

UNIT-2

KNOW THEN THYSELF

Alexander Pope

Structure

- 2.0 Introduction
- 2.1 Unit Objectives
- 2.2 About the Poet
- 2.3 About the Poem
- 2.4 Summary
- 2.5 Key Terms
- 2.6 Answers to Check Your Progress
- 2.7 Explanation of Important Passages
- 2.8 Questions and Exercises

2.0 Introduction

This extract is taken from *An Essay on Man* a longer poem published by Alexander Pope in 1733–1734. This poem *Essay on Man* was designed to be a part of a system of ethics which he wanted to express in poetry. On its publication, *An Essay on Man* received immense appreciation all through Europe. Great French Enlightenment writer, Voltaire called it "the most beautiful, the most useful, the most sublime didactic poem ever written in any language". In 1756 Another great French Philosopher Rousseau wrote to Voltaire admiring the poem and saying that it "softens my ills and brings me patience".

The poem generally suggests that man, with his limited capability, cannot comprehend the ways of God – therefore it is proper for him to confine himself to the study of man.

2.1 Unit Objectives

The objective of this unit/poem is to help the students in appreciating the poetic capabilities and deep insight of Alexander Pope's poetry. The students need to be well versed in understanding the finer aspects of satirical poetry of which Alexander Pope was the master.

2.2 About the Poet

Alexander Pope (1688-1744) is considered to be the most outstanding literary personality of the Neo-Classical Age. According to his biographer, John Spence, Pope was "a child of a particularly sweet temper," and with a voice so melodious as to be nicknamed the "Little Nightingale," Pope was barred from attending public school or university because of his religion, He was largely self-educated. He was well versed in French, Italian, Latin, and Greek, and read widely, discovering Homer at the age of six.

At twelve, Pope composed his earliest extant work, *Ode to Solitude*. However, in the same year he was affected by the onset of the debilitating bone deformity that plagued him until the end of his life. This

disease affected his spine and stunted his growth—Pope’s height never exceeded four and a half feet—and rendered him hunchbacked, asthmatic, frail, and prone to violent headaches. His physical appearance would make him an easy target for his many literary enemies in later years, who would refer to the poet as a “hump-backed toad.”

Pope’s *Pastorals*, which he claimed to have written at sixteen, were published in Jacob Tonson’s *Poetical Miscellanies* of 1710 and brought him swift recognition. *Essay on Criticism*, published anonymously the year after, established the heroic couplet as Pope’s principal measure and attracted the attention of Jonathan Swift and John Gay, who were Pope’s lifelong friends and collaborators. Together they formed the Scriblerus Club, a congregation of writers endeavoring to satirize ignorance and poor taste through the invented figure of Martinus Scriblerus, who would serve as a precursor to the dunces in Pope’s late masterpiece, the *Dunciad*.

In 1712 Pope wrote *The Rape of the Lock*, his best-known work and the one that brought him fame. Its mundane subject—the true account of a squabble between two prominent Catholic families over the theft of a lock of hair—is transformed by Pope into a mock-heroic send-up of classical epic poetry.

Pope in 1713 began work on his six-volume translation of Homer’s *Iliad*. He arranged for the work to be available by subscription, with a single volume being released each year for six years, a model that garnered Pope enough money to be able to live off his work alone, one of the few English poets in history to have been able to do so.

In 1719, following the death of his father, Pope moved to an estate at Twickenham, where he lived for the remainder of his life. Here he constructed his famous grotto, and went on to translate the *Odyssey*—which he brought out under the same subscription model as the *Iliad*—and to compile a heavily-criticized edition of Shakespeare, in which Pope “corrected” the Bard’s meter and made several alterations to the text, while leaving corruptions in earlier editions intact.

He wrote *Dunciad*, a vicious, four-book satire in which he lampoons the witless critics and scholars of his day, highlighting their “abuses of learning”. Reaction to the *Dunciad* from its victims and sympathizers was more hostile than that of any of his previous works; Pope reportedly never left his house without two loaded pistols in his pocket.

Pope published *Essay on Man* in 1734, and the following year a scandal broke out when an apparently unauthorized and heavily sanitized edition of Pope’s letters was released by the notoriously reprobate publisher Edmund Curll (collections of correspondence were rare during the period). Infact, these letters were edited and delivered to Curll in secret by Pope himself.

