Alexander Pope, *Essay on Criticism*

(1) BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

**Alexander Pope (1688 – 1744)**
- born in London in a Catholic family
- a sickly child, both in body and spirit, found his only delight in books
- as a Catholic he was denied a privilege of education at a first-class school
- his religion made it impossible for him to enter any of the professions, while a business life was out of the question for one who was not only weak in health, but actually deformed
- his works include pastorals published in 1709 inspired by Virgil, didactic poem *The Essay on Criticism* written in 1709 and published two years later, moral essay *The Essay on Man* (1732-1734) dealing with man’s relation to the universe, and satiric poems *The Rape of the Lock*, *The Dunciad*, and *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot*.
- produced very successful translations of Homer’s *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*

(2) TEXT OF WORK

Available at [http://poetry.eserver.org/essay-on-criticism.html](http://poetry.eserver.org/essay-on-criticism.html)

(3) ANALYSIS AND COMMENTARY

**Excerpt from the book From Renaissance to Classicism by Shahab Yar Khan:**

The Essay on Criticism was written in 1709 and published in 1711. This poem was the first real evidence of Pope’s great qualities. It contains principles of literary taste and style according to the classical rules of Aristotle and others. It is divided into three sections dealing with (a) the need of studying the principles of taste and improving out judgment by studying the ancients and holding them in high esteem; (b) the causes that hinder judging correctly (for instance, the habit of looking at a part instead of at the whole); and (c) the functions of critic, and the way in which he should discharge them. On Pope’s life this poem had two immediate effects: it lead to the lasting quarrel with John Dennis, and to a brief friendship with Addison, who praised the poem.

**Excerpt from The Oxford Anthology of English Literature (vol. 1):**

This Horatian essay, Pope’s first major poem, is the culmination of those years of literary study and discussion that Pope conducted at Binfield. His choice of criticism as its subject reflects the concern with self-definition of an age that had reacted against baroque wit and sought to cultivate the urbanity of Roman (as well as modern French) models. But a more immediate concern was the social one of how writers and critics were to behave in the new open forum that replaced gentlemanly amateurism and patronage. (...) 

Pope writes in a spirit of moderation, trying to free criticism of its partiality and its animosity. He offers a generous account of the value and limits of rules and warning above all against the pride that sets self against nature, the fashionable against universal. The theme of pride, whether of the individual or the coterie, creates a pattern of imagery that underlines the poem at every point and gives it more strength than its casual surface might suggest. We see the light of heaven descending into the “glimmering light” of the individual mind, as it once did more strikingly in the “celestial fire” of ancient genius. We see the light of nature as “clear, unchanged, and universal,” opposed to the glaring, refracted light of false wit. The light of nature like that of true expression, “clears and improves” – that is, dresses to advantage – “whate’er it shines upon,” self-affecting in order to bring each object to its full realization. In contrast, the
glitter of false wit conceals the “naked nature” (or rather hopes to conceal its absence) and buries what might have been “living grace” in a tawdry display of verbal wit. Behind these images there may be traces of an implicit scheme familiar in neoplatonic thought: the light of the One descends through emanation, forming and beautifying the Many.

(4) SOURCES CITED


(5) RECOMMENDED READING
