

Success as a Poet: Career Lessons from Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man*

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A poet's success depends on an extensive number of factors. Today, popular opinion is that the artist's path is impractical as opposed to the scientist's, the doctor's, the engineer's, or the lawyer's. A career in the arts is often associated with risk and instability, thus the stereotype of the starving artist. Rightfully so, however, is this stereotype. Success relies heavily on too many factors that are out of the author's control. Unlike the doctor, who will likely always have patients in need of healing, there is no guarantee that the artist will always have followers who will appreciate their art. A poet's work must find its way through many other works by various other poets, attract readers continuously, survive harsh scrutiny, and sustain the poet financially. These daunting premises alone are enough to filter out the faint of heart. Still, the ones who choose this path face incredible barriers. Against these odds, a select few are able to succeed. Alexander Pope was someone who overcame many of these barriers to become the legendary poet that we know him as today. Throughout his career, Pope's poetry was consistently met with relentless criticism. The intensity of the berating that Pope received would have most likely caused almost any other poet to quit the profession. Yet, Pope was able to continue publishing what he wanted even when many thought that he was losing the early genius he displayed with his publication of *Pastorals*. Certainly, in order not to get discouraged by such substantial amounts of criticism, a poet must hold very strong beliefs both about themselves and about the world. Through analysis of Pope's *Essay on Man*, we can learn the beliefs that allowed Pope to

flourish despite the constant disapproval and criticism. Pope's views on mankind, the universe, and God explain his ability to succeed.

Pope began to receive severe criticism early on in his career. Written in 1709 and published in 1711, Pope's *An Essay on Criticism* was immediately met with negative judgement. The English critic John Dennis frowned upon Pope's immaturity as a writer when, in his first published attack on Pope, he said that *An Essay on Criticism* revealed Pope as "a young man" who did not know "his own mind" (Dennis, *Reflections* 6). Dennis also complained that *An Essay on Criticism* showed Pope's apparent "frequent Contradictions of himself" (*Reflections* 6). In his preface, Dennis attacked Pope by accusing him of corrupting his early genius. Dennis called *An Essay on Criticism* "A most notorious Instance of this Depravity of Genius and Taste" (1). These excerpts from Dennis's public attack give just a mere taste of the harsh words that a young Pope faced.

The criticism did not let up even as Pope continued to publish works that were well-received by many, such as *Windsor-Forest* in 1713 and *The Rape of the Lock* in 1714. Published in 1717, Dennis's *Remarks Upon Pope's Homer* attacked Pope by claiming that "*Windsor Forest* is a wretched *Rhapsody*... not worthy [of] the Observation of a Man of Sense" (54). In the same publication, Dennis made his criticism personal when he wrote that "the Author of *Windsor Forest*... is despicable" (55). Dennis also thought it to be problematic that, to him, "Half the Poem of *Windsor Forest* has nothing in it... that is peculiar to *Windsor Forest*" (*Remarks* 55). As expected, *The Rape of the Lock* received a similar treatment from Dennis. But, Dennis was not the only critic who condemned Pope. In *The Progress of Dulness* (1728), William Bond made it clear that he thought Pope was not innovative with his ideas and that Pope's poetry only appeared new to appeal to readers who thought highly of themselves:

Late on Fantastic Cabalistic Schemes,
 Of waking Whimsies, or of Fev'rish Dreams,
 New Cobweb Threads of Poetry were spun,
 In gaudy Snares, like Flies, were Witlings won,
 Their Brains entangled, and our Art undone. (ll. 1-5)

Bond does not see Pope's formal elements as clever but as mere tools to confuse readers and to give the appearance of wittiness. Bond continues his condescending tone in the following lines, accusing Pope of "Cheapen[ing] the Charms of Art" (l.6). Bond's *The Progress of Dulness* then singles out parts of *The Rape of the Lock* and criticizes Pope for the world that he had created within the poem: "Lop off his Sylphs — and his Belinda dies..." (l.9). However, even the dedicated poetry and full publications that attacked Pope did not slow him down, discourage him, or cause him to quit.

In 1728, Theobald, in *An Essay on the Dunciad*, expressed disbelief that an author with such great reputation would publish a work of such poor quality (Theobald 214). Theobald thought that surely *The Dunciad* was an attempt by some unknown author at making a name for himself by first publishing as Pope:

I can't possibly reconcile my self to the Belief of Mr. Pope's being the author of this Poem. I wish some abler Person than my self, would be at the Trouble of examining this Poem somewhat stricter than I have, and then let him give out his Opinion: for I would not have it ever be said, that Mr. Pope, who is the Honour of our English Nation, was the Author of such a notorious Libel. (*The Critical Heritage*, 217)

Clearly, these words are Theobald's attempt at tactfully and implicitly criticizing Pope. Theobald uses many mitigating techniques, like placing his own credibility lower, inviting other critics to

chime in, and offering the possibility that *The Dunciad* is a poor work of poetry simply because it was not Pope that wrote it. But, Pope knew what he wrote and so this criticism would likely have achieved its purpose of attacking Pope nonetheless.