In 1738 his health began to fail. Alexander Pope died at Twickenham, surrounded by friends, on May 30, 1744. Since his death, Pope has been in a constant state of re-valuation. His high artifice, strict prosody, and, at times, the sheer cruelty of his satire were an object of derision for the Romantic poets of the nineteenth century, and it was not until the 1930s that his reputation was revived. Pope is now considered the dominant poetic voice of his century, a model of prosodic elegance, biting wit, and an enduring, demanding moral force.

2.3 About the Poem

*Know then thyself, presume not God to scan;
 The proper study of mankind is man.
 Plac'd on this isthmus of a middle state,
 A being darkly wise, and rudely great:
 With too much knowledge for the sceptic side,
 With too much weakness for the stoic's pride,
 He hangs between; in doubt to act, or rest;
 In doubt to deem himself a god, or beast;
 In doubt his mind or body to prefer;
 Born but to die, and reas'ning but to err;
 Alike in ignorance, his reason such,
 Whether he thinks too little, or too much:
 Chaos of thought and passion, all confus'd;
 Still by himself abus'd, or disabus'd;
 Created half to rise, and half to fall;
 Great lord of all things, yet a prey to all;
 Sole judge of truth, in endless error hurl'd:
 The glory, jest, and riddle of the world!*

The poem “Know then Thyself” is an extract taken from *An Essay on Man: Epistle II. An Essay on Man* (1729-34) comprises four epistles in all. One of the most celebrated works of English Literature.

In this poem, at its outset, Pope commands man to “Know then thyself,” an adage that describes his argument (1). Although he actually intends for man to better understand his place in the universe, the classical meaning of “Know thyself” is that man should look inwards for truth rather than outwards. Having spent most of the first epistle describing man’s relationship to God as well as his fellow creatures, Pope’s true meaning of the phrase is clear. He then confuses the issue by endeavoring to convince man to avoid the presumptuousness of studying God’s creation through natural science. Science has given man the tools to better understand God’s creation, but its intoxicating power has caused man to imitate God. It seems that man must look outwards to gain any understanding of his divine purpose but avoid excessive analysis of what he sees. To do so would be to assume the role of God.

2.4 Summary

The main idea of the poem is the primal adage “Know thyself”. Alexander Pope says that it is beyond the reach of human intelligence to investigate the inscrutability of God. Pope counsels man to confine

his study to mankind and not try to comprehend the ways of God. The proper study of mankind is man himself. The poet states that man's nature is full of inconsistencies. He is a mixture of contradictions. He is wise and ignorant, cultured and crude. He is darkly wise and rudely great. Always confused whether to act or to rest, man is never sure whether he is God or a beast. To make matters worse, man is caught between the opposite dictates of his body and soul. His birth is the commencement of his earthly life, which soon comes to an end. No matter how strong his logical power, he is always prone to errors of judgement. Pope further expands the idea of the dual nature of man and says that he can never free himself from the chaos of thought and passion. The paradox is, while he thinks that he is the King of the universe, he is actually a prey to many forces. Man thinks that, being a learned creature, he can act as the judge of the universe; but his judgement is so poor that he is continuously making mistakes. Pope sums up his opinion of man with the declaration that man is 'the glory, the jest and the riddle of the world'.

2.5 Key Terms

Thyself : yourself

Scan : scrutinize, examine

Isthmus : a narrow tract of land that connects two larger land bodies.

However, in this poem it refers to the fact that man is suspended between God and beast.

Darkly wise : ignorant but wise

Middle state : reference to the earth

Stoic : one who is indifferent to pain and pleasure

Hangs between : ever confused

Deem : regard or consider in a specific way

Alike : equal, similar

Chaos : disorder

Lord of all things: King of the Universe

Glory : splendour

jest : joke

riddle : puzzle

2.6 Answers to Check Your Progress

Explain the following lines:

1. Know then thyself, presume not God to scan;

The proper study of mankind is man.

Ans: These introductory lines refer to the famous Greek adage "Know thyself". Here, the poet advises man to study his own nature and not to try to understand the ways of God. The proper study of all mankind is study of his own self.

