From An Essay on Criticism: A little learning is

POEM TEXT

A little learning is a dangerous thing;
Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring:
There shallow draughts intoxicate the brain,
And drinking largely sobers us again.
Fired at first sight with what the Muse imparts,
In fearless youth we tempt the heights of Arts,
While from the bounded level of our mind,
Short views we take, nor see the lengths behind,
But, more advanced, behold with strange surprise
New, distant scenes of endless science rise!
So pleased at first, the towering Alps we try,
Mount o'er the vales, and seem to tread the sky;
The eternal snows appear already past,
And the first clouds and mountains seem the last;
But those attained, we tremble to survey
The growing labours of the lengthened way,
The increasing prospect tires our wandering eyes,
Hills peep o'er hills, and Alps on Alps arise!

SUMMARY

It's dangerous to learn only a little bit about the arts (or any subject). If you don't study in depth, as though drinking deeply from the mythical fountain of knowledge, you won't really understand anything. Small sips from the fountain of knowledge go to our head, but drinking deeply returns us to thinking clearly. As adventurous young critics or artists, excited by our first inspiration from the Muse (goddess of the arts), we strive for the heights of achievement. From the limited vantage point of our own minds, we take a shortsighted view of the future and don't look back at the ground we've covered. Once our study is more advanced, we're surprised to see whole new areas of knowledge looming ahead of us! At first, we're happy to tackle these huge metaphorical mountains. We climb the valleys and seem to walk on air. We seem to have left the cold, harsh terrain behind already, and we assume that the first mists and slopes we make it past are also the last. But once we conquer them, we're shaken to see the increasing difficulty of the path stretching farther and farther ahead of us. The widening landscape exhausts us and tempts us to quit. Hills give way to hills, and mountains pile on top of mountains!

THEMES

SHALLOW LEARNING VS. DEEP UNDERSTANDING

Part of a longer poem on artistic and critical taste, "A little learning is a dangerous thing" contrasts the shallow arrogance of novice critics (or artists) with the informed humility of their more experienced counterparts. According to the poem's speaker, people who have learned only a "little" about the arts are dangerously prone to overconfidence, because they don't know how much they don't know. By contrast, people who have learned a lot are "sober[ed]" by how much they still have to learn. Extensive experience in the field is the only way to discover how vast and challenging the field is. Thus, the passage urges readers to study the arts in depth rather than superficially—and warns that serious study will humble rather than flatter them.

The speaker argues that it's "dangerous" to learn only a "little" about the arts because limited understanding breeds overconfidence and faulty judgment. The speaker warns that if readers don't "Drink deep" from "the Pierian spring"—the mythical fountain of the Muses, Greek goddesses of artistic inspiration—they won't really "taste" it at all. That is, if they content themselves with "shallow" knowledge of the arts, they'll be foolishly "intoxicate[d]" by false sophistication. Only by going deeper into the subject, as if "drinking" deeply from that intoxicating fountain, will they (paradoxically) gain a "sober[ing]" wisdom.

Switching metaphors, the speaker compares an education in the arts to mountain climbing, and young critics/artists to naive climbers who imagine they've conquered "the Alps" when the climb has barely begun. The speaker advises that, rather than assuming they know everything after learning a few things (taking just a few steps on that metaphorical climb), students of the arts should expect a long, humbling struggle.

When "fearless youth" believe they will conquer "the heights of Arts" almost immediately, the speaker warns that they're taking "Short views" (i.e., being shortsighted). As learners become more "advanced" in the field, "[n]ew, distant scenes of endless science"—of endless knowledge still to be gained—open up before them. Metaphorically, the more "mountains" we've "attained" in the arts, the more mountains appear on the horizon, daring us to conquer them.

The speaker warns that the "growing labours" of such an education can be daunting. The challenge "tires our wandering eyes," tempting people to quit and try something else. Yet while this passage doesn't actually urge students of the arts to give

up, it doesn't exactly give them a pep talk, either. It's a "sober[ing]" reality check and a fair warning against premature arrogance, applicable well beyond the arts. If a novice doesn't learn their field "deep[ly]," the speaker suggests, they may as well have learned nothing at all. In fact, they've deceived themselves, and their faulty judgement may deceive others.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-18

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

A little learning is a dangerous thing;
Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring:
There shallow draughts intoxicate the brain,
And drinking largely sobers us again.

