Ode on Solitude

POEM TEXT

Happy the man, whose wish and care
A few paternal acres bound,
Content to breathe his native air,
In his own ground.

Whose herds with milk, whose fields with bread,
Whose flocks supply him with attire,
Whose trees in summer yield him shade,
In winter fire.

Blest, who can unconcernedly find
Hours, days, and years slide soft away,
In health of body, peace of mind,
Quiet by day,

Sound sleep by night; study and ease,
Together mixed; sweet recreation;
And innocence, which most does please,
With meditation.

Thus let me live, unseen, unknown;
Thus unlamented let me die;
Steal from the world, and not a stone
Tell where I lie.

SUMMARY

Fortunate is the person whose desires and concerns are limited to his inherited plot of land, and who is satisfied to breathe the air where he was born, on his own bit of earth.

Whose cows provide him with milk, his crops with food, his sheep with clothing, and whose trees in the summer offer him shade and in the winter provide wood for fire.

Blessed is he who, without worry, sees hours, days, and years slipping gently by; who is physically healthy and whose mind is at ease; who is quiet during the day.

And who is deep asleep at night; whose life consists of a mixture of hard work and relaxation, of pleasant leisure, of purity (which makes most people happy), and of deep thought.

That's how I'd like to live: out of sight, no one knowing me. Do not mourn me when I die; let me slip away, and leave no headstone to mark my grave.

THEMES

SOLITUDE, SIMPLICITY, AND SELF-SUFFICIENCY

"Ode on Solitude" celebrates the beauty of living simply and alone. The speaker argues that a solitary yet self-sufficient person is a happy one: people don't really need that much in order to be content with their lives—just a little bit of peace and quiet, physical and mental health, and a good mix of work and play. Being seen and "known," the speaker implies, simply complicates life. Overall, the poem suggests that people are better off leading simple, self-contained lives rather than worrying about what others think.

The speaker thinks it doesn't take a whole lot for a person to lead a good, happy life: the person who has "Hours, days, and years" of physical "health" and mental "peace" is lucky indeed. After all, the only things people really need in order to be happy are "quiet" untroubled "sleep" and the ability to balance leisure with hard work and introspection. In other words, the speaker suggests that happiness doesn't come from other people; it comes from being able to take care of oneself.

According to the speaker, being seen and known by others is just a burden that gets in the way of this peace and happiness. The speaker thus prefers to live life "unseen [and] unknown" and hopes to die "unlamented" (that is, he doesn't want to be mourned). For the speaker, life is better this way; the speaker can't be disrupted by other people's feelings if they don't know that he exists!

Being solitary also gives the speaker the freedom to live life according to his own "wish[es] and care[s]." When a person isn't worrying about what others think, the poem implies, they are able to focus on their own happiness.

The poem ultimately suggests that people are most content when they learn to rely on themselves instead of others. The speaker says that a person whose life is more or less contained within "a few [...] acres" of their "own ground" is more likely to be happy. In other words, people are better off focusing on their own surroundings and not worrying about what others have. Finally, the speaker applauds the person "Whose herds" provide "milk" and "whose trees in summer yield him shade, / In winter fire." This metaphor suggests that by learning to be reliant only on oneself, a person is more likely to live a happy, peaceful life.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-20

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

Happy the man, whose wish and care
A few paternal acres bound,
Content to breathe his native air,
In his own ground.

This poem begins with a confident declaration of what makes a person "happy" (that is, both contented and fortunate). Happiness, in this speaker's mind, isn't anything to do with dazzling dreams of acclaim, brilliance, or wealth. Rather, it's about living a humble, wholesome life on "a few paternal acres."

Those "paternal" acres might suggest that the speaker is talking about inherited land, passed down from father to son. But he might also be saying the land itself has a paternal quality, that it looks after the person who lives on it.

Either way, the speaker is essentially saying that people don't need a lot to live a happy life. Instead, a happy man should be "Content to breathe his native air / In his own ground." In other words, this speaker agrees with Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*: one finds happiness in one's own backyard.

