**Title of the Unit: *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot***

**Alexander Pope**

**Unit Structure:**

* 1. Relevance of the Unit.
  2. Objectives/ Learning Outcomes
  3. Introduction- Alexander Pope: Life and Works
  4. Context of the Poem
  5. Subject Matter/ Themes and Issues
  6. Summary and Analysis
  7. Glossary
  8. Self-Assessment Questions
  9. Bibliography
  10. **Relevance of the Unit:**

For the students of English Literature, Augustan age has always been intriguing for its satires and the essence of neoclassicism emanating from it. It was so believed that during the reign of Roman emperor Augustus (27 BC-14 AD), Rome achieved the peak of its literary eminence with Horace, Ovid and Virgil. Emulating the same elegance through the writings of Pope, Swift, Steele and Addison, England under Queen Anne during the Enlightenment came to be compared to Augustan Rome. Alexander Pope is usually considered as one of the finest exponents verse satire that gained popularity and critical attention during the early years of eighteenth century in England. Among Pope’s rich oeuvre, *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot* stands out as one of the best literary representation of the spirit of the age. Therefore, this particular unit is indeed relevant within the structure of the present course because it provides a scope to be introduced to Alexander Pope’s style of writing and gives us an adequate taste of the nature and grandeur of Augustan satire through a reading and analysis of Pope’s *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot*.

**1.2. Objectives/ Learning Outcomes:**

There are multiple objectives of creating this module on Alexander Pope’s *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot.* Some of them are cited below-

1. To introduce Alexander Pope through a brief discussion on his life, work and his style of writing.
2. To provide an idea of the nature of Augustan satire and its relevance in the early eighteenth century literary scene.
3. To understand the major themes of the concerned poem, *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot* and Pope’s use of imagery.
4. To understand Pope’s personal equation with the men of letters of the time.

**1.3 Introduction- Alexander Pope: Life and Works:**

Pope’s personal life has always intrigued people during his time and afterwards. Born on 21st May, 1688 in London, during the year of the Glorious Revolution, Pope grew up in a restoration climate in a Roman Catholic family with his middle-aged parents, and that shaped his sensibilities from the very beginning. His father, a successful linen merchant in the Strand, London and his mother, the daughter of William Turner, Esquire of York, were devout Catholics, and provided Pope a Catholic upbringing.

Since childhood, Alexander Pope was a sickly child with poor health, prolonged weakness and unimpressive gait. This essentially rendered him unable to lead a normal life like other kids of his age. A further physical deformity was contributed by an attack of tuberculosis at the age of 12, causing a hunchback, stunting his growth to a height of 4 feet 6 inches. Other physical ailments like abdominal pain, high fevers, respiratory difficulties and inflamed eyes were his regular companion and it was, therefore, not surprising when Pope sighed, “that long disease, my life” and was forced to take precautionary measures. His use of fur doublet under his coarse linen shirt and putting extra effort of improving his appearance provoked Johnson to write, “When he rose, he was invested in bodices made of stiff canvas, being scarcely able to hold himself erect till they were laced, and he then put on a flannel waistcoat. One side was contracted. His legs were so slender that he enlarged their bulk with three pairs of stockings, which were drawn on and off by the maid.” Thus, being a Catholic and a person with severe disabilities, Pope was doubly alienated from the society, initially.

Furthermore, his Catholic lineage also meant, his family had to move to a small estate at Popes wood, in Binfield, Berkshire since the “Papists” were not allowed to own land within ten miles of London. The enactment of Test Acts also meant the Catholics were banned from holding public offices, voting, teaching or attending a university. This ensured, Pope’s formal education ended quite early in his life, after brief stints at two Roman Catholic Schools at London. Henceforth, Pope educated himself by reading the works of satirists like Juvenal and Horace, poets like Virgil and Homer and authors of his own nation like Chaucer, Shakespeare and Dryden. His association with important literary figures provided a perfect initiation for Pope into the London literary scene. Enjoying close contact with Wycherley, Walsh, Congreve, Garth, Granville and Trumbull, Pope soon made a name for himself relying solely on his literary output that bordered on exemplary use of wit and humour. On personal front, Pope was never married. However, he was believed to be closely attached to Lady Mary Montague and Martha Blount. Pope’s political affiliation was inclined towards Tory interest, and he usually saw himself as a Jacobite sympathizer, but dissociated himself from the cause temporarily after the failure of their rebellion in 1715.