Lines 1-4 introduce the argument that Alexander Pope will develop throughout this 18-line stanza, which is a famous (and fairly self-contained) passage from a longer poem called "An Essay on Criticism." Essentially, the passage argues that becoming an expert in the arts is hard and humbling—but necessary in order to have anything worthwhile to say as a critic.

Pope makes this argument via two extended metaphors: one spanning lines 1-4 and the other spanning the rest of the passage. The first metaphor alludes to "the Pierian spring," which, in Greek mythology, was the sacred spring of the nine Muses (goddesses of art and science). Think of it as a fountain of wisdom, or a metaphorical source of artistic knowledge and inspiration.

According to Pope, a critic (or artist) should "Drink deep" from this spring rather than settling for a quick taste:

> A little learning is a dangerous thing;
> Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring:
> There shallow draughts intoxicate the brain,
> And drinking largely sobers us again.

In other words, "we" (as critics) have to consume a lot of knowledge in order to really know anything at all. Settling for "shallow" knowledge, or "A little learning," is "dangerous" in the sense that it causes us to fool ourselves (and potentially others). It goes to our heads, "intoxicat[ing]" our "brain[s]" with the delusion that we understand more than we actually do. Only by "drinking largely"—studying the subject deeply—do we become "sober[]," or humble and realistic about the limits of our understanding.

Notice how this metaphor plays ironically on the connotations of "intoxicate" and "sober[]," words normally associated with alcohol. Unlike alcohol, Pope implies, knowledge makes us *more* sober as we consume more of it. And through sharply drawn antithesis, Pope makes clear that consuming a lot of knowledge—not "A little"—is exactly what critics should do. In fact, he hints that "Drink[ing] deep" in this way will make critics themselves "deep" rather than "shallow."

Like all of "An Essay on Criticism"—and virtually all of Pope's poetry!—these lines take the form of *heroic couplets*. In other words, they're rhymed couplets of iambic pentameter (lines that follow a five-beat, "da-DUM, da-DUM" rhythm). These first two couplets function almost as a quatrain, tracing a single complex metaphor across four memorable lines.

LINES 5-8

Fired at first sight with what the Muse imparts,
In fearless youth we tempt the heights of Arts,
While from the bounded level of our mind,
Short views we take, nor see the lengths behind,

Lines 5-8 kick off the stanza's second extended metaphor. This metaphor begins subtly, with landscape imagery that doesn't necessarily conjure up a vivid landscape:

> Fired at first sight with what the Muse imparts,
> In fearless youth we tempt the heights of Arts,
> While from the bounded level of our mind,
> Short views we take, nor see the lengths behind,

Because the language here draws on common, idiomatic phrases—*reaching the heights* of achievement, being *shortsighted* (taking "Short views"), and so on—it's easy to miss the fact that it's starting to paint a picture. According to the poet, "we" (critics and artists) get "Fired" up in our "fearless youth" by inspiration from "the Muse" (i.e., one of the Greek goddesses of artistic inspiration). We "tempt the heights of Arts"—that is, we *attempt* to reach the peak of the critic's or artist's profession. It's as if we're setting out to climb a difficult slope. But "from the bounded level," or limited vantage point, "of our mind," we can't see the true nature of the path ahead. We take "Short views"—that is, we're shortsighted about the challenges to come—and we fail to "see the lengths behind," or reflect on the ground we've already covered in our education.

In other words, Pope is comparing young critics to eager adventurers who start trekking across a landscape they don't really understand. They're "fearless," but they're naive about what they're in for.

LINES 9-10

But, more advanced, behold with strange surprise
New, distant scenes of endless science rise!

Lines 9-10, the middle lines of the stanza, mark a subtle but "surpris[ing]" shift. According to this second extended metaphor, young, inexperienced critics are like adventurers

who set off on a journey across steep terrain. Once they're more "advanced," the poet now says, they learn how challenging that terrain is:

> But, more advanced, behold with strange surprise
> New, distant scenes of endless science rise!

