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**A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY  
POETRY WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO ALEXANDER POPE AND  
THOMAS GRAY**

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**Abstract:** This paper is an account of a study about the characteristics of the eighteenth-century poetry. An attempt is made to trace the ideas and passions through the poetry of the century. This will enrich the understanding about the major decorum, sensibilities, reasons and sentiments that marked this period. Simultaneously we will look into the works of Alexander Pope and Thomas Gray which eventually gave a path to the romantic thoughts of writers like Wordsworth and Coleridge and are an interesting part of this account.

**Keywords:** Bleak Pessimism, Enlightenment, Neoclassical Movement, Political Disturbance, Renaissance, Romanticism

**Introduction:** The eighteenth century was the era of enlightenment. It saw the development of the seventeenth-century poetic modes. It was an age of political disturbance, of growing wealth and colonialism, of increasing education and literacy and of Tories and Whigs. England became the centre of literary achievement. During the century new democratic ideas were sprouting, new forces were gaining strength and the French Revolution was the climax to a long unrest. Revolutionary ideas exerted literature to the very depths.

It was the age of transition. Poets were obliged to the old order of classicism. Samuel Johnson was the main and probably only figure in this movement. At the same time the period saw the new order of Romanticism. Many writers were engaged in the search for Romanticism. Romantic writers were returning to the real nature of the earth and air. The works of Burns, Crabbe and Cowper are rich with sympathy for the poor and oppressed.

The later stages of the eighteenth century show a minor Renaissance that touched nearly all Europe. The increase in wealth and comfort coincided with the elevation of the standard of

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human intellect. Many of the leading writers like Hume, Gibbon and Sterne visited Paris, which was the hub of European culture.

The spirit of the new thinking received its expression in the works of Voltaire and was marked by stimulation for eager inquiry. The new spirit assisted the Romantic notion by clearing ancient mental material and leaving the ground clear to new and fresher creations.

**Works of Alexander Pope:** He is the acknowledged master of the heroic couplet and a prominent figure in the Neoclassical movement<sup>1</sup> of the eighteenth century. He is known for perfecting rhymed couplets and turning them to satiric and philosophical purposes.

*An Essay of Criticism* is one of the major poems written by Alexander Pope. It was first published in 1711. It is composed in heroic couplets and written in the Horatian ode<sup>2</sup>. It covers suggestion and good criticism and represents the important literary ideals of the age of Alexander Pope. Throughout the poem, Pope refers to writers such as Homer, Aristotle, Longinus and Horace. This is evidence for his belief that “Imitation of Ancients” is the most important standard for taste. He believes that writing comes through practise and art, not by chance. He meant that poets are made and not born. He himself says:

A little learning is a dangerous thing;

Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian Spring:

- Part II lines 215-216

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Here, he has emphasised the importance of practice and art. Only true exercise and art can bring perfection.

His mock epic *The Rape of the Lock* (1714) had long been considered one of the most serious of literary forms. Actually, it satirises an incident by comparing it to the world of the gods. It was based on the actual event recounted to the poet by his friend, John Caryll. Lord Petre cut off a lock of hair of Arabella without permission, and the resulting argument had created a breach between the two families. Pope wrote his verses to cool hot tempers and to make his friends laugh at their own folly.

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<sup>1</sup> The 18<sup>th</sup> century movement that developed in Europe and sought to return to the classical beauty and magnificence of Ancient Greece and Roman Empire

<sup>2</sup> A stanzaic form in which all stanzas are structured in the same pattern

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The purpose of the mock-epic of Alexander Pope is to mock the society. He wants to expose its pettiness by casting it against the brilliance of the traditional epic subjects. *The Rape of the Lock* emphasises the ridiculousness of a society in which important things have lost their values and the things of little importance are handled with seriousness.

