit.

Alexander Pope: Themes

Human reason is limited in its scope

"Say first, of God above, or man below,
What can we reason, but from what we know?
Of Man, what see we but his station here,
From which to reason, or to which refer?
Thro' worlds unnumbered tho' the God be known,
'Tis ours to trace him only in our own." (84-5)

**(Note that we should rely on reason, but not on
conjecture or imagination.)**

Alexander Pope: Themes

The human inability to see the big picture, to
have a divine perspective

"So man, who here seems principal alone,
Perhaps acts second to some sphere unknown,
Touches some wheel, or verges to some goal;
'Tis but a part we see, and not a whole." (86)

Alexander Pope: Themes

With a divine perspective, flaws would not appear as flaws, but as necessary parts of a whole picture.

“Of Systems possible, if tis confest

That Wisdom infinite must form the best, . . .

Then, in the scale of reas'ning life, 'tis plain,

There must be, somewhere, such a rank as Man; . . .

Respecting Man, whatever wrong we call,

May, must be right, as relative to all.”