Here, "more advanced" might mean more advanced in years (i.e., older), as well as further along on the metaphorical journey (as a student of the arts). "Science" in this context is an old-fashioned synonym for *knowledge*; it doesn't refer specifically to what we would now call scientific knowledge (the systematic study of the natural world). Thus, the "strange surprise," for the student of the arts, is that they have so much still to learn! It's as if entire new vistas of knowledge have opened before them—"distant," demanding, and humbling.

The ending of line 10 ("rise!") sets up the nearly identical ending of line 18 ("arise!"). This later repetition will drive home the point that lines 9-10 start to make: the critic's journey is an exhausting series of repetitive challenges. As soon as one challenge is overcome, countless others appear. An education in the arts never really ends.

Both here and throughout the stanza, alliteration and consonance help make the language vivid and memorable. Notice the punchy /b/ sounds in "But" and "behold," for example, and the crisp sibilance of "strange surprise" and "scenes"/"science." Pope often uses these kinds of punchy, playful sound effects, which add to the wit and "surprise" of his language.

LINES 11-14

> *So pleased at first, the towering Alps we try,*
> *Mount o'er the vales, and seem to tread the sky;*
> *The eternal snows appear already past,*
> *And the first clouds and mountains seem the last;*

Lines 11-14 continue the extended metaphor developed in the previous lines.

In line 10, the poet described the "scenes of endless science"—new landscapes of knowledge—that "rise" in the distance once the early stages of learning are "past." Now, the poet says that this fresh challenge is "pleas[ing] at first": "we" students of the arts are eager to take on these "towering" new" Alps." (The Alps are a famous mountain range in Europe.) As we "Mount o'er the vales" (climb the valleys) and reach new heights of knowledge, we're exhilarated; we "seem to tread the sky," or walk on air (line 12).

Moreover, we assume that the worst is behind us:

> The eternal snows appear already past,
> And the first clouds and mountains seem the last;

In other words, we assume we've passed the coldest, harshest terrain—the hardest part of our education. We imagine that the "first clouds and mountains," or first serious obstacles we face, will also be the "last." Once we overcome them, we'll finally be expert critics (or artists). Of course, Pope is setting the reader up for a reality check, which arrives on cue in lines 15-18.

As usual, lively sound effects add to the playfulness of the language. Notice, for example, the alliteration in "towering Alps we try" and "seem to tread the sky," as well as the assonance in "clouds and mountains."

LINES 15-18

> *But those attained, we tremble to survey*
> *The growing labours of the lengthened way,*
> *The increasing prospect tires our wandering eyes,*
> *Hills peep o'er hills, and Alps on Alps arise!*

Lines 15-18 bring the stanza, and its second extended metaphor, to a close. The poet has been comparing an education in the arts to a trek across the mountains. Until now, this trek has sounded challenging but fun. Now, suddenly, it sounds exhausting:

> But those attained, we tremble to survey
> The growing labours of the lengthened way,
> The increasing prospect tires our wandering eyes,
> Hills peep o'er hills, and Alps on Alps arise!

That is, as soon as "we" students have "attained" (conquered) the first mountains, we're shaken to find that the path ahead of us has "lengthened." It's full of "growing labours," or escalating challenges. Our education is getting harder rather than easier; we actually feel *further* from expertise than we used to. "The increasing prospect"—that is, the widening landscape before us—"tires our wandering eyes," draining our energy and perhaps tempting us to try something else. ("Wandering eyes" are a common metaphor for distraction and temptation, usually of a sexual kind.) Rather than reaching the end of our rugged journey, we're faced with an endless series of "hills" to climb—obstacles so daunting, they seem like "Alps" piled on "Alps"!

In the end, this second extended metaphor traces the same arc as the first. According to lines 1-4, "A little learning" in the arts "intoxicate[s]" us; a lot of learning "sobers us again." According to lines 5-18, an education in the arts begins as a thrilling adventure but soon becomes a "labour[ious]" test of willpower.