2. He hangs between; in doubt to act, or rest;

Ans: The condition of man is that he is in a state of doubt i.e. indecisiveness. Man is confused whether to act or not.

3. Chaos of thought and passion, all confus'd;

Ans: In this lines the poet highlights the complete confusion arising out of the constant conflict in his mind between contemplation and obsession.

4. Great lord of all things, yet a prey to all;

Ans: In this line the poet says that man is the great lord of all things, he has mastered all material things, yet he falls prey to these very things.

2.7 Explanation of Important Passages

Passage 1

Know then thyself, presume not God to scan;

The proper study of mankind is man.

Plac'd on this isthmus of a middle state,

A being darkly wise, and rudely great:

Reference to the Context: These lines have been taken from “ Know Then Thyself” which is an extract from Alexander Pope’s famous poem “ Essay on Man”. In this poem the poet advises man to restrict his study of mankind and not try to understand the ways of God.

Explanation: In these lines the poet says that the proper study of mankind is man himself. Man should not try to scan the ways of God. The mysteries of God are beyond the human intellect. Therefore, man should limit himself to his own study. The poet says that man is a curious paradox. He is a mixture of opposites. He is darkly wise and rudely great. He is, indeed, a great riddle.

Passage 2

With too much knowledge for the sceptic side,

With too much weakness for the stoic's pride,

He hangs between; in doubt to act, or rest;

In doubt to deem himself a god, or beast;

Reference to the Context: These lines have been taken from “ Know Then Thyself” which is an extract from Alexander Pope’s famous poem “ Essay on Man”. In this poem the poet advises man to restrict his study of mankind and not try to understand the ways of God.

Explanation: Man has a great deal of knowledge. Yet he remains in doubts. His knowledge is not perfect. He has much knowledge therefore he cannot be called a sceptic. He can't be called enlightened as he is also full of doubts. He has great power over material things. But he is a slave to his passions. He is too weak to be called a stoic. He remains in a state of uncertainty. He remains indecisive to remain in

doubt whether he should lead a life of action or one of rest. He does not know whether he should consider himself a God or a beast.

Passage 3

*In doubt his mind or body to prefer;
Born but to die, and reas'ning but to err;
Alike in ignorance, his reason such,
Whether he thinks too little, or too much:*

Reference to the Context: These lines have been taken from “ Know Then Thyself” which is an extract from Alexander Pope’s famous poem “ Essay on Man”. In this poem the poet advises man to restrict his study of mankind and not try to understand the ways of God.

Explanation: The poet says that man ever remains in a state of uncertainty. He remains in doubt whether he should prefer his mind or body. He does not know which of the two is more important. Another enigma about man is that he is born but to die. He reasons but to err. Birth and death are two extremes..logic and error are another set of extremes. But all these extremes co-exist in man. Thus man is really a riddle. he has reason yet he is ignorant. His reasoning is always imperfect.

Passage 4

*Chaos of thought and passion, all confus'd;
Still by himself abus'd, or disabus'd;
Created half to rise, and half to fall;
Great lord of all things, yet a prey to all;
Sole judge of truth, in endless error hurl'd:
The glory, jest, and riddle of the world!*

Reference to the Context: These lines have been taken from “ Know Then Thyself” which is an extract from Alexander Pope’s famous poem “ Essay on Man”. In this poem the poet advises man to restrict his study of mankind and not try to understand the ways of God.

Explanation: In these lines the poet says that man is a mere chaos of thought and passion. He remains confused all the time. He is always being abused and disabused by himself. He is a mixture of opposities. He is created half to rise and half to fall. Man is the great lord of all things. Yet he falls prey to these very things. He is the sole judge of truth on this earth. Yet his own life is a tale of endless error. Man is , indeed, a riddle. He is glory as well as jest of the world.

2.8 Questions and Exercises

1. Who is the writer of the poem “ Know Then Thyself”?

Ans: Alexander Pope.

2. According to the poet, Who is prey to all?

Ans: Man.

3. According to the poet, What is the proper study of mankind?

Ans: The study of man.

4 What should man not scan?

Ans: The ways of God.

5. In What doubt does man hang?

Ans: Whether to act or rest.

6. According to the poet, why man cannot be a stoic?

Ans: Man is too weak to be a stoic.