One of the most informed authors with a blessing of a flamboyant style, Pope was always in the know of the ways of the world around him. When he was sixteen, came his first prominent literary production, a set of *Pastorals* (1709). Received well among the popular literary practitioners, Pope felt inspired enough to create his first major literary work in the form of *An Essay on Criticism* (1711). Dealing with the merits and limitations of the eighteenth century school of poetry, this work established Pope as one of the finest writers of the day. Next came the famous mock-epic written in heroic couplets, *The Rape of the Lock*, published in 1712 initially. A revised version, with the inclusion of two more Cantos and the supernatural machinery, appeared in 1714, and re-consolidated Pope’s reputation. Loaded with sharp verses, calculated use of wit and humour, this work was celebrated in spite of its primary purpose of questioning the manners of eighteenth century high society and their parties and card games. *Windsor Forest* (1713), a descriptive poem with pastoral undertones, did not match the reception that the previous work achieved.

His 1717 work, *Eloisa to Abelard*, was highly praised by critics like Hazlitt and Leslie Stephen. Pope also gained popularity for his attempt of translating *Illiad*, which received praise from Dr. Johnson, who called it “the noblest version of poetry the world has ever seen.” 1725 saw Pope publishing an edition of Shakespeare, which was duly denounced by the noted editor of Shakespeare’s works, Lewis Theobald, who later became the hero of Pope’s *The Dunciad*. Using the scope of mock-heroic poem, *The Dunciad* portrays the bad writers of the day participating in pointless and indecorous contests in order to be the successor of the empire of Dullness. Colley Cibber, a dramatist who was known for criticizing a play produced by the Scribblers, replaced Theobald in *The New Dunciad*, (1743). With a very serious attempt to “Vindicate the ways of God to Man”, came Pope’s masterpiece *An Essay on Man* and *Moral Essays* (1733-34). In 1735 came *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot*, a fine piece, usually seen as Pope’s defense of satire, which will be the premise for discussion in the present unit.

**1.4 Context of the Poem:**

Composed in 1734 and published in 1735, *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot* is a verse-satire of 419 lines of heroic couplets that employs the form of a letter, apparently written by Pope, addressed to his friend Dr. John Arbuthnot, a known physician of the time. Often considered as Pope’s “most directly autobiographical work”, Pope is known to have acknowledged it as a memorial of the friendship that he shared with Dr. Arbuthnot. It was occasioned by a letter from Dr. Arbuthnot bearing the news of his terminal illness. In response to this letter, Pope informed the doctor that he intended to address one of his epistles to him, while also pointing out the motives of writing his satires the way he did.

Dr. Arbuthnot, apart from gaining fame as an admirable writer, was also an efficient doctor, known to have treated Queen Anne and her daughter Princess Caroline, after being made the royal physician. Just like Pope, he was a Tory in politics and wrote a number of political pamphlets under his name, including *The Art of Political Lying*. He later brought out a collection of his political pamphlets under the title *The History of John Bull*. His seminal work, however, was *Essay on the Usefulness of Mathematical Learning* (1700), which helped him get elected as a fellow of the Royal Society.

Since Pope’s their first acquaintance in 1712, the doctor not only became his personal physician, but also a mentor who later collaborated with the poet on several occasions. Dr. Arbuthnot, was a prominent member of the Martinus Scriblerus Club, along with Swift, Gay and Pope, and was believed to have written the greater part of *The Memories of Martinus Scriblerus* (1741). He also collaborated in the production of *Three Hours After Marriage*, a farcical play, with Pope and Gay. Thus it was not a surprise when the persona of a prudent advisor and a patient listener was assigned to Dr. Arbuthnot in the Epistle.

The poem, as Pope confessed, was “being written piecemeal many years” which he “now made haste to put together” after the news of the doctor’s illness, and was completed by 3rd September, 1734. The poem was first published on 2nd January, 1735, eight weeks before Dr. Arbuthnot’s death, in its folio version of 24 pages, bearing the title, *An Epistle From Mr. Pope to Dr. Arbuthnot*. The same year, this poem appeared in Pope’s *Works* in its other versions. It was also included in Pope’s *Moral Essays* during his lifetime.

**1.5. Subject matter/ Themes and Issues:**

Pope’s aesthetic principles shaped the literary ethos of the time, marked by the tendency of seeking harmony and precision in writing, correctness in order and decorum, imitating the classical models such as Homer, Cicero, Virgil and Horace. The predominance of satirical form can also be attributed to Dryden at first, and then Pope, who perfected the form. Pope’s use of heroic couplet also stood out through his satires that targeted both individuals and the frivolities of the society. Therefore, the society and the literary atmosphere of the time finds true reflection in *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot*.