*The Dunciad* is a mock-heroic narrative poem by Alexander Pope. It was born from discussions among Pope and other members of the literary society called the Scriblerus Club<sup>3</sup>. In *The Dunciad* the tone in which the subject of Pope is satirized is angry and bitter. In the final book, Pope imagines apocalyptic vision in which he depicts the destruction of mankind. The last book gives an objective emphasis to the triumph of incompetency in art, most of the book exercises personal revenge against those whom Pope disliked. Pope dedicates the work to his friend and great satirist of the age, Jonathan Swift.

*An Essay on Man* is another poem by Alexander Pope published in 1734. It is associated with the natural order that God has determined for man. Man cannot know God's purposes, so he cannot complain about his position. He must accept whatever is right. This poem popularized optimistic philosophy throughout Europe. On its publication it achieved great praise throughout Europe. Philosophers like Immanuel Kant, Rousseau and Voltaire have praised it.

This poem is divided into four sections that the poet calls Epistles. In each epistle the poet has given his arguments. In the first epistle the poet says that humans can only see the world from their own perspective. God conceals the future from humankind. There exists a natural order, which allows for flaws. The vast chain of existence cannot be comprehended by man. Every being in the universe is important. Men should believe in the power of God. Whatever is, is right. Man should submit and devote to God.

In the second epistle the poet argues that human beings should study themselves, including their flaws and weaknesses. The speaker addresses the importance of passions. Passion stimulates one to achieve. The reason helps people to make their passions productive. Vices like envy and pride can become productive. Everyone has flaws, and these flaws are part of God's plan.

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<sup>3</sup> An informal association of authors which was based in London and came together in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century

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In epistle three, the poet says that all living beings are necessary part of the chain. The greatest and the least of all beings are interconnected. Human beings cannot know the end of the chain. Man may have powers of intellect that nature lacks, but nature conquers all.

All creatures enjoy reason or impulse. If both reason and impulse work in harmony, they achieve the desired results.

In the fourth epistle, the idea of happiness is addressed. He says, happiness is never to be brought but always free. If people are unhappy, they should not blame God. One should endeavour for the happiness of all, not just one's own. God wants all to be equally happy. People, who are actually good, will be happier. The speaker believes that no one can be happy without virtue. The purpose of the human soul is to love God and humankind. He restates that only virtue makes our bliss and self understanding- is the goal of knowledge.

**Works of Thomas Gray:** Alongside Pope, Thomas Gray is also the most important English poets of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. He combined traditional forms and poetic diction with new themes and modes of expression. He is a self-critical writer and probably published thirteen poems in his lifetime. The image of the poet in his poems is often isolated, lonely and marginal. His literary achievements were overshadowed by the emergence of Wordsworth, Coleridge and other second generation of Romantic writers.

*Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College* poem which was published in 1747 begins with a look at the past. The general impression of the beginning lines is that school days are a blissful time. Once Eton College is left behind, the outside world will give troubles to inmates. Apart from these sufferings, disease will bring its own misfortune. Then poverty brings troubles to people. Poet himself says,

Lo, Poverty, to fill the band,  
That numbs the soul with icy hand,  
And slow-consuming age.

Hence, mankind is destined to suffer and lament. The final argument made is that there is no reason to tell boys about this, and they should be allowed to stay in a state of innocence. He summarises to say that misfortunes will come on their own, and it would be harsh to inflict them on young people before they are able to bear them.

*Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* is another poem by Thomas Gray and published in 1751. It is an elegy and embodies a meditation on death and reminiscence after death. The

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Narrator finds comfort in reflecting on the lives of the rustics buried in the churchyard. It does not mourn an individual. The major part of the poem deals with questions that were linked to the life of Gray. He was confronted with death of others and argued his own mortality. The poem was grounded in feelings of Gray about his own life. It is the best known and best loved poem in English. The narrator meditates on the end of human life. He comments on the inevitability of death that everyone has to face. In the poem, the poet himself writes the epitaph of his own. The poet through the narrator ends the elegy by saying that man's efforts and struggles to succeed in life come to an end in death. The death conquers man.