The first lines of the poem are enjambed:

Happy the man, whose wish and care
A few paternal acres bound,

Enjambment launches the reader forward to the (perhaps surprising) idea that happiness comes from a humble life. But this momentum is short-lived: the rest of the stanza (and the vast majority of the lines that follow) are end-stopped. The end-stopped lines reflect the speaker's ideal of a quiet, self-contained life: he sees no point in rushing from place to place, but is rather content to stay where he is and meditate on the virtues of solitude.

LINES 5-8

Whose herds with milk, whose fields with bread,
Whose flocks supply him with attire,
Whose trees in summer yield him shade,
In winter fire.

In the second stanza, the speaker describes what a life "bound" to "a few paternal acres" looks like. He says that a person living such a life has "herds" and "flocks" of livestock to provide him with food and clothing. His fields give him bread, and the trees that grow on his property offer shelter in the summer and kindling in the winter. In other words, he is utterly self-sufficient; he needs nothing from the outside world.

Anaphora on the word "Whose" organizes the speaker's images so that they all clearly refer back to the hypothetical "happy man" the speaker is describing. And parallelism shows that all of these "herds" and "fields" work together in harmony: everything in this self-sufficient man's life is in perfect natural balance. These repeated structures also give the poem a pleasing, easy rhythm that reflects the speaker's idealization of rural life.

These lines also draw attention to the natural cycle of the seasons. Readers might even interpret "summer" and "winter" figuratively here: like trees "yield[ing] shade" when it's sunny and providing warmth when it's cold, a pastoral setting shelters this person from the harshness of living alongside other people while also providing inspiration and sustenance.

LINES 9-10

Blest, who can unconcernedly find
Hours, days, and years slide soft away,

The speaker says that the person who can "unconcernedly" let "Hours, days, and years slide soft away" is blessed indeed. Where city life is broken up by a string of social engagements and the need to curry favor with others, rural life, it seems, has a smoother texture. The speaker imagines life passing gracefully and peacefully, every day looking more or less like the one before it.

Sibilance echoes this feeling; the soft, smooth /s/ sounds ("Blest," unconcernedly," "slide," "soft") evoke tranquility.

While the poem is generally written in iambs (metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm), this stanza's first lines do something a little different:

Blest, who | can un- | concerned- | ly find
Hours, days | and years | slide soft | away

(Note that, in this poem, the word "unconcernedly" should be pronounced "un-con-CERN'D-ly," with four syllables instead of five.)

This line starts, not with an iamb, but a trochee, its opposite: a foot with a DUM-da rhythm. That extra stress at the beginning of the line makes the word "Blest" land with extra force. Then, the next line begins with a stately spondee, a foot with a DUM-DUM rhythm. Those two strong stresses give the "hours" and "days" their own unrushed pocket of time, mirroring the gentle pace of the speaker's ideal life.

LINES 11-16

In health of body, peace of mind,
Quiet by day,
Sound sleep by night; study and ease,
Together mixed; sweet recreation;
And innocence, which most does please,
With meditation.

A peaceful life, the speaker continues, comes from having "health of body" and "peace of mind." Parallelism suggests that

these two kinds of health—physical and mental—are equally important, while also helping the poem's rhythm to feel as balanced and predictable as the life the speaker describes.

The speaker adds that a person needs "Quiet by day" and "Sound sleep by night"—but also "sweet recreation," times of fun. The speaker, it seems, is very interested in balance. Indeed, he goes on to say that "study and ease" should be "mixed [together]." In other words, too much of any one thing is disruptive. In order to achieve a peaceful, happy life, one has to figure out how to balance all these different elements—a task, the poem implies, best carried out in "solitude."

Lines 11-14 also create a stately, balanced rhythm through caesura. Strong commas and semicolons in the middle of lines slow the poem down, encouraging the reader to stop and think about each of these elements of a life well-lived.

And listen to the assonance here:

> Sound sleep by night; study and ease,
> Together mixed; sweet recreation;

All those long, sweet /ee/ sounds make the life the speaker imagines sound both delicious and musical. This "happy man" isn't just living a life of sober virtue: he's finding a moderate, well-ordered path to delight.

