

POPE'S "EPISTLE TO DR. ARBUTHNOT"

(pp. 2562-73)

This handout was prepared by Dr. William Tarvin, a retired professor of literature. Please visit my free website www.tarvinlit.com. Over 500 works of American and British literature are analyzed there for free.

Note: Text used: W. H. Abrams, ed. The Norton Anthology of English Literature, 7th ed. Vol. 1. New York: Norton, 2000.

I. INTRODUCTION

1. Dr. Arbuthnot was hopelessly ill and had written Pope a "last request" that the poet should continue to attack vice in his satires.
2. This poem, basically written during the summer of 1734, was published in Jan. 1735, less than two months before Arbuthnot's (1667-1735) death.
3. Arbuthnot was Queen Anne's favorite doctor and later held a similar relation to Princess Caroline, who in 1727 became Queen Caroline.
4. Also during 1733, Pope was the victim of two bitter attacks by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and Lord Hervey (pronounced Harvey).
5. The poem is less an "epistle" than a dialogue between "P." (Pope) and "A." (Arbuthnot, who is not introduced until line 75).

II. THEME

1. The poem is an attack on Pope's detractors and a defense of his own character and career (Abrams 2562).
2. Pope uses every device of persuasive rhetoric: reasonable argument and emotional appeals, subtly suggestive imagery, and superbly controlled shifts in tone and style (2562).
3. The poem expresses a span of emotions: anger, contempt, amusement, sarcasm, mock self-pity, indignation, hatred, affection, gratitude, and tenderness (2562).

4. Also very effective is that Pope addresses Arbuthnot, a man known to be honest and kind; this acquisition of virtue through association is an effective stroke (2562).

5. In defense of his own character, in the final section of the poem, Pope portrays himself as a virtuous man, full of love, nursing his aged mother and asking Heaven's blessing for his friend. This shows him furthest removed from the popular conception of the satirist as a malevolent man.

III. STRUCTURE AND IMAGERY

A. ANIMAL IMAGERY

1. Five main images emerge, all connected: animal, filth, disease, persecution, and the virtuous man, but the central one is the animal imagery.

2. The animal image yields the filth, the noxious element out of which disease arises, disease turns into persecution, and persecution reveals the virtuous man.

3. The animal image comprises all references to animals, worms, and insects in the poem.

4. Pope associates the poetasters with "low Grub Street" (378, but mentioned earlier, 111; a grub is the larva of certain insects, especially of a beetle). These people write and act without thinking, in automatic response to certain stimuli.

5. They are like trained hawks, "May Dunce by Dunce be whistled off my hands!" (254), or like frogs that live on flies, word catchers that live on syllables (166).

6. Furthermore, like spiders (89), they live in their own filth, so that disease flourishes in Grub Street.

7. From there in swarms and packs, the creatures descend on Pope, carrying their infection with them. Thus Pope justifies satire from a man of peace.

8. An analysis of the structure of the poem will reveal the persistent use of animal imagery.

B. STRUCTURE

LINES 1-6:

1. The poem opens with Pope speaking, not to Dr. Arbuthnot, but to his gardener John, who is ordered to "shut the door" (1) of Pope's house Twit'nam, even "tie up the knocker" (2), and admit no-one.

2. The house seems to be surrounded by mad poets: “All Bedlam” is a reference to a mental institution and “**Parnassus**” is the mountain of the classical poetic Muses (4).

3. In the second line of the poem, the disease image, “I’m sick, I’m dead,” is, of course, comic exaggeration: Pope is simply not at home to the poetasters.

4. Line 3 uses animal imagery by suggesting that the would-be poets are mad dogs.

5. Line 4: Likewise the correlation of Bedlam and Parnassus implies a mock-heroic metaphor in the connection of lunacy with poetry.

6. The opening is effective because it builds suspense about why Pope’s house is under siege.

LINES 7-14

1. Pope lists examples of how these poetasters besiege and pester him: climbing through his shrubbery wall, using an underground entrance, or stopping him as he traveled in either his carriage or his boat.

2. He protests that he cannot even go to church in peace without being bothered by the “man of rhyme” (13).

3. Antithesis: He is under siege above ground and underground, on land and on water.

LINES 15-26

1. Having listed how they attack, Pope next specifies some of the attackers: A beer-besotted parson (15), a poetess, a “rhyming peer” (16), a legal clerk (17-18), and a madman (19-20).