SYMBOLS

THE MOUNTAINS/ALPS

The poem's "mountains," or "Alps" (as in the famous

European mountain range), are part of an extended metaphor comparing an education in the arts to a long trek over the mountains. Gaining expertise as an artist/critic is so challenging, the speaker suggests, that it feels like crossing one mountain after another only to find more peaks rising ahead of you. This metaphor plays on the traditional symbolism associated with mountains, which often represent difficult challenges or lofty achievements.

Many conventional metaphors associate overcoming obstacles with climbing mountains, or accomplishing something impressive with reaching a mountaintop (think of an idiom like "the peak of your profession"). Mountains are also traditionally linked with artistic prestige in particular: in Greek mythology, for example, Mount Parnassus (a real-life Greek mountain range) was said to be the home of the Muses.

Pope draws on all these associations here, suggesting that the obstacles one overcomes in the arts lead only to more obstacles, and the achievements one gain lead only to fresh challenges. Whatever expertise or prestige one manages to acquire, there's always some next level they haven't reached yet.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 6-18

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

This passage of "An Essay on Criticism" is packed with alliteration. In fact, the "Essay" as a whole, and Pope's work in general, uses this device frequently. Pope was known for his witty, epigrammatic style, and alliteration helps make his observations all the more crisp and memorable.

It's no accident, for example, that the famous and often-quoted first line of this passage—"A little learning is a dangerous thing"—features an alliterative phrase. That line then pairs with the second half of its rhyming couplet, which *starts* with alliteration:

> Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring:

Notice, too, how the /d/ sounds here echo the one in "dangerous" (line 1), and how the /dr/ sound echoes more faintly in the following lines ("draughts," "drinking"). All in all, these sonic repetitions make for a tightly woven, highly memorable four lines.

Once readers start noticing the alliteration in this passage, they'll realize how deliberate it is. Phrases like "strange surprise," "scenes of endless science," and "labours of the lengthened way" are clearly meant to please the ear and trip off the tongue.

In general, Pope was highly conscious of sound effects in his poetry—the "Essay on Criticism" features his famous, and alliterative, claim that "The sound must seem an echo to the sense"—and he specialized in writing lines that stick in the mind. (He's been called the most quotable author in the English language after Shakespeare!) Zingy, alliterative language is a big part of what makes his style so catchy.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "little learning," "dangerous"
- **Line 2:** "Drink deep"
- **Line 5:** "Fired," "first," "with what"
- **Line 8:** "behind"
- **Line 9:** "But," "behold," "strange surprise"
- **Line 10:** "scenes," "science"
- **Line 11:** "towering," "try"
- **Line 12:** "seem," "sky"
- **Line 15:** "tremble to"
- **Line 16:** "labours," "lengthened"

ANTITHESIS

The passage repeatedly uses antithesis, or the juxtaposition of opposites using parallel phrasing, to make its points about learning and art. This device contributes to Pope's highly logical style, both here and throughout the "Essay on Criticism." He isn't primarily telling a story or expressing personal feelings; he's making arguments, and those arguments often involve comparisons and contrasts.

And so lines 1-4, for example, make a series of contrasts between "deep" and "shallow" understanding. The poem juxtaposes "A little learning" with the idea of "Drink[ing] deep" from the fountain of learning. It contrasts taking "shallow draughts" (small sips) from that fountain with "drinking largely" (taking big gulps). It contrasts the "intoxicat[ion]" of superficial knowledge with the "sob[riety]" of deep expertise. All of these smaller antitheses help illustrate the overarching contrast.

Later, in line 8, the poem juxtaposes the "Short views" that youthful critics see ahead of them with "the lengths behind" them, which they don't "see" at all. To put this more simply: young critics don't perceive how much they still have to learn *or* look back properly on the ground they've already covered in their learning. They're shortsighted, limited by their inexperience, and overly confident as a result.

Finally, line 14 claims that, to inexperienced critics, "the first clouds and mountains" they conquer "seem the last." This is a metaphorical way of saying that young critics get way ahead of themselves. They believe the first obstacles they overcome in their education will also be the final obstacles they face. (Instead, the passage implies, there *are* no final obstacles in the arts—just endless challenges!) Here, antithesis helps illustrate

the young critics' confusion: in their naivete, they mistake one thing for its opposite.

