

# **An Essay on Criticism**

*Alexander Pope*

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**An Essay on Criticism** Alexander Pope

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.

## An Essay on Criticism Details


Date : Published June 1st 2004 by Kessinger Publishing (first published 1711)

ISBN : 9781419106408

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Format : Paperback 48 pages

Genre : Poetry, Classics, Nonfiction, Writing, Essays, Literature, 18th Century, Philosophy

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## Lindsey says

Ahem. It's kind of awkward, trying to review a great poem about reviewing. I have to reread everything I type and examine it for Pope's fiercely lambasted Follies. I believe I shall confine my comments to this:

-This is as true now as it was 301 years ago, when it was published. (It both pleases and pains me to see that nothing has really changed since then. It's like moving to a new school--the names come and go, but the faces remain the same.)

-I wish we still wrote and talked like this. Why does modern language seem so inadequate in comparison?

-I unfortunately observed that I am guilty of unjust criticism in several of my reviews. I am going to go over them and update them (eventually) to reflect my penitence and desire to be a better critic.

### Favorite lines

2nd stanza, last lines:

*Authors are partial to their Wit, 'tis true,  
But are not Criticks to their Judgment too?*  
Guilty on both counts.

4th stanza, lines 3 and 4:

*Some neither can for Wits nor Criticks pass,  
As heavy Mules are neither Horse nor Ass.*

12th stanza, beginning with line 3:

*Musick resembles Poetry, in each  
Are nameless Graces which no Methods teach,  
And which a Master-Hand alone can reach...  
Great Wits sometimes may gloriously offend,  
And rise to Faults true Criticks dare not mend;  
From vulgar Bounds with brave Disorder part,  
And snatch a Grace beyond the Reach of Art,  
Which, without passing thro' the Judgment, gains  
The Heart and all its End at once attains...  
But tho' the Ancients thus their Rules invade,  
(As Kings dispense with Laws Themselves have made)  
Moderns, beware! Or if you must offend  
Against the Precept, ne'er transgress its End...*

13th stanza, lines 3-6:

*Some Figures monstrous and mis-shap'd appear,  
Consider'd singly, or beheld too near,  
Which, but proportion'd to their Light, or Place,  
Due Distance reconciles to Form and Grace.*

14th stanza, lines 15-18:

*Oh may some Spark of your Celestial Fire  
The last, the meanest of your Sons inspire,  
(That on weak Wings, from far, pursues your Flights;  
Glowes while he reads, but trembles as he writes)*

15th stanza, beginning with line 5:

*For as in Bodies, thus in Souls, we find  
What wants in Blood and Spirits, swelled with Wind...  
Trust not yourself; but your defects to know,  
Make use of ev'ry friend--and ev'ry Foe.*

16th stanza, first lines:

*A little Learning is a dang'rous Thing;  
Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring:  
There shallow Draughts intoxicate the Brain,  
And drinking largely sobers us again.*

17th stanza, lines 13 and 14:

*'Tis not a lip, or Eye, we Beauty call,  
But the joint Force and full Result of all.*

18th stanza, first lines:

*Whoever thinks a faultless Piece to see,  
Thinks what ne'er was, nor is, nor e'er shall be.  
In ev'ry Work regard the Writer's End,  
Since none can compass more than they intend.*

21st stanza, lines 9-12:

*True Wit is Nature to Advantage drest,  
What oft was Thought, but n'er so well Exprest,  
Something, whose Truth convinc'd at Sight we find,  
That gives us back the Image of our Mind...*

22nd stanza, lines 5-6:

*Words are like Leaves; and where they most abound,  
Much Fruit of Sense beneath is rarely found.*

24th stanza, lines 3-4:

*(Thus Wit, like Faith by each Man is apply'd  
To one small Sect, and All are damn'd beside.)*

29th stanza, lines 1-4 and 15-18:

*Some valuing those of their own, Side or Mind,  
Still make themselves the measure of Mankind;  
Fondly we think we honour Merit then,  
When we but praise Our selves in Other Men...*

*Envy will Merit as its Shade pursue,  
But like a Shadow, proves the Substance true;  
For envy'd Wit, like Sol Eclips'd, makes known  
Th' opposing Body's Grossness, not its own.*

33rd stanza, lines 1-4 and last lines:

*But if in Noble Minds some Dregs remain,  
Not yet purg'd off, of Spleen and sow'r Disdain,  
Discharge that Rage on more Provoking Crimes,  
Nor fear a Dearth in these Flagitious Times...  
Yet shun their Fault, who, Scandalously nice,  
Will needs mistake an Author into Vice;  
All seems Infected that th'Infected spy,  
As all looks yellow to the Jaundic'd Eye.  
Spot on, Mr. Pope!  
link*

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### **Xena says**

Great pleasure reading this out loud while listening to classical music in the background.

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### **Lovmelovmycats Hart says**

Pope published this masterpiece at age 23. I should read more of him, his later stuff- I'd like to see if/how his ideas of human nature evolved.

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### **Maryam Bayat says**

“A little learning is a dangerous thing”  
“Some praise at morning what they blame at night;  
But always think the last opinion right.”

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### **Lane Wilkinson says**

how prescient was Pope?  
did he foresee the heavy-handed and ultimately uninspired contemporary, po-mo approach to lit-crit?  
indeed, Alexander Pope offers the most precise summation of post-modernism available:

"Such labored nothings  
in so strange a style  
amaze th' unlearned

and make the learned smile"

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## **Jivita says**

And of course Alexander Pope would find a way to criticize and rhyme! Ever since I read 'Rape of the Lock,' Pope has been growing on me. Now I'm not sure if I'm a true fan, but I do admire his unique rhyming craft!