True to this pattern of publication being met with criticism, Pope's *Imitations of Horace*, published in 1733, was attacked. A month after its publication, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu criticized the work in what was "perhaps the best written of the many vicious attacks upon Pope's personality and physique" (Barnard 269). In *Verse Address'd to the Imitator of the First Satire of the Second Book of Horace. By a Lady*, Lady Mary criticizes Pope for the way his skill as a poet is inferior to Horace's:

Horace can laugh, is delicate, is clear;
 You, only coarsely rail, or darkly sneer:
 His Style is elegant, his Diction pure,
 Whilst none thy crabbed Numbers can endure;
 Hard as thy Heart, and as thy Birth obscure. (ll. 16-20)

Here, Lady Mary also attacks Pope by saying that both his heart and his metrical lines of poetry lack a certain delicate quality. The attack is vicious also because it attacks Pope's position in society — Lady Mary is essentially exposing Pope as lower class since his status was unknown to many (as indicated by "thy Birth obscure"). By linking Pope's lines to his lower-class status, Lady Mary is implicitly accusing Pope of inelegance in his poetic style. Around the same time Lady Mary published these criticisms, there were also others who viewed *Imitations of Horace* in a negative light. In *An Epistle to the Little Satyrist of Twickenham*, an anonymous writer "takes the common position that [Pope's] move to satire betrayed Pope's early genius" (Barnard 273) when he expresses his supposed sympathy toward Pope's apparent downfall:

There's nothing moves a Man's Compassion more,
 Than Man reduc'd who had been Great before;
 For you I feel that gen'rous Passion mov'd,
 So hated now, who once was so belov'd. (ll. 11-14)

These lines claim that Pope has lost his greatness and that he is hated now. Year after year, all of the main aspects of Pope's poetic gift: his personality, his physical attributes, and his choice of topics are scrutinized and attacked relentlessly, consistently, and immediately. Through all this, we know that Pope continued to write poetry because shortly after the publication of *Imitations of Horace*, Pope published *An Essay on Man*.

It is in *An Essay on Man* that we learn the beliefs that Pope presented himself to hold during his career. The ideas that are outlined in *An Essay on Man* are likely concepts that sustained his drive to write poetry and continue publication. An idea that likely helped Pope endure the heavy criticism that he had received up to this point was that a person only ever sees any given situation partially, never seeing the whole picture. This idea encourages the poet to disregard setbacks. Since a person never sees the whole picture, worry and anxiety about the future is taken out of the equation. In Epistle I of *An Essay on Man*, Pope writes,

In God's [works], one single can its end produce;
 Yet serves to second too some other use.
 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. (ll. 55-60)

Pope's speaker believes that if he put his trust in God, his efforts in producing poetry could always turn out working in some other beneficial way. Trusting that all will be taken care of in the future liberates the poet and gives the poet freedom to write as the heart desires.

An Essay on Man also reveals Pope as a poet content with his place both in relation to the universe and to the passage of time. In Epistle I, Pope's speaker demonstrates his trust in the timing of his existence:

Then say not Man's imperfect, Heaven in fault;
 Say rather, Man's as perfect as he ought:
 His knowledge measured to his state and place,
 His time a moment, and a point his space.
 If to be perfect in a certain sphere,
 What matter, soon or late, or here or there?
 The blessed to-day is as completely so,
 As who began a thousand years ago. (ll. 69-76)

Pope continues to emphasize the importance of being content with one's own occupation and being when he writes,

Each beast, each insect, happy in its own;
 Is Heaven unkind to Man, and Man alone?
 Shall he alone, whom rational we call,
 Be pleased with nothing, if not blessed with all? (ll. 185-188)

By mocking mankind as the only ungrateful species on this planet, Pope's speaker is showing the importance that he places on knowing one's place and on recognizing the blessings that one's position in the universe accompanies. As a poet, Pope had to do the job of a poet because all

must fulfill their designated role. By linking happiness to the contentment of being yourself, as expressed in the content-filled line of “happy in its own,” Pope is saying that the rational thing to do is to do what one is meant to do in order to be happy.