2. “All fly to Twit’nam,” seeking the advice and encouragement of Pope (21-22).

3. Not just a bother in themselves, they encourage their family members to slander Pope’s name: A father faults Pope because his son imitates “my damned works” (23-24), and a husband “curses” “Pope” because his wife has “elope[d]” to Twit’nam to get Pope’s opinion of her poetry (25-26).

LINES 27-40

1. Pope now turns and addresses Dr. Arbuthnot as “Friend of my life,” his physician, who had taken care of Pope through many illnesses (27-28).

2. The plague of Pope’s congenital ill health is now added to the “plague” (29) of poetasters.

3. Pope now examines his “dire dilemma,” which is speeding him to his death (30-33): These would-be poets demand that he read their works, expecting praise, but Pope is trapped: he cannot “lie” (by telling them that their poetry is good), yet dare not speak the truth (for fear of hurting them).

4. In a mock-heroic picture, Pope portrays himself as the martyr on the rack (33-38).

5. He finally decides to tell them to follow Horace’s advice of waiting nine years before they attempt to publish their works (39-40).

LINES 41-48

1. This advice is received with amazement.

2. One petitioner suggests that if there is something wrong with his poetry, Pope could spend some time in correcting it (45-46).

3. Another poet’s “modest wishes” (47) are that Pope will write a prologue for his work and (in addition) lend him ten pounds.

LINES 49-68

1. Pope then shows how these poetasters take advantage of and intimidate him, using one called Pitholeon (49).

2. Pitholeon asks Pope’s help in securing a sponsor (“patron”) for his poetry, even though he had previously “libeled” Pope (50-51).

3. Pope is cautioned that unless he helps this person Pitholeon will attack Pope in the newspaper (53-53), a not-so-subtle form of blackmail.

4. Pope next notes that he receives unsolicited manuscripts of plays from “stranger[s]” (55). He says that if he writes disapprovingly of a play, the person threatens him with “Furies, death, and rage” (57). However, if it praises it, the person seeks something more: for Pope to use his influence to get the play staged (58).

5. The assault continues because even when the play is rejected by theater producers, the writer suggests that Pope use his influence to get the play published, of course after Pope has “revise[d]” it. He even offers to give Pope a share of the profits, as

Pope is escorting him out the door (61-68).

6. Both of these examples show that Pope tries to treat with courtesy these hack writers who impose their works on him.

7. Unlike Dryden, Pope seldom uses comic feminine rhymes, but does here in 61-62, where “print it” and “Lintot” (the name of a publisher) are rhymed.

LINES 69-82

1. Pope uses the Midas analogy, basically calling the poetasters asses.

2. Also footnote 1, p. 2565, states, the references to “minister” and “queen” probably refer to Walpole and Queen Caroline, thus making the ass-eared Midas King George II.

3. At this point (75), Arbuthnot speaks, giving Pope the advice not to attack personally, particularly “queens, ministers, or kings” (76).

4. However, Pope interrupts Arbuthnot in an attack upon all the fools—even referring to his own previously published Dunciad (79)--calling each irritating writer “an ass” (80).

LINES 83-108

1. Pope asks if it is “cruel” to tell a fool that he is a fool. He answers no because they do not believe you (83-84).

2. Those fools, like Codrus (85), can be engulfed in “peals of laughter” (85), but be “unconcerned” with the laughter (86).

3. Pope avers that it is impossible to “shame . . . a scribbler” (89), for he brushes the criticism off and is soon “at his dirty work again” (92).

4. Here Pope’s indignation supports the disgust of the animal and filth images, where writers are portrayed as spiders (83-92).

5. Pope then contends that his satiric attacks upon hack poets and writers, such as the Poet Laureate Cooley Cibber and Ambrose Philips, have not changed them at all (95-100), so “Whom have I hurt?” (95).

6. When Pope refers to Sappho—Lady Mary Wortley Montagu—Arbuthnot interrupts and says “for god’s sake . . . learn prudence” (101-02).

7. Arbuthnot’s interruption also refers to Pope’s extreme shortness: “I [Arbuthnot] am twice as tall [as you, Pope]” (103). This is an instance where Pope

shows that he can make fun of himself.

