

protocol, and justification for criticism, using polished **couplets** that have survived as proverbs that are still popular today. The lines presented in the following selection contain some of the most well-known couplets in this 600-line poem.

Pope is particularly famous for his elegant rhyming couplets, each so meticulously crafted and balanced that a complex idea comes to life in just two lines. Famous **aphorisms** or **epigrams** have arisen from these matchless couplets, and have become adopted as concise statements of principle. Some of Pope's most famous lines are:

- Hope springs eternal in the human breast.
- The proper study of mankind is man.
- 'Tis education forms the common mind,
Just as the twig is bent, the tree's inclined.
- To err is human; to forgive, divine.
- For fools rush in where angels fear to tread.
- A little learning is a dangerous thing.

Seventy years after its publication, "An Essay on Criticism" received the highest accolade from Dr. Samuel Johnson (see page 329), who asserted that if Pope had written nothing else, this poem "would have placed him among the first critics and the first poets, as it exhibits every mode of excellence that can embellish or dignify didactic composition — selection of matter, novelty of arrangement, justness of precept, splendor of illustration, and propriety of digression."

Pope begins his "An Essay on Criticism" with the following lines:

'Tis hard to say, if greater Want of Skill
Appear in Writing or in Judging ill,
But, of the two, less dang'rous is th' Offence,
To tire our Patience, than mis-lead our Sense.

The message in these lines is succinctly stated, yet (as with so much of Pope's poetry) the meaning is profound and thought-provoking. According to Pope, it is hard to know which is worse, the inability to write, or the inability to exercise good judgment in assessing literature. Of the two, however, Pope believes it is preferable to bore the reader with mediocre literary output rather than to present him or her with an inaccurate assessment of the literary work under evaluation. These four lines represent the quintessential Pope. The lines that follow, excerpted from "An Essay on Criticism," continue the tradition.

Pope's poetry can be viewed as a puzzle whose every clue guides the reader onward toward a satisfying solution. As with Shakespeare's works, the rewards for cracking the language code are numerous, ranging from a warm sense of satisfaction to a broadening of intellectual perspective.

NOTE: The capitalization and spelling in the poem reflect the usage current during Pope's time.

An Essay on Criticism

Alexander Pope

FOCUS: LITERARY CRITICISM; HEROIC COUPLETS

Of all the Causes which conspire to blind
Man's erring Judgment, and misguide the Mind,

What the weak Head with strongest Byass* rules,
Is Pride, the never-failing Vice of Fools.

Whatever Nature has in Worth deny'd,
She gives in large Recruits* of needful Pride;

For as in Bodies, thus in Souls, we find
What wants* in Blood and Spirits, swell'd with Wind;

Pride, where Wit* fails, steps in to our Defence,
And fills up all the mighty Void of Sense!

If once right Reason drives that Cloud away,
Truth breaks upon us with resistless Day;

Trust not your self; but your Defects to know,
Make use of ev'ry Friend — and ev'ry Foe.

HELPFUL DEFINITIONS

byass — bias; tendency; prejudice.
recruits — additional supply.
wants — here, lacks.
wit — wisdom.

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What powers does Pope attribute to pride?

How does this couplet cleverly insult arrogant people?

Pope refers to the rule that nature abhors a vacuum and will fill a void with air.

What would honest self-evaluation reveal?

How should one use friend and foe alike (line 14)?



What powers does Pope attribute to pride?

A. Pride confuses judgment, misdirects thought processes, and controls a weak mind.



How does this couplet cleverly insult arrogant people?

A. By intimating that pride is a poor substitute for worthier character traits and talents, Pope subtly insults those who are arrogant.



What would honest self-evaluation reveal?

A. It would reveal that self-pride is undeserved.



How should one use friend and foe alike (line 14)?

A. A person cannot honestly recognize his or her own flaws; however, both friends and enemies can identify them. One should “use” one’s friends and foes to learn about one’s own flaws.

1 Note: Students should be informed that whenever Pope uses the word *wit*, he does not mean humor. Rather, he is using it to signify wisdom.