Answer the following questions in about 20-30 words.

1. What is a paradox? Find two instances of paradox in the poem.

Ans: The word paradox means opposite to expectations, existing belief or supposed opinion. It is a statement that appears to be self-contradictory but true. In this poem Pope calls man 'darkly wise' and 'rudely great'. Thus, man, according to the poet, is a paradox.

2. How is man stuck between an angel and an animal?

Ans: Man has both angelic as well as inhuman virtues. He has feelings of sympathy, love and compassion for others. But at times he behaves like an animal.

3. What is it that man cannot be stoic?

Ans: Man is too weak, both in mind and body. He cannot suffer pain or trouble without complaining.

4. How is man a confused being?

Ans: Man always remain a confused being because he always lives in a state of limbo. He has knowledge, yet he is ignorant. He is weak, yet proud.

5. What are the doubts that trouble man?

Ans: Throughout his life, man remains disturbed with all sorts of doubts. He remains in doubt, whether he is God or a beast, whether to act or rest? He is always doubtful whether to prefer mind or body.

6. Explain ;” The glory, jest and the riddle of the world” .

Ans: Man is glory as well as jest and riddle of the world because he is a glorious creature due to his achievements; however, he sometimes becomes a joke due to his foolish actions. These strange opposition makes him a riddle of the world.

7. What is a rhyme scheme used in the poem/

Ans: The poem has been written in heroic couplets. The poem contains nine couplets and each couplet has a different rhyme.

Answer the following questions in about 200 words each.

1. What is the central idea of the poem?

Ans: The central/main idea of the poem is based on an ancient aphorism “ Know thyself”. Throughout the poem, Pope advises man to limit his entire study to mankind and not to try to understand the

ways of God. The poet is of the opinion that man is a victim of opposites. He is both foolish and wise, great but at the same time rude, he possesses too much knowledge but remains a sceptic, though he considers himself to be a stoic but he is full of weaknesses. Man is caught between a catch 22 position, between the opposite pulls of his body and soul. Man is born with a dual nature. He can never free himself from the 'chaos of thought and passion'. The poet affirms that the proper study of mankind is man himself. Being such as he is, he must limit himself to studying his own nature.

2. Where, according to Pope, does the root of man's confusion lie?

Ans: According to Alexander Pope, man is all confused and the root of his confusion lies in the fact that he is totally ignorant about himself. He hangs between knowledge and ignorance. He acquires knowledge but is bound by passion and weakness of his body. He is torn apart by the contradictory demands of his mind and body. Moreover, he also has a confusion of identity. Whether, he is a beast or is he God? Is he divine or is he an animal? All these conflicts make him a confused creature. He is never sure about what he is. He hangs in doubt whether to act or rest.

3. What is Pope's concept of man?

Ans: Alexander Pope depicts man as a bundle of contradictions. Pope believes that man is a curious paradox. The poet has expressed his idea through various terms and expressions highlighting the duality of man. The expression, 'He hangs between' used by Pope clearly suggests the thought that man does not have a clear individuality. Man stands on the isthmus of a middle state 'between the two extreme states of being- God and beast. He is a mixture of opposites. He is sensible as well as uninformed. He is crude as well as cultured. He is 'darkly wise' and 'rudely great' i.e he is wise and living in darkness, great but at times uncivilized.

Man, according to the poet is, created half to rise and half to fall. Though, he has mastered all material things, yet he himself falls a prey to all these things. Although, man has discovered newer and newer truths about the physical world, but he failed to discover the truth about himself. Finally, the poet says that Man is, undeniably, a riddle. He is both, the glory and jest of the world.

4. How do poetic devices like paradox, repetition, etc help the poet reiterate his point of view?

Ans: Alexander Pope in his poem '*Know Then Thyself*' has exhibited both these techniques remarkably. The central idea Pope wants to convey is that proper study of mankind is man himself. He repeatedly emphasises that man doesn't know who or what he himself is, but tries to scrutinize the ways of Almighty. Pope states that man is a curious riddle. In order to support his argument the poet uses certain paradox. For example, man resorts to, "reasoning but to err", "In doubt to deem himself a god, or beast", "created half to rise, and half to fall". These devices are employed astutely by the poet to heighten the poetic effect the well.