Where Antithesis appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "A little learning is a dangerous thing; / Drink deep"
- **Lines 3-4:** "There shallow draughts intoxicate the brain, / And drinking largely sobers us again."
- **Line 8:** "Short views we take, nor see the lengths behind,"
- **Line 14:** "And the first clouds and mountains seem the last;"

IRONY

Lines 2-4 contain a witty, paradoxical-seeming irony. First, the speaker alludes to the "Pierian spring"—a mythical fountain of knowledge—and urges students of the arts to "Drink deep" from it, so that they truly experience its "taste." In other words, students should consume *lots* of knowledge rather than settling for a "little learning" (line 1). The speaker continues:

> There shallow draughts intoxicate the brain,
> And drinking largely sobers us again.

This statement is ironic because it reverses readers' expectations about (alcoholic) intoxication and sobriety. With alcohol, a few quick sips ("shallow draughts") won't "intoxicate" you, but drinking a lot ("drinking largely") will. Also, no amount of alcohol consumption "sobers us." But with the metaphorical waters of knowledge, Pope declares, it's the opposite. The less you consume, the more intoxicated you'll be; the more you consume, the soberer you'll get.

Intoxication here becomes a metaphor for giddy overconfidence. A little bit of knowledge, Pope implies, will go to your head, leaving you more intellectually disoriented than you were before. Sobriety, meanwhile, represents the humility and seriousness that come with deep learning. The more you understand about the arts (or, really, any field), the more levelheaded you'll be.

Though Pope's figurative language makes these claims seem paradoxical at first, they're not, because knowledge is, ultimately, very different than alcohol! (One is an abstract substance, the other is real; one makes people wiser, the other less inhibited, etc.)

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-4:** "Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring: / There shallow draughts intoxicate the brain, / And drinking largely sobers us again."

EXTENDED METAPHOR

The passage contains two extended metaphors, one spanning lines 1-4 and the other lines 5-18.

The first metaphor compares consuming knowledge (of the arts in particular) to drinking from the "Pierian spring." In Greek mythology, the Pierian spring was sacred to the nine Muses, goddesses of artistic inspiration, so it's basically a fountain of artistic knowledge. Whereas small sips of knowledge—a.k.a. "A little learning"—will go to your head, large gulps ("drinking largely") will steady you again. Thus, the speaker implies that knowledge has the opposite effect of alcohol, which makes people less sober and more "intoxicate[d]" the more they consume.

The second, longer metaphor compares gaining an education in the arts to trekking over mountainous terrain. In our "fearless youth," according to the speaker, "we tempt the heights of Arts"—that is, we're determined to reach the summit of artistic expertise. We don't see that far ahead ("Short views we take"), and we barely notice how far we've gone at first ("nor see the lengths behind"). But as "we" students of the arts become "more advanced," we're "surprise[d]" to see more and more challenging terrain opening out ahead of us. Still determined, we reach a point where we feel like we're on top of the world, "tread[ing the sky"—but then more and more "hills" and "Alps" appear in the distance, daring us to conquer them!

In other words, this second metaphor suggests that an education in the arts is both humbling and exhausting. The challenge begins to feel like endless mountain climbing—a "labour[ious]" journey that "tires our wandering eyes" and tempts us to give up.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Lines 5-18

REPETITION

The passage repeats several key words as a way of emphasizing its main points.

For example, the root word "drink" repeats in the phrases "Drink deep" and "drinking largely" (lines 2 and 4), both of which metaphorically refer to consuming knowledge in large quantities (this repetition of a root word is known as polysyndeton). That's what these lines are urging the reader to do, of course—Pope is basically saying, "Learn as much as you can"—so the repetition helps get the message across loud and clear.

Later, the poem repeats "Alps" (lines 11 and 18) and "Hills" (line 18), and also uses the closely related words "heights" and "mountains" (line 6, line 14). These verbal repetitions mirror the visual imagery the poet is using (as part of an extended

metaphor about learning). Getting an education in the arts, the passage claims, is like journeying over an endless series of challenging mountains (the Alps are a famous European mountain range). Accordingly, the "mountain" words seem to pile up one right after the other, like "Alps on Alps"!