*The Bard* was published in 1757. It was inspired by his researches into medieval literature and history. The Bard invokes the spirit of Cadwallo, Urien and Mordred who are victims of Edward. He also predicts the return of Welsh rule over Britain and the flowering of the British poetry. This Bard escaped the massacre and curses Edward and his posterity.

**Romantic Poetry:** Both Alexander Pope and William Wordsworth proposed their own opinions on the creation of poetry. William Wordsworth revised and refined ideas and thoughts of Alexander Pope since he is the representative of the Neoclassicism school and came earlier than Wordsworth. Both emphasised the synthesis of rules and feelings. Pope's thought reminds us of William Wordsworth's opinion. Wordsworth highly praises the importance of feelings and perceptions in poetry creation. If we look carefully at Wordsworth's thought about poetry creation, we find similarities between him and Pope. Subjective feelings can be stimulated by external elements that are beyond the control and mastery of human beings. Such external forces and elements are not rational and controllable but instant and uncertain. Hence Wordsworth's idea resembles those of Pope. Like Pope, Wordsworth also touches on regulations of classic and tradition and then refines personal feelings that flourish in the individual creation of literature.

For Wordsworth, nature inspires poets not only in the sense that it arouses feelings and inner voices but also because it provides them with an ideal place to grasp the pure and original things and to perceive the innate feelings. Nature serves as a sacred shrine for poets where they can mediate, just as Wordsworth says in his work "*Preface to Lyrical Ballads*"<sup>4</sup>. Feelings sprouted within this natural simplicity are harmonious and elementary. Within nature, poets will attain a harmonious coexistence with nature. Similar to Pope, Wordsworth also suggests that nature functions as an infallible standard to refine original feelings of human beings.

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<sup>4</sup> An essay composed by William Wordsworth for the second edition of poetry collection *Lyrical Ballads* and expanded in third edition of 1802

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Hence, true poets strive to resemble genuine simplicity by choosing events and situations from common life. Poets describe the incidents with the simple language really used by men.

Thomas Gray was a precursor of English Romanticism and had no sympathy for conventional verse. He strives to break the bounds of the traditional patterns of poetry. He strongly argues against the bondage of rules and conventions. He got inspiration in the literature of the past. He loved nature, medievalism and melancholy. He had sympathy for the poor and the weak. These are the important characteristics of the Romantic poetry.

The romantics used Gray's ideas when attempting to define their own beliefs. Romantics sought to make a language of poetry, which is the same goal Gray sought to accomplish. Wordsworth in his Lyrical Ballads argued for a simplification of the language to what was real and genuine. Although both are opposite approaches, but they complement each other as they strive to attain the same linguistic goal.

Blake is viewed as part of a transition into Romanticism, but he is included along with William Cowper, Robert Burns and Thomas Chatterton. Blake illustrated some of Gray's poems. The illustrations of Gray's poems are lighter than Blake's seriousness, and Blake thought that Gray depicted something new.

Gray's elegy was profoundly significant and provoked a response from Romantic poets. William Wordsworth wrote the "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads*. He responded to techniques of Thomas Gray and responded to the ideas on Elegy with his "Ode: Intimations of Immortality". In the "Preface" Wordsworth is relying on Gray's techniques of defending his intentions. Gray also influenced the language used by Wordsworth to describe his education and death of his father in *The Prelude*<sup>5</sup>. The idea of the narrator recounting his own development is similar to Gray's elegy. Similar with Gray's account, Wordsworth also describes discontent with an individual lost to his or her outward appearance. In the *Excursion*<sup>6</sup> Wordsworth described "mute" in a manner very similar to "mute inglorious Miltons" by Gray. A poem by Gray connects the muteness to the natural state people are unable to avoid, but Wordsworth disconnects nature from such a connection to the people. Wordsworth tried to overcome the muteness and give a voice which was not there before.