8. Pope, however, again ignores the counsel and continues his scornful attack, using the references to “mad creatures” and “It is the slaver [slobber] kills, and not the bite” (104-06).

LINES 109-24

1. Pope ridicules even those from “Grub Street” (111) who praise and defend him (109-12).

2. Pope knows they have an ulterior motive, expecting “a bribe” or for Pope to “subscribe” to one of their literary projects (113-14).

3. He next describes the ridiculous homage (115) which his suitors pay him; they compare him to Horace (116), Alexander the Great (117), Ovid (118), Virgil (122), and Homer (124). This is probably the most comic passage in the poem.

4. Pope puns on his first name, for the poetasters couple him with Alexander the Great (117).

LINES 125-34

1. The same tension between self-depreciation and self-glorification is carried over into lines 125-26, where Pope cries that his talent is a cursed inheritance or judgment of his guilty self.

2. Line 125 is tongue-in-cheek, yet the Biblical reference (John 9.2) carries with it a suggestion of solemnity: “And his disciples asked him, saying, Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?”

3. Line 126, “dipt me in ink,” may refer to Achilles, whose parent dipped him in the Styx to make him invulnerable.

4. The fact that Pope has just been poking fun at himself, especially at his physical shortcomings—“am short” (116), “one shoulder . . . too high (117)”--enables him to make a serious and moving reference to his ill health without seeming maudlin (131-34): “This long disease, my life” (132).

5. Thus from the previous predominantly humorous passage Pope turns to pathos, the transition effected by the serious suggestion of Pope as a great poet.

LINES 135-46

1. Arbuthnot asks Pope why he publishes, since he knows that he will expose himself to ridicule (135).

2. Pope’s answer lists the writers who encouraged him to develop his

writing talent. As footnote 9, pp. 2566-67, states, this list establishes Pope as the successor of Dryden and thus places him far above his Grub Street persecutors.

3. All of the writers mentioned were associated with Dryden in his later years and had all encouraged the young Pope.

LINES 147-56

1. Pope maintains that he never initiated any literary attacks.
2. His early poetry was pastoral and descriptive, not satiric (147-50).

3. Even when two early critics—Gildon and Dennis—attacked him, Pope says that he “sat still” and did not respond, accepting that these hack writers were either provoked by “madness”—“Bedlam”—or a need for money—“the Mint” (151-56).

LINES 157-72

1. Pope then tells how he responded to “some more sober critic”: He said that if their commentary on his literary work was “wrong,” he did not respond but simply “smiled.” However, if the critics were “right,” Pope said that he graciously acknowledge the correction—“If right, I kissed the rod” (157-58).

2. While positing that they lacked good “sense” (160), Pope acknowledges these critics’ exacting scholarship—their mania that “commas and points [periods]” be “set exactly right” (161).

3. He then damns by praising Theobald (pronounced and often spelled Tibbald) and Bentley. First, he puns on their self-importance (might) and their insignificance (mite) in the word mite: “And ‘twere a sin to rob them of their mite” (162).

4. Again, in order to ridicule, he uses a comic feminine rhyme—ribalds and Tibbalds—in lines 163-64.

5. He inflates, only to deflate: “Each word-catcher that lives on syllables, / Even such small critics some regard may claim “ (166-67), by attaching their names to Shakespeare’s or Milton’s through editing these great writers’ works (168).

6. Using animal imagery, Pope then compares them to “grubs, or worms” (170).

LINES 173-92

1. Next, Pope justifies his attacks on some poets as simply giving them “but their due” (174).

2. He says that these poets were barren of talent, but filled with an overblown self-esteem: “pride adds to emptiness” (177).

3. He first mentions Ambrose Philips, who, Pope contends, writes for money, that is, to get “half a crown” (a prostitute’s customary fee).

4. He censures Philips’s pretensions of laboring over his poems which causes him to publish little, by saying that the “barrenness” of his ideas is more likely the cause of his “hard-bound brains” turning out only “eight lines a year” (181-82).

5. A second poet is attacked for plagiarizing most of his ideas from other writers: “steals much” (184).

6. A third poet tries to impress by making his poems appear to be difficult, while in truth the poet does not know what he is writing: “blunders round about a meaning” (186). (Here Pope uses a rare feminine rhyme: leaning and meaning.)