Two variations of the word "length" appear as well—"lengths" and "lengthened" in lines 8 and 16—as if to stress the punishing duration of this journey. Finally, the similar endings of lines 10 and 18 ("rise!" and "arise!") drive home how *circular* the journey seems. As soon as "we" overcome one obstacle, countless others appear.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Drink"
- **Line 4:** "drinking"
- **Line 8:** "lengths"
- **Line 10:** "rise!"
- **Line 11:** "Alps"
- **Line 16:** "lengthened"
- **Line 18:** "Hills," "hills," "Alps," "Alps," "arise!"

VOCABULARY

A little learning (Line 1) - A superficial or beginner's understanding of a subject (in other words, *only* a little learning).

Pierian spring (Line 2) - The Pierian Spring of Macedonia, fabled in ancient Greek mythology as the sacred fountain of the nine Muses (goddesses of art, literature, and science). According to myth, the spring was the source of knowledge and inspiration. Here, the allusion is part of a metaphor suggesting that "Deep" knowledge of the arts is the only kind worth having.

Draughts (Line 3) - Sips or gulps (of liquid).

Intoxicate (Line 3) - To make drunk or lightheaded; to confuse the senses.

Largely (Line 4) - An apparent pun, meaning both "in large amounts" (as in "drinking large amounts") and "for the most part" (as in "sobers us again for the most part").

Sobers (Line 4) - Disintoxicates; returns to a state of sobriety or seriousness.

Fired (Line 5) - Fired up; excited.

The Muse (Line 5) - One of nine ancient Greek goddesses of literature, art, and science. In other words, a source of inspiration, especially poetic inspiration.

Imparts (Line 5) - Communicates or teaches.

Tempt (Line 6) - Here meaning *attempt*, as in "attempt to climb the heights."

Bounded level (Line 7) - Limited vantage point. (Here, part of an extended metaphor comparing learning to mountain climbing; "level" suggests a particular *ground level*, and "bounded" suggests *enclosed* or *limited in perspective*.)

Short views (Line 8) - Shortsighted perspectives or attitudes.

Science (Line 10) - Here, a general term for knowledge.

Alps (Line 11, Line 18) - A famous European mountain range stretching from France to Slovenia. Here, part of a metaphor for the "heights" (highest levels) of knowledge in the arts.

Mount (Line 12) - Climb (like a mountain climber).

O'er (Line 12) - An old-fashioned contraction of "over."

Vales (Line 12) - Valleys. (Again, part of an extended metaphor comparing learning to mountain climbing/hiking.)

Tread (Line 12) - Walk on.

Attained (Line 15) - Reached (in the sense of reaching a summit or goal).

Survey (Line 15) - Assess or look over; behold.

The lengthened way (Line 16) - The path that has seemingly gotten longer.

Prospect (Line 17) - Outlook (over a landscape); vista.In the context of the extended metaphor, the speaker is suggesting that as you learn more about the arts, the path toward expertise seems to lengthen and the amount of ground you need to cover seems to expand.

Peep (Line 18) - Peer; crane to see. (Metaphorically, the larger hills rise over smaller ones as if to see beyond them.)

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"An Essay on Criticism," from which this single stanza is excerpted, consists entirely of rhyming couplets. The poem is also written in iambic pentameter (i.e., it consists of five-beat lines that generally follow a da-DUM, da-DUM rhythm). Rhyming iambic pentameter couplets are known as *heroic couplets*, since this form was associated, early in the English-language tradition, with epic and narrative poetry.

Pope turned to heroic couplets in virtually all of his poems. For the most part, he used this crisp, sprightly form to satirical or witty effect. (Though he also, for example, translated Homer's *Iliad* into the same form—and that's an epic without much comedy in it!) The two halves of a Pope couplet will often work together as a kind of setup and punchline. Here, for example, readers can see that effect in lines 3-4:

> There shallow draughts intoxicate the brain,
> And drinking largely sobers us again.

This rhyme pair creates a concise, witty paradox: "drinking" only a little "learning" will make you drunk, but drinking a lot will make you "sober[]." (In other words, a little bit of education in the arts will go to your head; an extensive education will humble you.)