The speaker's desire for moderation, order, and delight also turns up in his admonition that "innocence"—that is, a simple, pure, unspoiled attitude—"most does please, / With meditation." In other words, the ideal "happy man" needs both an uncorrupted frame of mind and the capacity to think deeply. Innocence on its own is "pleas[ing]" enough, but it really blossoms alongside long periods of reflection. Again, balance is all!

LINES 17-20

> *Thus let me live, unseen, unknown;*
> *Thus unlamented let me die;*
> *Steal from the world, and not a stone*
> *Tell where I lie.*

The speaker concludes the poem by saying that he'd like to live exactly the kind of simple, solitary, and self-sufficient life he's just described. He'd be delighted to live out his days "unseen" and "unknown: he doesn't need the recognition of others to feel happy, and he's content to die "unlamented"—that is, he doesn't feel the need to be mourned.

In this speaker's view, solitude clearly isn't just about living modestly on one's own. It's about humility—freedom from pride or arrogance. The speaker doesn't need to feel like the most important person in the world; he doesn't care about making an impression or being remembered. In fact, when he dies, he'd just as soon "Steal from the world"—that is, creep away quietly, without drawing attention to himself. In the end, he doesn't even want a headstone to mark his grave; he prefers the freedom of anonymity.

Listen to the anaphora and alliteration he uses to describe his imagined death—the death that would follow his well-lived, balanced life of "study and ease":

> Thus let me live, unseen, unknown;
> Thus unlamented let me die;
> Steal from the world, and not a stone
> Tell where I lie.

All these rhythmic repetitions give the speaker's voice its tone of quiet conviction—and a musicality that once again suggests a humble, solitary life wouldn't just be virtuous, but sweet.

A pity, then, that the author of this poem—the 12-year-old Alexander Pope—would grow up to become the toast of the 18th-century English literary scene, and one of the most quoted wits in the English language. Readers can hope he wasn't too disappointed.

POETIC DEVICES

CONSONANCE

Consonance elevates the poem's language, giving it some meaningful music.

For instance, listen to the gentle repeating sounds in the first stanza:

> Happy the man, whose wish and care
> A few paternal acres bound,
> Content to breathe his native air,
> In his own ground.

Here, a subtle /r/ connects those "paternal acres," creating a fitting feeling of stability and continuity. And the unobtrusive /n/ and tapping /t/ consonance that threads these lines feels quiet and humble as this "happy" man's life.

Sibilance does similar work in the third stanza:

> Blest, who can unconcernedly find
> Hours, days, and years slide soft away,

All those gentle /s/ sounds feel whispery, peaceful, and smooth as the time that "slide[s] soft" away.

But perhaps the most notable passage of consonance (and alliteration!) appears in the final stanza:

> Thus let me live, unseen, unknown;
> Thus unlamented let me die;
> Steal from the world, and not a stone

Tell where I lie.

Here, restrained /l/ sounds suggest the kind of quiet life the speaker dreams of living, as well as the "unlamented" death he imagines for himself. And tip-of-the-tongue /t/ sounds evoke an image of the speaker tip-toeing from this world, trying not to be noticed on his way out.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "paternal acres"
- **Line 3:** "Content to," "native"
- **Line 5:** "fields"
- **Line 6:** "flocks," "supply"
- **Line 9:** "Blest," "unconcernedly"
- **Line 10:** "slide soft"
- **Line 13:** "Sound sleep," "study"
- **Line 14:** "mixed," "sweet"
- **Line 15:** "innocence," "most"
- **Line 16:** "meditation"
- **Line 17:** "let," "live"
- **Line 18:** "unlamented let"
- **Line 19:** "Steal," "world," "stone"
- **Line 20:** "Tell," "lie"

ASSONANCE

Assonance, like consonance, gives the poem music, meaning, and rhythm.

In the poem's second stanza, for instance, pairs of assonance help to underscore the poem's theme of a humble, balanced life:

> Whose flocks supply him with attire,
> Whose trees in summer yield him shade,
> In winter fire.

These matching sounds suggest how well-matched this man is with his way of being.