Epistles, as a literary device, was usually seen as a piece of writing sent to an individual or church, a letter, sent by an apostle, and entailed both informal and formal aspects. Verse-epistles originated with Horace’s *Epistles* and Ovid’s *Heroides*. Samuel Daniel’s *Letter to Lucy* can be seen as one of the earliest examples of Ovidian epistle. Johnson used the form of the epistle in his works *The Forest* and *Underwoods*. Vaughan, Congreve and Dryden were also fond of verse epistles. Dryden’s *Epistle to Congreve* became famous for its graceful style. Swift, however, was the first to use epistle for the purpose of satire in his *Drapers Letters*. Soon, Pope took the cue and used it in his *Moral Essays* (1731-35), *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot* (1735) and *Epistle to Augustus* (1737).

Primarily designed to answer those critics who tried to attack Pope’s works and his name, *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot*, carries an “Advertisement” preceding the poem where Pope declares the piece to be “Bill of Complaint” against individuals who, he felt, attacked not only his writings but also his person, morals and family. Chief among them were Lady Mary Wortley Montague and Lord Hervey, both known to have ridiculed Pope in their works. In a retaliatory effort, Pope satirizes them as Sappho and Sporus respectively in *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot.*

Through this epistle, Pope not only pays an affectionate tribute to his longtime friend Dr. Arbuthnot, but also to many writers of repute including Gay, Walsh, Congreve, Granville and Garth. Pope also lashes out at the critics and poets of his times who were bent upon maligning the reputation of men and women in their defamatory works. He also refers to Theobald and Bentley, who edited the works of Shakespeare and Milton, and did nothing significant. The poem also introduces the persona of “Atticus”, a Roman gentleman, and draws association with Addison, with whom he maintained friendly terms at one point before the relationship was strained.

*Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot* is also considered autobiographical at times, owing to the fact that it can be seen tracing the whole course and pattern of Pope’s life, the motives behind his being a poet and his choice of writing satire. The use of rhetoric is usually persuasive and displays a whole range of emotions including amusement, anger, sarcasm, contempt, mock self-pity, tenderness, gratitude, affection and hatred to name a few.

*Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot* employs satiric devices through the introduction of an adversary in the form of the persona of Dr. Arbuthnot. This persona is responsible for interrupting the speaker while also criticizing his motives, thus imparting a dramatic quality to the poem. Antithesis is also used in this poem. In the satirical portrayals of Atticus, Bufo and Sporus, Pope creates his anti-selves that would help him establish his own identity as a perfect poet and a nice man. Atticus is a man who is a great poet but also with his share of flaws, desperate for praise and never appreciates his rivals. Bufo is created to attack the tasteless patrons of arts, drawing upon the similarity of the word ‘bufo’ with the French word ‘buffoon’, meaning a puffed up fool. Sporus is a satirist who is corrupt by nature and is a scandal-monger.

*Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot* also displays a measured use of imagery that helps in generating humour. One can easily find popular animal imagery being used through the references to animals of various kind, worms, insects and bugs. Hordes of poetasters are compared to swarms of insects and a pack of mad dogs. Sporus has been called a butterfly, a bug and an insect among other things. Pope also compares the scribblers to spiders, who apparently, are mediocre poets and write hastily and carelessly to meet deadlines.

**1.6. Summary and Analysis:**

**Part 1 (lines 1-68)**

*Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot* begins with Pope asking a servant, John, to close the door, precisely because Pope is afraid that the budding poets may flock in, whom he compares to dogs, who follows him everywhere. He expresses his desire to avoid fake admirers. He goes on to talk about artists whose own skills are not adequate enough to get them appreciation. He mentions the negative aspects of being a famous literary personality and the expectations associated with the fame. He then calls Dr. Arbuthnot as “friend of my life”, whose illness he considers as a plague, just like the troublesome poets who pester Pope every day, and everywhere.

**Part 2 (lines 69-124)**

The dangers of being popular are talked about in this part. The image of Midas is used by Pope to ridicule the poetasters, hinting at their unreliability. A few poets like Colley, Harley, Bavius and others are also attacked in this part. But, at the same time, Pope also declares that he won’t let satires to be dangerous. Dr. Arbuthnot, in his persona, interrupts the poet and asks him not to use names. Pope says he is willing to be honest, and would not be called out for calling a fool as a fool. He states clearly that he is more afraid of fake friends than enemies.

**Part 3 (lines125-146)**

In this part Pope summarizes his life as a writer, while also confessing that his physical condition would not let him practice any other profession or passion. Pope actively rationalizes why he became a writer. He also mentions that he chose to continue being a poet because his friends, including Swift and Congreve enjoy his literary works. Dryden encouraged him to write poetry. Dr. Arbuthnot questions him about his decision of publishing his works. Pope mentions that it would be easier for his friends to read his poems this way.