7. A fourth poet is attacked for his affected style of writing: “It is not poetry, but prose run mad” (188).

8. Pope says that his own “modest satire” was directed at “all these” poets, “nine” of whom it would take to make one unqualified poet laureate: “And owned that nine such poets made a Tate” (190), a reference to Nathan Tate, the poet laureate from 1692-1715. As footnote 8, p. 2568, states, “The line refers to the old adage that it takes nine tailors to make one man.”

9. Pope says these insignificant poets fumed and roared at his appraisal of them and swore “not Addison himself was safe” (192), Pope’s not-so-subtle lead-in to his portrait of Addison as Atticus.

LINES 193-214: ATTICUS PASSAGE

1. The Atticus portrait grammatically is one sentence of 22 lines.

2. Generosity, kindness, courage, wholeheartedness, and humility seem mainly what Atticus lacks.

3. The passage begins by commenting on line 194. “Peace to all such!” (193) asserts that “all such” who would dare attack Addison will keep their “peace.” Of course, Pope then starts a subtle attack on Addison—who dies in 1719, sixteen years before the poem—who is called Atticus here.

4. Pope begins by praising Atticus for his “genius” (194) and his “talent” as a writer and conversationalist (196).

5. However, the praise turns to criticism when Pope wonders whether Atticus was so egotistical that he would allow no-one to challenge his “rule” (197).

6. Unpleasant words are brought forward and associated with Atticus: “jealous” (199) and “hate” (200).

7. These qualities caused Atticus to judge other writers circumspectly: “Damn with faint praise” (201).

8. Atticus was cowardly and sneaky in his approach to criticism of others; he would not “strike” (203), but would nevertheless “wound” (203) by “hint[ing] a fault, and hesitat[ing] dislike” (204).

9. He lacked courage, but retained guile: “A timorous foe, and a suspicious friend” (206).

10. He was a literary tyrant who loved to hear his admirers applaud him (209-12).

11. Pope concludes that in perspective such a contradictory man deserves to be laughed at, although the laughers would cry if they were like Addison: “Who but must laugh, if such a man here be? / Who would no weep, if Atticus were he?” (214-15).

LINES 215-30

1. Pope says that though Atticus’s group smeared his name (215-18), he never curried favor from that group (219).

2. He states that he no more “heeded” what this group said of him than did King George pay attention to the poem annually written by the poet laureate on the monarch’s “birthday” (222).

3. Pope says he avoided such “witlings” (223), using the disease image: “To spread about the itch” (224) probably suggests gonorrhoea.

4. He continues that he refused to become a London lapdog: Lines 225-26 contain this animal imagery: the foppish wit both in his actions and his poetry seems as mechanical and senseless as the puppy in its proud retrieving of the trainer’s stick.

5. Pope says he wanted nothing to do with a culture where a poet had to curry favor from a patron such as “Bufo” (230).

LINES 231-48: BUFO PASSAGE

1. Here Pope attacks the tasteless patron of the arts.

2. Bufo means “toad” in Latin, but it is similar to the French word buffoon, meaning “puffed up.”

3. Pope puns on this meaning in “full-blown Bufo, puffed by every quill

[hired poet]" (232).

4. Those who called on Bufo came only pretending to want his judgment of their poems; actually they sought his help in getting them a position or to sponge off of his ample table of food and wine (238-40).

5. Great poets such as Dryden avoided Bufo (245-46), whose English identity is never established.

6. Although Bufo never helped Dryden while Dryden was alive (in fact, Pope accuses, Bufo "helped to starve" Dryden), Bufo "helped to bury him," that is, he contributed to the lavish funeral Dryden was given (248).

7. This episode shows that Bufo is comfortable around flattering minor poets or great dead poets, but never great living poets, since these would show Bufo up as the literary fraud he is.

LINES 249-70

1. Pope says that Bufo would be a perfect match for Bavius, the bad poet mentioned above in line 99: "May every Bavius have his Bufo still" (250).

2. In fact, Pope says he is pleased that the bad poet can give "flattery" to the tasteless patron on demand (253), for this situation will free Pope from having to confront either: "May dunce by dunce be whistled off my hands!" (254).