And listen to the assonance in lines 13-14:

> Sound sleep by night; study and ease,
> Together mixed; sweet recreation;

Those long /ee/ sounds feel as "sweet" as the gentle, restful life they describe.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "supply," "attire"
- **Line 7:** "trees," "yield"
- **Line 8:** "In," "winter"
- **Line 13:** "sleep," "ease"
- **Line 14:** "sweet"
- **Line 15:** "please"
- **Line 17:** "Thus," "unseen," "unknown"
- **Line 18:** "Thus," "unlamented"
- **Line 20:** "I lie"

ALLITERATION

Like consonance and assonance, alliteration gives the poem music and meaning.

For instance, take a look at the alliteration in the final stanza:

> Thus let me live, unseen, unknown;
> Thus unlamented let me die;
> Steal from the world, and not a stone
> Tell where I lie.

First, that repeated /un/ draws emphatic attention to the things the speaker *doesn't* value: note how much less powerful these lines would have sounded if the poet had written "Thus let me live out of sight, concealed, / Thus unmourned let me die." Then, the quiet /st/ sounds of "steal" and "stone" evoke the speaker's vision of slipping away from the world unnoticed, as if on tiptoe.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Happy," "whose"
- **Line 5:** "Whose," "herds," "fields"
- **Line 6:** "flocks"
- **Line 10:** "slide," "soft"
- **Line 13:** "Sound," "sleep," "study"
- **Line 15:** "most"
- **Line 16:** "meditation"
- **Line 17:** "unseen," "unknown"
- **Line 18:** "unlamented"
- **Line 19:** "Steal," "stone"

CAESURA

Caesura paces the poem, slowing lines down to emphasize words or ideas.

For instance, take a look at the poem's first caesura:

> Happy the man, || whose wish and care

Grammatically speaking, the comma after "man" isn't necessary. Its only purpose, it seems, is to slow the reader down just a notch, giving them time to reflect on what a "happy man" might be like before the speaker goes on to introduce his own ideas on the matter (and perhaps to surprise those readers who expect to hear that happiness and good fortune are found in love or achievement).

Later on, caesura again offers the reader a chance to slow

down. Consider stanza four:

> Sound sleep by night; || study and ease,
> Together mixed; || sweet recreation;
> And innocence, || which most does please,
> With meditation.

These caesurae (especially those solid semicolons) separate out all these elements of a happy life into their own pockets of space, giving the reader room to consider them one by one. This creates a slow, steady pace, and evokes the life the speaker values: the reader can *hear* and *feel* the speaker's ideal balance in the rhythm itself.

Caesurae thus help the reader, not just to take in the speaker's ideas about a perfect life of solitude, but to get a taste of that life's gentle, harmonious ease.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "man, whose"
- **Line 5:** "milk, whose"
- **Line 10:** "Hours, days, and"
- **Line 11:** "body, peace"
- **Line 13:** "night; study"
- **Line 14:** "mixed; sweet"
- **Line 15:** "innocence, whic"
- **Line 17:** "live, unseen, unknown"
- **Line 19:** "world, and"

ANAPHORA

The poem uses anaphora to structure its thought and to create a steady, gentle rhythm.

In the first line of the poem, for example, the speaker describes a man "whose wish and care / A few paternal acres bound": a guy who's perfectly contented to live out his life on his own little plot of land. The speaker goes on to describe this man's simple lifestyle in lines 6-8:

> Whose herds with milk, whose fields with bread,
> Whose flocks supply him with attire,
> Whose trees in summer yield him shade,
> In winter fire.

The repetition of "Whose" allows the speaker to move quickly between images without the speaker losing the connection between these images and the "Happy [] man" at the beginning of the poem. The repetition also *sounds* nice, giving the poem a steady rhythm—just like the seasonal rhythms of this man's life.

Similarly, in lines 17-18, anaphora sets up a parallel between the idea of living "unseen" and "unknown" and dying "unlamented":

> Thus let me live, unseen, unknown;
> Thus unlamented let me die;

That repetition underscores the speaker's conviction that it's best to live a humble, modest life—just the kind of life he's been describing. In fact, the emphatic anaphora here makes the speaker sound curiously passionate about the idea of living quietly!