**Part 4 (lines 147-260)**

Pope launches a scathing counterattack on those who denounced his poems. He talks about the various parameters the critics use for denouncing his poems. He feels, whatever he did, he would be attacked by these critics and tells Dr. Arbuthnot so. He introduces Addison as an opponent and mentions that, by considering himself perfect, Addison has furnished a bad example, who, otherwise, is a genius and a good writer. Lord Halifax is attacked next for his love for being flattered, which encourages the poetasters in turn.

**Part 5 (lines 261-304)**

Pope’s current attitude towards life and career as a poet is described in this part. Pope requests peace from the poetasters and mentions that he lives a normal life and prays to God regularly. He also mentions that his satires will only be feared by the liars, and others will have nothing to be afraid of. He also tries to establish a connection between intellectual and financial independence, and considers intellect as a means for earning money, citing his own example. However, he also mentions that money has attracted fools to him, while providing him independence at the same time.

**Part 6 (lines 305-333)**

Pope talks about his nature of ridiculing follies of the society and individuals, and that he considers it his duty to attack them, in order to give them a scope for rectification. He also declares that a person in possession of exceptional verbal powers must consider it his duty to rebuke impertinence. In the name of Sporus, Pope attacks Lord Hervey in this part.

**Part 7 (lines 334-419)**

In this final part, Pope attempts to sum up all his qualities and virtues that he wants Dr. Arbuthnot to believe he possesses. Pope declares that he has never been a seeker of fortune, being neither prude, nor servile. He also mentions that he attacks his enemies and critics with similar rage and has never flattered anyone for his own personal gain. He also goes on to talk about the lives his parents lived as peace loving citizens, and that he himself desires to have a similar life. He ends this part by wishing a happy and prosperous life for Dr. Arbuthnot.

**1.7. Glossary:**

**Atticus:** The Character of Atticus is framed on Addison, who shared similar interest with Pope when both were members of Martinus Scriblerus Club. Things later turned sour between the two.

**Bufo:** Bubb Dodington and Charles Montague, the Earl of Halifax, have been clubbed together to be satirized through the character of Bufo and Bubo, meaning toad and own respectively in Latin. Pope also mentions how great poets like Dryden avoids patrons like Bufo.

**Heroic-couplet:** A couple of verse lines in Iambic pentameter, extensively used by Alexander Pope in his satires.

**Imagery:** Imagery can be seen as a language employed by the poets and writes in order to create images in the mind of the reader, at times involving either or both figurative and metaphorical language.

**Poetaster:** A derogatory term used to refer to poets who were usually considered to have written poor or inferior pieces of poetry.

**Sappho:** A Greek poetess who was believed to be possessing immoral character. She apparently drowned herself to end her life for unrequited love. Lady Mary Montague has been associated with this character in *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot*, who was thought to have laughed at Pope’s advances towards her.

**Sporus:** A character in *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot*, shaped on Lord Hervey, a man of letters and the son of Earl of Bristol. Sporus, the name given to him, was a boy at the court of the Roman emperor Nero, who was overtly affectionate towards this boy.

**1.8. Self-Assessment Questions:**

1. Discuss Pope as a representative poet of his age.

2. What provoked Pope to write *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot?* Discuss in detail.

3. Comment on Pope’s presentation of satirical portraits in *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot.*

4. Analyze Pope’s use of imagery in *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot.*

5. Comment on the autobiographical elements in *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot.*

6. Comment on the following:

a) Opening section of the poem

b) Portrait of Atticus

c) Portrait of Bufo

d) Portrait of Sporus

e) Concluding part of the poem

**1.9. Bibliography**

Baines, Paul. *The Complete Critical Guide to Alexander Pope*. Routledge, 2000.

Barnard, John, editor. *Alexander Pope: The Critical Heritage*. Routledge, 2005.

Brown, Laura. *Alexander Pope*. Edited by Terry Eagleton, Basil Blackwell Publisher, 1985.

Gooneratne, Yasmine. *Alexander Pope*. Cambridge U Press, 1976.

Griffin, Dustin H. *Alexander Pope: The Poet in the Poems*. Princeton U Press, 1978.

Hammond, Brean S. *Pope*. The Harvester Press, 1986.

Mengel Jr, Elias F. “Patterns of Imagery in Pope’s Arbuthnot.” *PMLA*, vol. 69, no. 1, pp. 189-197. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/460137.

Rogers, Pat, editor. *The Cambridge Companion to Alexander Pope*. Cambridge U Press, 2007.

---. *A Political Biography of Alexander Pope*. Pickering & Chatto, 2010.

Sowerby, Robin, editor. *Alexander Pope: Selected Poetry and Prose*. Routledge, 1988.

Weinbrot, Howard D. *Alexander Pope and the Traditions of Formal Verse Satire*. Princeton U Press, 1982.