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<sup>5</sup> An autobiographical poem in blank verse by the English poet William Wordsworth

<sup>6</sup> A portion of poem *The Recluse* by William Wordsworth and it describes his experience of natural environment that was essential for human spirit

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Hence, Thomas Gray is important as a precursor of the Romantic Movement. His works emphasized reason and rational thought. His works marks the beginning of a trend to emphasize sentiment and emotion. His description of nature, sensitivity to emotion and its elevation of common people are important characteristics of Romanticism.

**Other Poets:** Samuel Johnson's first poem *London* was published in 1738, and it is written in a heroic couplet. It depicts the vanity and the sins of city life viewed from the perspective of a disillusioned poet. His other poem *Vanity of Human Wishes* was published in 1749. This poem is an imitation of the tenth satire of Juvenal. There is bleak pessimism in the poem. The speaker searches for all desires and wishes which ultimately come to the point of futility. He says all human desires are vain and meaningless. In every human wish there is pain and the result of desire is also the same. The ambition, wish and desire all just give suffering. All the things are meaningless and futile. This poem is very similar to the philosophy propounded by Lord Buddha. He advises everyone to follow the middle path and be merciful to every creature. Only then true happiness and peace will come.

Oliver Goldsmith' first poem *The Traveller* was published in 1764 and deals with his wanderings through Europe. The poem is a series of descriptions and criticisms of the places and people he had experienced. His other poem *The Deserted Village* was published in 1770. In this poem he deals with memories of his youth. His natural descriptions have charm and genuine feelings.

William Collins wrote *Persian Eclogues* which was published in 1742. It is written in the conventional style of Pope and deals with Persian scenes and characters. His other book *Ode* was published in 1746. This work is a collection of odes to Pity, Fear, Simplicity and other abstract subjects. In this book two short elegies "How sleep the brave" and "In yonder grave a Druid lies" are included with their echoes of melancholy.

William Cowper published his first work, a collection of a number of hymns contributed to the *Olney Hymns* in 1779. His hymns are notable for their direct sincerity. Among them most important are *Oh! For a closer walk with God; God moves in a mysterious way:* and *Hark, my soul! It is the Lord.* His "Poems" was published in 1782. It is taken up with a collection of set pieces in heroic couplets on subjects such as *Truth, Hope and Charity.* His long poem *The Task* was published in 1785. It deals with simple and familiar themes and



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contains fine descriptions of country scenes. The poem is inspired with passionate or deep feeling and observation is acute and humane.

George Crabbe is important among the poets of the eighteenth century. His main poetical works are *The Village*, *The Library* and *Tales*. They are a collection of tales and deal with lives of common country folk as he encountered in his own parish. There is a large number of natural description. Actually, he wants to state the unvarnished truth about the life of the peasant. His work was warmly considered by Wordsworth and other thinkers who had sympathy for the poor. He is a sincere, sympathetic and acute observer of nature.

Robert Burns published his *Poems* in 1786. He edited it five times during his life. His best work was entirely lyrical in motive. He gave human emotion a precious and imperishable utterance. He traverses emotions and experiences. He describes the feelings of Scottish peasants. He discovers the touch of nature. He had the passion and apathy that are the inspiration of the lyrical poet. He pays a spontaneous and beautiful tribute to the piety of the Scottish peasant.

To conclude, in the eighteenth-century poetical works of Alexander Pope and Thomas Gray were powerful and alive. With Robert Burns and Blake, Romanticism has unquestionably arrived. This great change came gradually and can be observed with precision. Poems like *London*, *The Traveller* and *Deserted Village* are rich with description and narration. In these poems we find genuine sympathy for nature and the poor. The subjects and themes were practical and reasonable. Poets attempted certain genres and looked to the ancients for inspiration. They valued elegant ease. They wrote about the present. The poet was the spokesperson for his age. Voices and emotions were public. Their use of noble tone and classical patterns gave them an audience. This period saw the blossoming of various poetic modes. The canon of eighteenth-century poetry has greatly expanded.

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