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "Whose," "whose"
- **Line 6:** "Whose"
- **Line 7:** "Whose"
- **Line 17:** "Thus"
- **Line 18:** "Thus"

ENJAMBMENT

The vast majority of the lines in this poem are end-stopped, giving the verse a measured and meditative flow. But a few enjambed lines add spice and surprise.

Take the first line, for example:

> Happy the man, whose wish and care
> A few paternal acres bound,

In this case, enjambment works with caesura to pace the poem. First, a caesura slows readers down—and then enjambment propels them past the end of the line. This pacing subtly introduces the poem's argument:

- First, readers learn they're about to hear what makes a "happy" man;
- Then, all at once, they learn that, in this speaker's opinion, a fortunate, contented guy isn't one who's rich or famous or brilliant, but one who's happy with a modest and solitary life.

That first enjambment thus creates a little pop of surprise.

Enjambment similarly undermines readers' expectations in lines 9-10:

> Blest, who can unconcernedly find
> Hours, days, and years slide soft away,

By breaking up the verb ("find") and the object ("Hours, days, and years"), the speaker gives readers a chance to first imagine what *they* think might make a person feel blessed, and to contrast their own idea of good fortune with the speaker's.

The poem's final clause is enjambed across lines 19-20: "and not a stone / Tell where I lie." This final enjambment means readers hang for a moment on the finality of the word "stone"

before they're propelled on to the poem's firm conclusion that dying in anonymity isn't just okay, but desirable.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "care / A"
- **Lines 9-10:** "find / Hours"
- **Lines 19-20:** "stone / Tell"

ASYNDETON

Asyndeton gives the poem drama and atmosphere.

For instance, take a look at lines 7-8:

> Whose trees in summer yield him shade,
> In winter fire.

The lack of a conjunction between the two clauses here makes that last line feel striking. Consider if the poet had instead chosen to write "Whose trees in summer yield him shade, / and in winter, fire." This would be more grammatically precise, but less evocative: the simplicity of the words "in winter fire" conjures up the fortunate man's natural, easy, instinctive relationship with his land. It also draws attention to the way this man's trees provide for him equally well in all seasons, making these lines' meaningful parallelism stand out clearly.

Asyndeton also plays an evocative part in lines 11-13:

> In health of body, peace of mind,
> Quiet by day,
>
> Sound sleep by night; study and ease,

By omitting a coordinating conjunction here, the speaker makes this list feels less like a list and more like a see-saw perfectly balanced in midair—a balance that suggests just how stable, orderly, and comfortable the speaker imagines his ideal life feeling.

Asyndeton thus helps the reader to feel the ease and beauty of a happy man's days.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** "Whose trees in summer yield him shade, / In winter fire."
- **Line 11:** "In health of body, peace of mind,"
- **Lines 12-13:** "Quiet by day, / Sound sleep by night"

PARALLELISM

Parallelism helps to convey the speaker's ideals by creating balanced, harmonious sentences.

The poem first uses parallelism in lines 5-8:

> Whose herds with milk, whose fields with bread,
> Whose flocks supply him with attire,
> Whose trees in summer yield him shade,
> In winter fire.

Overlapping with anaphora (the repetition of "Whose"), these moments of parallelism help to suggest the simplicity of the speaker's imagined ideal life. The "happy man" the speaker describes is happy because his "few acres" support him: he doesn't need much, and nature supplies all that he *does* need. These similarly-structured lines show how each of the plants and creatures on this man's land helps him in turn.

Later, in lines 11-14, the speaker lists more aspects of an ideal life—this time looking not at the happy man's physical surroundings, but the way he spends his time. Here, parallelism makes it clear that "Health of body" and "peace of mind," "quiet by day" and "sound sleep by night" all have their place in a life of wholesome solitude. By giving each of these ideas equal weight, parallelism suggests that a happy life is one of *balance*.

Parallelism thus shapes the speaker's language so that it mirrors his philosophy.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-8:** "Whose herds with milk, whose fields with bread, / Whose flocks supply him with attire, / Whose trees in summer yield him shade, / In winter fire."
- **Line 11:** "health of body, peace of mind,"
- **Lines 12-13:** "Quiet by day, / Sound sleep by night;"
- **Line 13:** "study and ease"

VOCABULARY

Happy (Line 1) - In Pope's 18th-century English, "happy" doesn't just mean "contented," but "lucky, fortunate."

