

A brief summary of Pope's An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot

**Dr Atal Kumar
Department of English
Gaya College, Gaya**

Pope was born in a century where there was so much confusion in the society. People were torn between the extremes of religion, society and politics. Pope, as a poet, wrote many satires. Pope and his friends were fondly named as Scriblerians. Dr. Arbuthnot, Pope's friend, was hopelessly ill. He wrote to Pope that he should be careful while satirizing and attacking others. Pope wrote this poem as a reply to him in 1734. This poem attacks Pope's detractors and defends Pope's character and career. This poem could be divided into 7 parts.

First Part (lines 1 - 68)

The poem opens with Pope ordering John, a servant, to shut the door. Pope is afraid of letting in the budding poets, who are like dogs. He asks John to tie the knocker of the door. He thinks that the mental institutions like Bedlam and Parnassus are let loose in the road. He finds the poets with papers in their hands and fire in their eyes. Pope is not left alone; wherever he goes he is followed by the budding poets. They come into his house by climbing the wall and shrubs. They get into his chariot and into his boat. They do not even leave him pray. Everyone blames Pope in some way or the other. All people come to Twitnam, Pope's house, to scold him. Pope finally addresses Dr. Arbuthnot as "friend of my life". Pope finds his friend's illness and the troublesome poets as a plague. Pope is confused on what to do and what not to do. If he appreciated their poetry they overflow with more poems, if he says something negative about their poetry, they feel hurt. Pope gives the advice of Horace to the new poets. He asks them to wait for nine years before publishing a poem. The writers are unable to accept this advice. They ask Pope to make some corrections in their poem. They also try to bribe him. Some poets blackmail him.

Second Part (lines 69 - 124)

The second part of the poem talks about the dangers of being popular. Pope elaborates on the comparison of Midas. He ridicules the poetasters by using Midas image, which ultimately represents unreliability. Pope scolds a few poets like Colley, Harley, Bavius, Bishop Philips and Sappho. At this point Arbuthnot warns Pope not to use names in his poem. He advises Pope to be prudent. Arbuthnot ridicules Pope that he is twice as tall as Pope but he never uses any names. Pope is angry again. He is willing to be honest. He claims that he would not be called as cruel when he calls a fool as a fool. He then talks about how a few dramatists approach him to

recommend scripts, which are rejected by the theatres and production companies. They all try to flatter Pope. Some say that Pope's nose is like Ovid's and they compare Pope with Hercules and Alexander the Great. Pope does not listen to such flattery. He calls himself as an ordinary man.

Third Part (lines 125 - 146)

This part talks about Pope's life as a writer. He starts explaining why he writes. He says that he wrote not out of any compulsion. He found it hard to learn numbers but it is not hard for him to write poetry. Nobody asked him to write poetry but he did it by himself. He writes because his friends like Swift, Granville, Congreve and others enjoyed reading his poetry. He did not write poem for his personal reasons like loving his wife. Arbuthnot asks why Pope publishes his works. Pope says that because his friends enjoyed reading his poetry. They praised his works. Even Dryden encourages Pope to write and publish poems so Pope published them.

Fourth Part (lines 147 - 260)

Part IV of this poem discusses about why Pope attacks other poets through his satire. Pope says that he does not care a little for those who find fault with him. He calls them as donkeys and fools. He sometimes tried to be friendly with them. He tried to take them out for a dinner. In spite of all these some cheap critics criticizes him. Pope says that if their criticism is correct he would readily accept it. Pope satirizes Ambrose Philips. Ambrose is a plagiarist. He copies works from Greek literature and earns money. If he attempts to be original, he will not cross eight lines a year. Pope then criticizes Addison. Addison, according to Pope, is a genius. He is a good writer. His defect is that he wants to dominate the literary world. He thinks that he is the greatest of all writers. Pope calls Addison a coward, because Addison attacks many writers but he fears being attacked by them. Lord Halifax is attacked next. Lord Halifax loves being flattered. He helps the poetasters who flatter him.

Fifth Part (lines 261 - 304)

This part describes Pope's current attitude towards life and career. Pope asks the poetasters to let him leave live in a peaceful manner. He says that he lives in debt. He is someone normal who prays to god regularly. He says that only liars will fear his satire and attacks. A man of good intention and honest behavior need not fear him.

Sixth Part (lines 305 - 333)

In this part, Pope attacks Lord Hervey in the name Sporus. When Arbuthnot hears the name Sporus, he starts scolding him. Sporus is a man who drinks the milk of a donkey. He is capable only of killing a butterfly with his wheels. He is such a

senseless person that he is not able to distinguish satire and other kinds of poem. If Pope is a paragon of independent judgment, Hervey is a man who will say anything to please the people at court and in government. He values glamour, sensual pleasure, and social climbing. Hervey was also homosexual. Hervey is not only a man-woman but an animal-demon, a shape-changer, like Satan

Seventh Part (lines 334 - 419)

Part 7 is Pope's final draft of his self-portrait, summing up the virtues he wants Arbuthnot to believe he has. Pope says that he has never been a worshipper of fortune. He is bold and courageous. He has never flattered anyone for selfish reasons. He attacks his enemies and critics. He claims that he was brought up well by his parents. His parents are peace loving. They are good citizens of England. They led a happy domestic life. Pope also wants to live a similar life. He concludes the poem by praying that Arbuthnot should lead a happy, peaceful and prosperous life.

ANALYSIS

Pope decided to write this epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot as a gratitude for the concern shown by the latter towards him. Arbuthnot had cautioned him about the possible dangers of naming people openly while ridiculing them, particularly the influential ones. Although Pope responded to his concern in the form of this epistle but he did not show any sign of agreement with his concern. Pope took this occasion to express his fearlessness openly. He did not even avoid mentioning some people openly in this work as well whom he disliked. The only assurance he has given to the doctor is that he is not afraid of anyone and that he is satisfied with his own position in the society. He has also given some general philosophical ideas in the letter by mentioning the conduct of some people. For instance, he has talked against the tendency of people to flatter someone.

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

An epistle is a literary creation in the form of a letter. It is meant to be read by the person to whom it has been addressed as well as by the readers in general.

This epistle was written by Pope to Dr. Arbuthnot. He has presented some varied views in the epistle. However, all the views have been presented to suggest that it was his duty to expose impudence and that he was not afraid of serious opposition if he was performing his duty as a writer.

The structure of the letter is such that it could be divided into seven parts.

Pope has used personal views, personal experiences, personal wishes and personal advices to convince Dr. Arbuthnot that the way he treated his satires was the best thing for him to do.

Pope has established himself as a fearless and responsible writer through this epistle.

CONCERNED FACTS

'John Arbuthnot' to whom the epistle has been dedicated was a physician.

Pope wrote this epistle after Arbuthnot had written to him about the lethal disease he was suffering from.

It was published in 1735

The poem includes 419 lines.

It has been written in heroic couplets.