Pope's couplets are evocative in other ways, too. As they pile up in the long sentence spanning lines 11-18, they mimic the metaphorical mountains that seem to pile one on top of another ("Alps on Alps arise!").

METER

All of "An Essay on Criticism," including this excerpt, is written in iambic pentameter. In other words, the poem's lines typically contain five *iambs* (metrical feet, or units, that consist of an unstressed followed by a stressed syllable). The typical line's rhythm sounds like "da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM"—though, like most metrical poems, this one contains occasional variations.

These variations can be quite expressive. In fact, it's in this same poem that Pope famously says of poetry: "The sound must seem an echo to the sense." In other words, sound and meaning should go hand in hand—ideally, for example, a line about smooth waters should flow smoothly, while a line about rough waters should sound choppy and rough.

Readers can hear an example of this kind of expressive variation in lines 11-12:

> So pleased | at first, | the tow- | ering Alps | we try,
> Mount o'er | the vales, | and seem | to tread | the sky;

Line 11 flows according to the standard iambic pentameter pattern (for metrical purposes, "towering" counts as two syllables here: TOW-ring). Line 12, however, begins with a trochaic foot (stressed-unstressed) rather than an iambic foot (unstressed-stressed). The variation makes the line briefly seem to struggle a bit—like someone "Mount[ing]" (climbing) the slopes of mountain "vales" (valleys). But by the end of the line, which describes a feeling of walking on air ("tread[ing] the sky"), the meter is smooth again. The rhythm matches the imagery; the sound echoes the sense.

RHYME SCHEME

All of Pope's "Essay on Criticism," including the passage excerpted here, consists of rhyming couplets. Thus, the rhyme scheme of the passage is AABBCCDDEEFFGGHHII.

Rhymed couplets written in iambic pentameter (as these are) are also known as *heroic couplets*. The name comes from their traditional association with epics and other narrative poetry. (See Form and Meter sections for more context.)

However, Pope used heroic couplets for many purposes throughout his career, including mock-epic poetry, verse epistles (letters in the form of poems), and verse "essays" like this one. The crisp, consistent rhyme pairs allowed him to flex his wit to the maximum, with the first line in a pair often serving as a kind of setup and the second as a punchline.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "An Essay on Criticism" is anonymous; readers never learn this person's gender, age, etc. That said, it's fair to read the speaker as the author himself. Alexander Pope was an opinionated, sharp-tongued poet and critic, and the distinctive voice of his poems captures his prickly public persona. While the "A little learning" passage applies to the "Arts" in general, the "Essay" as a whole also comments more specifically on the literary scene of Pope's day and reflects the critical tastes and beliefs that Pope upheld elsewhere in his writing.

In this passage, the speaker adopts a voice of experience and wisdom, comparing the illusions of "fearless youth" with the "more advanced" perceptions of older critics. By the final lines, the speaker sounds downright world-weary, warning young critics that the "growing labours" of study in the arts may "tire[]" them out.

Interestingly, however, Pope himself was only 23 when he published the poem! He was very much in the early stages of his own career (in fact, the "Essay" helped make his name). As a young writer, he may have been exaggerating his own maturity somewhat in hopes of establishing greater critical authority.

SETTING

The "Essay on Criticism" has no defined setting; it's a set of instructions delivered from speaker to reader. This passage does allude to "the Pierian spring" (the sacred fountain of the Muses in Greek mythology) and describe a landscape that includes "the towering Alps." These place descriptions aren't the poem's physical setting, however; they're part of extended metaphors for consuming and acquiring knowledge.

Because the second metaphor extends over so many lines (lines 6-18), the landscape it describes starts to *seem* detailed and real. It follows the young knowledge-seeker's journey through a series of challenges, which the speaker compares to "snows," "hills," "mountains," and so on. It even describes the fatigue of reaching one peak only to find endless "Alps" ahead. Again, though, this is all a figurative way of describing a progression from ignorance to (relative) understanding.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Published when the author was just 23, "An Essay on Criticism" (1711) was one of the poems that made Alexander Pope's

name. It's a *didactic* poem, meaning a poem of instruction (usually with a moralistic flavor), and it's addressed to critics of the arts, especially poetry. As it preaches what Pope considered good critical taste in poetry, it often seems to advise poets themselves. Take this famous passage, for instance:

> True ease in writing comes from art, not chance,
> As those move easiest who have learn'd to dance.
> 'Tis not enough no harshness gives offence,
> The sound must seem an echo to the sense.