3. Pope then recalls his friend, the poet and playwright John Gay, now dead three years—he died in 1732.

4. Pope condemns literary London which let Gay, a "neglected genius" (257) "neglected die" (258).

5. Given this shameful treatment of Gay, Pope prefers to live away from London society, maintaining "a poet's dignity" (263) and a life "above a patron" (265).

6. However, he does say that he has as "my friend" a former chief political minister, Henry St. John, Lord Bolingbroke (266).

7. Pope concludes that he was not meant to be a court poet (267), since he can pay his debt, does not wish to sacrifice his religious beliefs, does not care to be always thinking up a poem to sell or to be used to flatter a patron (268-69), and does not have to keep up with the latest literary gossip (270)—all which disgraceful activities presumable a Bavius would have to.

LINES 271-82

1. Pope then shifts to mock self-pity.
2. Everyone in literary London, he states, is continually asking “what next” work of Pope’s “shall see the light” (271).
3. Pope seems to disdain this attention, protesting pitifully that “life” has “no joys for me” (273), people feel, except for his poetry (272).
4. Pope says that when Swift visits him, the gossips speculate about the nature of Pope’s next satire, presumably inspired by his conversations with Swift (275-76).
5. If Pope denies he is planning any new poem (277), the critics counter that his “genius never can lie still” (278), a self-aggrandizing technique Pope uses to have his enemies—not himself—praise Pope as a genius.
6. When lesser wits—Sir Will or Bubo—turn out something, many claim mistakenly it is by Pope (279-80).
7. The ignorance of such speculation and miscalculation Pope says he smiles at, especially those who profess to know Pope “by my style” (281-82).

LINES 283-304

1. Pope then curses any verses of his own which
 - have turned a worthy person into his “foe,”
 - have caused an innocent person to “fear,” or
 - have caused a “virgin” to shed a “tear” (283-86).
2. He censures anyone
 - who uses verse wickedly to bring “distress” to “harmless” people (287-88),
 - who “loves a lie” and helps to “slander” someone,
 - who libels (289-90).
 - who attacks an author behind his back or pretends to like

something he does not (291-94), and

--who to one's face calls a person his friend, but will not defend this friend against slander (295-96).

3. Pope continues his attack on hypocrisy, citing a person

--who betrays a person's confidence by revealing what was said in private (297-98),

--who deliberately misconstrues a person's poems (299-302)

4. Such "blockheads," Pope says, he will "lash" (303-04), although "A lash like mine no honest man shall dread" (303).

LINES 305-33: SPORUS PASSAGE

1. Before Arbuthnot interposes, Pope begins by saying that Sporus is such a blockhead and should "tremble" (305).

2. Sporus, as footnote 1. p. 2570, reveals, is John, Lord Hervey, an effeminate courtier who with Lady Mary Montagu had attacked Pope in pamphlets.

3. The original Sporus was a boy whom the emperor Nero publicly married (2570).

4. In all other places where Arbuthnot interrupted, it was to stop Pope's anger, but here he interposes to agree.

5. To Arbuthnot, Sporus is simply a "thing of silk" (305), a "mere white curd of ass's milk" (306), who has no feeling (307), and is so insensitive that he "breaks a butterfly upon a wheel" (308).

6. To Pope, Sporus is a gilded bug that stinks and stings (309-10). He is a fawning, mumbling spaniel (313-14), a shallow stream (316), or a puppet (318).

7. Then, all beauty and delicacy gone, Sporus becomes an ugly, filth-spitting toad (320). As such he is a perpetual menace as the tempter, powerless himself but always lurking "at the ear of Eve," to usurp the powers of good and pervert them (319-20).

8. After introducing this image, Pope returns to it later where Sporus is called "Eve's tempter" (330). Like Satan as the serpent, Sporus with his "cherub's face," but "a reptile all the rest" (331), "creep[s]" and "licks the dust," its belly in the dirt (331-33).

9. Sporus's ambivalent sexuality is also subtly attacked: "all seesaw

between that and this (323); “now master up, now miss” (324), Sporus can act “either part” (324)—the male or the female.

10. “One vile antithesis” (325), this “amphibian thing” (326) “[n]ow trips a lady—and now struts a lord” (329).

