

Learning to Appreciate Poetry

Presented by Paul Rogers

Alexander Pope



Ode on Solitude

A few words in advance

Pope's dates are 1688 - 1744

He is a writer of what today we call the Augustan style and wrote not only poetry but satires and early journalism, too. Augustan poetry models itself on writers of ancient Rome, particularly those who were active during the reign of Augustus. Such poets include Horace, Virgil and Propertius. Augustan poetry is characterised by wit, clever use of wordplay and sophistication. We will see that the poetry of the Romantics, headed by Wordsworth and Coleridge with their love of the natural world, was a reaction against the Augustans.

Pope was very short – 4' 6" in height and suffered from curvature of the spine.

His poetry is usually written in heroic couplets, a specific type of couplet that discusses heroic themes and is usually created in iambic pentameter. An ordinary couplet is just two successive lines of poetry and may follow any kind of metrical rhythm.

Many of Pope's more famous poems such as *The Rape of the Lock* and *An Essay on Man* are very long, and we don't have time to do them justice here. Instead, we're going to be looking at a shorter one, written when he was young, but which is typical of his Augustan style.

The Poem

Happy the man, whose wish and care
A few paternal acres bound,
Content to breathe his native air,
In his own ground.

Whose herds with milk, whose fields with bread,
Whose flocks supply him with attire,
Whose trees in summer yield him shade,
In winter fire.

Blest! who can unconcern'dly find
Hours, days, and years slide soft away,
In health of body, peace of mind,
Quiet by day,

Sound sleep by night; study and ease
Together mix'd; sweet recreation,
And innocence, which most does please,
With meditation.

Thus let me live, unseen, unknown;
Thus unlamented let me dye;
Steal from the world, and not a stone
Tell where I lye.

Rhyme Scheme

Happy the man, whose wish and care
A few paternal acres bound,
Content to breathe his native air,
In his own ground.

Whose herds with milk, whose fields with bread,
Whose flocks supply him with attire,
Whose trees in summer yield him shade,
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Blest! who can unconcern'dly find
Hours, days, and years slide soft away,
In health of body, peace of mind,
Quiet by day,

Sound sleep by night; study and ease
Together mix'd; sweet recreation,
And innocence, which most does please,
With meditation.

Thus let me live, unseen, unknown;
Thus unlamented let me dye;
Steal from the world, and not a stone
Tell where I lye.

There are five regular stanzas, each of four lines. Unlike much of Pope's later work, which is written in heroic couplets, this poem has a rhyme structure of abab. The metre is iambic tetrameter followed by trimeter, tetrameter and dimeter.

Note that words such as unconcern'dly and mix'd are missing the final vowel which is replaced with an apostrophe. This is to ensure that the metre is consistent. It is not unusual in poetry where there is an -ed ending, for this to be pronounced as in "He ask-id a question" for "He asked a question."

This convention has largely disappeared from English poetry but is still often found in French song lyrics, where the last syllable of a word usually not heard when spoken, is deliberately voiced to fit the music.

Imagery

Happy the man, whose wish and care
A few paternal acres bound,
Content to breathe his native air,
In his own ground.

Whose herds with milk, whose fields with bread,
Whose flocks supply him with attire,
Whose trees in summer yield him shade,
In winter fire.

Blest! who can unconcern'dly find
Hours, days, and years **slide soft away**,
In health of body, peace of mind,
Quiet by day,

Sound sleep by night; study and ease
Together mix'd; sweet recreation,
And innocence, which most does please,
With meditation.

Thus let me live, unseen, unknown;
Thus unlamented let me dye;
Steal from the world, and not a stone
Tell where I lye.

This is a very spare poem in terms of figurative language. It is reflective, philosophical even, so that the main aim is to communicate a message. The only rather obvious image is the metaphor of time sliding softly away (again, a time reference).

Dr Johnson, a key writer of the Augustan age, didn't like the "conceits" of metaphysical poetry, as we have seen. This is because the rich and ornate imagery of such work is in stark contrast to the clear message of Augustan writing. 20th century poets had a similar reaction against Romanticism.

Basic Meaning

Happy the man, whose wish and care
A few paternal acres bound,
Content to breathe his native air,
In his own ground.

Whose herds with milk, whose fields with bread,
Whose flocks supply him with attire,
Whose trees in summer yield him shade,
In winter fire.

Blest! who can unconcern'dly find
Hours, days, and years slide soft away,
In health of body, peace of mind,
Quiet by day,

Sound sleep by night; study and ease
Together mix'd; sweet recreation,
And innocence, which most does please,
With meditation.

Thus let me live, unseen, unknown;
Thus unlamented let me dye;
Steal from the world, and not a stone
Tell where I lye.

This poem carries a very simple message: it is better to be alone and in the countryside than forced to live cheek by jowl with one's fellows in the city.

I'm not sure Pope really believed this – he was a Londoner, through and through. However, the yearning for a quiet, more pastoral existence reflects the concern felt in cities like London that overcrowding was becoming a serious problem, particularly in terms of disease.

Check out Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*, published in 1751, which anticipates Romanticism.

Concluding Remarks

Alexander Pope is a relatively easy poet to read and enjoy. His poems tend to be discursive or morally instructive. He does not go in for complex imagery or rhyme schemes: his task is to educate and uplift. Later on in his life, the novel emerges as a new literary art form in which thoughts and ideas can be expressed through the words and deeds of the characters. This allows poetry to return to more introspective and descriptive areas such as awareness of natural beauty and the power nature exerts on humanity.

Pope, therefore, is one of the last of his kind. His own role model had been Dryden, one of the most notable earlier Augustans. Pope, however, speaks more directly to us today, I feel. I particularly recommend you look at his *Essay on Man* – a masterpiece of philosophical discussion written in heroic couplets. For most writers, the severe restrictions of the form would make it impossible to write meaningful poetry. Pope succeeds magnificently in conveying a very human message.

Preparing for the Next Unit