In schooling fellow critics on the art of poetry and rhetoric, Pope was partly emulating a few big-name authors from ancient Rome, including the rhetorician Quintilian and the poet Horace (author of *Ars Poetica*, a treatise on the art of poetry). Pope's "Essay" name-checks these famous models, and other authors as well.

The "Essay on Criticism" attracted both acclaim and controversy in English literary circles. Its critical opinions remained highly influential throughout the 18th century, during which Pope became the preeminent poet of what is now called the Augustan period. Other notable writers of this period included Pope's friend and fellow satirist Jonathan Swift (author of the novel *Gulliver's Travels*) and the critic Samuel Johnson, an admirer of Pope's poems and translations.

Today, the "Essay" remains most famous for its epigrammatic one-liners, several of which have become idioms—including "To err is human; to forgive, divine" and, of course, "A little learning is a dangerous thing." Pope wrote other verse "essays" as well, including the "Essay on Man," which contemplates the relationship between humankind and God.

As described by Pope, the "Alps" (lines 11, 18) are a metaphor for the intellectual challenges facing critics. The actual Alps later became an important setting in many of the poems of the British Romantics (late 18th-early 19th century), including Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Mont Blanc" (published 1817) and William Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (published 1850).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Alexander Pope is considered the major poet of the Augustan period, the era of English literature that spanned roughly the first half of the 1700s. This period was named after the Augustan Age of ancient Rome, which lasted from about 43 BCE to 18 AD. As *Britannica* notes, the Roman period "reached its highest literary expression in poetry, a polished and sophisticated verse generally addressed to a patron or to the emperor Augustus and dealing with themes of patriotism, love, and nature."

Parts of this description could also apply to the English Augustan period, whose major poets explicitly modeled some of their styles, subjects, and attitudes on the "classical" poets of ancient Rome. For example, Pope's "Essay on Criticism" alludes to, and models some of its specific advice on, the *Ars Poetica* of Horace, arguably the greatest poet of the Roman Augustan Age. Pope addressed some poetry to aristocratic patrons, too; for example, his "Epistle to Burlington" (one of his *Moral Essays* in verse) is addressed to his patron Richard Boyle, 3rd Earl of Burlington. Finally, the English Augustan poets, like their Roman predecessors, strove for a highly sophisticated style; Pope's poems are noted for their elegance, cleverness, and biting wit.

In the first half of the 18th century, Great Britain was consolidating and expanding its empire, both within the British Isles and around the world. It was becoming arguably the most powerful force on the geopolitical stage, much as the Roman Empire had been in antiquity (at least in its part of the globe: Europe, northern Africa, and the Middle East). It's no accident, then, that the culture of the English Augustan Age often looked back to ancient Rome for inspiration. In many ways, the British Empire saw itself as the imperial heir to Rome's legacy.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Aloud — Listen to an audiobook of Pope's "Essay on Criticism" (the "A little learning" passage starts at 12:57). (https://youtu.be/rB1rrbKZUKA?t=776)
- The Poet's Life — Read a biography of Alexander Pope at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/alexander-pope)
- "Alexander Pope: Rediscovering a Genius" — Watch a BBC documentary on Alexander Pope. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vkjDXbcEbCA)
- More on Pope's Life — A summary of Pope's life and work at Poets.org. (https://poets.org/poet/alexander-pope)
- Pope at the British Library — More resources and articles on the poet. (https://www.bl.uk/people/alexander-pope)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ALEXANDER POPE POEMS

- Ode on Solitude

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Allen, Austin. "*From An Essay on Criticism: A little learning is a dangerous thing.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 29 Apr 2022. Web. 5 May 2022.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Allen, Austin. "*From An Essay on Criticism: A little learning is a dangerous thing.*" LitCharts LLC, April 29, 2022. Retrieved May 5, 2022. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/alexander-pope/from-an-essay-on-criticism-a-little-learning-is-a-dangerous-thing.