11. The Sporus passage has the greatest concentration of animal images in the poem and is the pinnacle of the animal-filth imagery.

12. In its climactic progression, it becomes an accumulation of disgust, with Sporus going from a beneath-contempt, speciously attractive, almost nonexistent being at the beginning of the passage to a filthy, abhorrent creature—a toad which is spitting froth and venom--at its end.

LINES 334-59

1. Upon reaching this pitch of feeling, Pope drops for good his mask of irony and shows himself as the solemn and righteous man.

2. Now he can speak of himself in the third person and in an exalted mode (334-37).

3. His virtuous qualities contrast with those vicious ones of Atticus, Blavius, Bufo, Sporus, and the bad poets.

4. Unlike them, Pope says he never wrote for money or to further his ambition (334-35).

5. He never flattered—“even to kings” (338)—and never used his poetry to “lie” (339).

6. His poetry affirmed “truth” and stressed “morality” (341).

7. For sticking to these principles, Pope says he has had to endure the “furious foe,” “the timid friend” (343), and “The damning critic, half approving wit” (344).

8. Also, he has suffered “treats of vengeance” (348) and false reports (circulated by Hervey and Montagu) that Pope had been subjected to a whipping (349).

9. In addition, much “trash, and dullness not his own” was published which some attributed as his own poetry (352).

10. Pope says many even ridiculed him because of his physical deformity, as in caricatures showing him as a hunchbacked ape (352-53).

11. He says they even maligned his dead father (355).

12. Against all of these attackers and attacks, Pope says he has maintained his “fair virtue” (358-59).

LINES 360-87

1. This section continues to gradually refine away the scorn that emanates from the Sporus passage by stressing Pope’s patience and poetry.

2. Arbuthnot interposes to ask why Pope attacks both the low and the great (360).

3. Pope answers that he dislikes all knaves no matter their station, whether Sporus (who had the Queen’s ear) or a common forger (361-63).

4. It could be someone who, Pope says using antithesis, may “gain his prince’s ear, or lose his own” (as a forger does, whose ears are cut off when he is convicted of forgery) (366-67).

5. Pope confesses that far from being mean and spiteful, he was even gullible; because of his “soft” “nature” (368), he was often deceived in friends such as Sappho (Lady Mary Montagu) ((369).

6. Pope then lists those who attacked him, but whom he still helped when they needed him: Dennis, Tibbald, Cibber, and even Moore (370-73), although the last was unintentionally helped since Moore got his assistance by plagiarizing from Pope’s poetry.

7. Pope again asks: “Full ten years slandered, did he once reply?” (374).

8. Even when “the two Curlls of town and court”—the publisher and Hervey—attacked his family, Pope says he felt he had to reply (380).

9. Now, he shows his family pride by praising the virtues of his father and mother, whose “unspotted names” will live in memory and poetry (381-87).

LINES 388-405

1. In the wistful description of his father’s life which follows, Pope not only demonstrates a proper filial devotion, but also announces his own ideal life, the life of peace on a few paternal acres (394-95, 400-03).

2. He says his father was a self-made man who earned his fortune honorably (388-90).

3. A mild man, who married an equally gentle wife, his father never raged, did harm to others, or lied.

4. His father never used any language but “the language of the heart” (399); he was honest, wise, and temperate, dying of old age, not of disease (392-403).

5. Pope says that he wished he had been accorded such a life and hopes that he himself will be granted such a death (404).

LINES 406-19

1. Finally, the love and yearning of this passage is brought to an even higher pitch in the prayer-like close, the climax of the good man image and thus of the poem itself.

2. Pope turns and addresses Arbuthnot as “friend” and hopes that Arbuthnot will have “domestic bliss” (406-07).

3. Pope hopes that he can spend his own old age principally doing only one thing—taking care of his aged mother (408-13).

4. Note: Pope’s mother died in 1733, two years before this poem was published, but as footnote 5 (p. 2573) states, these lines were written in 1731, when Pope was nursing his mother through a serious illness.

5. He closes by again wishing happiness for the ailing Arbuthnot (416-17).

6. The last two lines of the poem are given to Arbuthnot, who pronounces that Heaven will determine what is to come. Significantly the last word of the poem is “Heav’n” (418-19).

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