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## **Nguyen Santiago says**

This is more an essay on how not to be a boorish critic, rather than against any criticism at all.

A few lines that stuck to me:

*Against the slavish adherence to rules (or the slavish disobeying of them)*

Rules were made but to promote their End

[...]

Moderns, beware! Or if you must offend

Against the Precept, ne'er transgress its End

*A good quote to illustrate path dependence and the argument in this article*

Immortal Heirs of Universal Praise!

Whose Honours with Increase of Ages grow,

As streams roll down, enlarging as they flow!

*Know thyself when criticizing...*

Trust not your self; but your Defects to know,

Make use of ev'ry Friend--and ev'ry Foe.

*Advice for reading Goodreads reviews (especially those of yours truly)*

Avoid Extreams; and shun the Faulty of such,

Who still are pleas'd too little, or too much.

*Schools of Thought*

Some foreign Writers, some our own despize;

The Ancients only, or the Moderns prize:

(Thus Wit, like Faith by each Man is apply'd

To one small Sect, and All are damn'd beside.)

*"Hipsters"?*

So much they scorn the Crowd, that if the Throng

By Chance go right, they purposely go wrong

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## Roya says

Well, I actually enjoyed it, probably because my real life is even crappier than an 18 century poem.

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## Tony Sheldon says

It is a trouble to critique a piece written about criticism itself. It's eerie, it's almost unnatural. It poses great difficulty.

One shall rather define it, try to understand it, grasp it and whatever comes leaking out of the process, will in no doubt be wisdom-lessons far and wide.

It surely will need re-reading and a hard, tiring effort to uncover all meaning.

But as I end it, I know I would love to read it again and I know I'll know better the next time.

5 stars all erupting with zest and a poem I'll call- one of the best!!

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## Tessa says

\*For College\*

Absolutely genius and interesting. I started by hating it because it's not something easy on the eye but once you let it in, it's really easy on the mind. A theoretical text was never so interesting for me and I feel like after reading this, I learnt a lot more than in any other case.

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## sabisteb aka callisto says

"Tis with our judgments as our watches, none/ Go just alike, yet each believes his own

Rezensionsunwesen und schlechte Autoren, die sich überschätzen, eine neverending story, wohl schon zu Zeiten von Alexander Pope. 1711 erschien dieser Essay on Criticism in Gedichtform und da bekommen ALLE ihr Fett weg vom Autor über den Kritiker/Rezensenten zu Leser. Seine Ratschläge gelten (leider) immer noch uneingeschränkt auch für (amazon) Rezensionen und (indie) Autoren.

17/18 Authors are partial to their wit, 'tis true / But are not critics to their judgment too?

28/29 In search of wit these lose their common sense / And then turn critics in their own defense

36/37 Some have at first for wits then poets passed / Turned critics next and proved plain fools at last

203/204 Pride where wit fails steps in to our defense, / And fills up all the mighty void of sense.

263/264 Most critics, fond of some subservient art, / Still make the whole depend upon a part:

412/413 Some judge of authors names not works, and then / Nor praise nor blame the writing, but the men.

426/427 So much they scorn the crowd that if the throng / By chance go right they purposely go wrong:

Sogar an Produktrezensenten hat Pope gedacht: Du sollst schlechte Produkte nicht hochjubeln...

562/563 'Tis not enough, taste, judgment, learning, join; / In all you speak, let truth and candor shine:

Dieter Nuhr scheint auch nur frei nach Pope zu zitieren: „Wenn man keine Ahnung hat, einfach mal Klappe halten.“ 566 Be silent always, when you doubt your sense;

Letztendlich kann man die letzten 5 Zeilen jedem (amazon) Rezensenten ins Poesiealbum schreiben:

The learned reflect on what before they knew

Careless of censure, nor too fond of fame,  
Still pleased to praise, yet not afraid to blame,  
Averse alike to flatter, or offend,  
Not free from faults, nor yet too vain to mend.

Wer hätte das gedacht, eine komplette Kritik des aktuellen Rezensionsunwesens, von Hochjublern über (Autoren-)Fans, zu Pseudointellektuellen, alles schon mal dagewesen vor über 300 Jahren.

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### **J.G. Keely says**

Sometimes, I grow the silly delusion that I might have the potential to be a writer. As a curative, I read this, Lycidas, and Hours of Idleness; then I recall that not only am I not a writer, I am old.

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### **Skylar Burris says**

I love a man that can make good sense and aim beautiful barbs in perfect, rhymed couplets.

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### **Abubakar Mehdi says**

This one is even more delightful than The Rape Of The Lock. It has the nuanced satire on the critics that foolishly reject and criticize every innovative endeavor by a poet. So here is a little chastisement for those lost soul.

The poem has some excellent couplets and few very quotable verses that would make any conversation immaculately charming and eloquent.

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### **Mariam Okasha says**

I have studied one verse of this poem about ten years ago, and today I've managed to finish reading it completely.

I must say that It's not my most Favoured poem of Alexander Pope, For (Eloisa to Abelard) is much closer to my heart, I can't deny though that I was thrilled by being able to read it properly today.

Reading Pope is not just a pleasure of soul and senses, it's rather an opportunity to receive an appropriate drought of Pope's eternal "Pierian Spring'.

His ideas some how seem endless, and the same idea is an eternal spring itself.

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