In Epistle I, Pope’s speaker also shows his belief that there is a certain order that governs the world. Not to know one’s place is to commit an offence against this order:

Aspiring to be gods, if angels fell,

Aspiring to be angels, men rebel;

And who but wishes to invert the laws

Of ORDER, sins against th’ eternal cause. (ll. 127-130)

In stating this, Pope’s speaker also makes sure to include that it is possible for mankind to know its purpose when he writes, “The general ORDER, since the whole began / Is kept in nature, and is kept in Man” (ll. 171-172). The importance of knowing one’s place is repeated yet again, showing how deeply Pope’s speaker believes in this eternal order. Worlds would collide with worlds (l. 254) if this order underwent changes. Each being is “essential to th[e] amazing whole” (l. 248) and if even a minor aspect is confused and out of place, “the whole must fall” (250). If Pope shared this belief, then no matter how harshly the critics treated him, this belief likely made Pope stay focused on his job.

Pope’s belief in God likely also helped him to continue the metaphorical race of his poetic career. The idea that each unit must play its own part links with the idea that there is a God who directs the events of the world. Echoing St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 12:15, Pope uses the hand trying to be the head as an example of the absurdity of one attempting to do a job not meant for them:

Just as absurd for any part to claim

To be another, in this general frame:

Just as absurd, to mourn the tasks or pains

The great directing MIND of ALL ordains. (ll. 263-266)

In other words, Pope's speaker says not to complain about one's lot in life because "the great directing MIND of ALL" has a reason for having it as such. He continues:

Cease then, nor ORDER imperfection name:

Our proper bliss depends on what we blame.

Know thy own point: this kind, this due degree

Of blindness, weakness, Heaven bestows on thee. (ll. 281-284)

Pope's speaker believes that all must know themselves and know what God has given to them.

This includes both strengths and weaknesses. Most importantly, they should trust in God to direct the bigger picture, because "All nature is but art, unknown to thee; / All chance, direction, which thou canst not see" (ll. 289-290). Even if the purpose is unclear, they should do their part anyway. Whether or not Pope in real life fully believed this, in times of doubt this would be a reason to continue writing poetry. Even when critics may have implied that Pope was not making the world a better place with his poetry, Pope may have believed that everything would eventually work for the greatest good:

All discord, harmony, not understood;

All partial evil, universal good:

And, spite of pride, in erring reason's spite,

One truth is clear, 'Whatever is, is RIGHT.' (ll. 291-294)

That these lines represent Pope's personal belief is supported in Harry Solomon's *The Rape of the Text*, in which he explicates Pope's intentions in writing the poem. According to Solomon's

sources, Pope had explained in a letter to Spence that his goal was to explore man: "...it lay out of *my* subject, which was only to consider man as he is" (qtd. in Solomon 91, my emphasis).

Solomon states that Pope used the "'Socratic' 'Whatever is, is RIGHT' to characterize his resignation" (Solomon 91). Solomon also refers to Pope's letter to John Caryll, in which "Pope admits the poem 'has merit in [his] opinion...'" (Solomon 91). Although resignation may have negative connotations, the fact that Pope believed the poem was well written implies at least some agreement with the content of the poem. As Solomon reflects, "Pope's attempts to prove that 'Whatever is, is RIGHT'" (qtd. in Solomon 71) show his personal investment in the topic.

Although I have concentrated on Epistle I of Pope's *An Essay on Man*, the remainder reflects many more beliefs that likely played an integral part in helping Pope keep his career on the track that he wanted. Epistle II touches on the idea that nobody understands their own vices and how extreme they are. Epistle III touches on other ideas, such as that mankind has the tendency to play God. Here, Pope shows his understanding that life is bigger than a single person and that his readership is bigger than a few critics:

For him as kindly spread the flowery lawn.

Is it for thee the lark ascends and sings?

Joy tunes his voice, joy elevates his wings:

Is it for thee the linnet pours his throat?

Loves of his own and raptures swell the note: (ll. 30-34)

More examination should add to our understanding of *An Essay on Man* as the blueprint to Pope's success. However, even in these brief passages we see a belief system that can form the foundation of a career. For the struggling artist, take comfort in the fact that Pope was able to overcome constant and consistent critique that attacked him oftentimes on a personal level. Very

possibly, Pope continued to write despite of all the obstacles because writing poetry simply made him happy. In Epistle IV, Pope writes, “Oh happiness! our being’s end and aim / Good, pleasure, ease, content! whate’er thy name” (ll. 1-2). Whichever way one comes to understand Pope’s career, his success was accompanied by his beliefs. He likely outlines these beliefs in *An Essay on Man*. If Pope benefitted from holding these views on mankind, maybe the aspiring poet will, too.

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