Paternal (Line 2) - In this context, *paternal* most likely means inherited through the father's side of the family.

Acres (Line 2) - Small plots of land.

Bound (Line 2) - In this context, "bound" means "limit" or "contain": a paraphrase of these first two lines might read, "It's a lucky guy who's happy and contented with a few inherited acres of land."

Flocks (Line 6) - Herds of sheep (whose wool the imagined "happy man" can use to make clothing).

Attire (Line 6) - Clothing.

Yield (Line 7) - Produce or give.

Blest (Line 9) - An archaic spelling of the word *blessed*.

Unconcernedly (Line 9) - Without concerns or worries.

Recreation (Line 14) - Fun or leisure.

Meditation (Line 16) - Deep thought, musings.

Unlamented (Line 18) - Not grieved or mourned.

Steal (Line 19) - Here, to "steal" means to tiptoe or creep quietly away.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

As its title announces, "Ode on Solitude" is an ode! Like all odes, it focuses on praising the merits of a single subject—in this case, solitude. More specifically, it is a Horatian ode, meaning that it is written after the style of Horace, a 1st century Latin poet whose poems were characterized by a quiet intimacy, contemplation, and elegance (as opposed to the more complex, energetic, and passionately emotive odes of Pindar, the ancient Greek poet who inspired Horace to write odes in the first place).

As is usually the case with Horatian odes, this poem is written in quatrains (five quatrains, to be exact) and follows a set meter and rhyme scheme (more on that in a moment). Visually, this short, simple structure combines with the gently undulating shape of the lines to suggest the very "study and ease" of the speaker's ideal life.

METER

The poem is written primarily in iambic tetrameter, with every fourth line in dimeter. This means that the first three lines of every stanza have a predictably bouncy rhythm of four iambs in a row: da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM. The last line feels cut short, with only two iambs, two da-DUMs.

Take a look at the first stanza:

> Happy | the man, | whose wish | and care
> A few | pater- | nal ac- | res bound,
> Content | to breathe | his na- | tive air,
> In his | own ground.

The poem's first foot is actually a trochee, the opposite of an iamb: a foot that goes DUM-da. This gives the poem a slightly more forceful start, though it soon evens off into a more laid-back, steady iambic rhythm. The final line of the stanza, lopped in half both visually and metrically, upsets the rhythm by skipping a couple of beats—just enough to keep things interesting.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem follows this simple rhyme scheme:

ABAB

These end rhymes are, for the most part, perfect: that is, the stressed vowel sound in both words, as well as any subsequent sounds, are identical: "care" and "air," "bound" and "ground," and so on.

The one exception is the slant rhyme of "bread" and "shade" in the second stanza. Mostly, though, the rhyme scheme is simple, musical, and predictable. This makes sense for a poem about the beauty and joys of a simple, predictable life.

SPEAKER

Readers don't know much about the poem's speaker, apart from the fact that he values living a simple, "unseen" life. He believes that being content in having only the basic necessities of life—things like "milk," "bread," and "attire" (or clothing)—is a virtue that leads to greater happiness. Better yet if one is able to provide these things for oneself, through the very land one lives on and works.

The speaker also thinks that striking a balance between work and "recreation," or play, is essential to living a happy life, as is balancing a kind of childlike naivety ("innocence") with the ability to think deeply ("meditation").

Finally, the speaker believes he will be happier without the burden of other peoples' expectations, opinions, or even admiration. He even goes so far as to say he wants to die "unlamented." It's appropriate, then, that readers never learn the speaker's name or age, nor anything about the speaker's appearance, struggles, etc.

It's worth noting that the speaker has a great deal in common with Pope himself, who moved with his family to the countryside just prior to the publication of this poem. Pope was only 12 years old when he wrote it; ironically, he himself would go on to become one of the most famous poets in the English language.

SETTING

The setting of this poem is less a real place and more the *idea* of a place. That is, the speaker is describing what a happy person's life looks like, and part of it is that they have a plot of "ground" that is their "own." This plot of land would ideally provide them "milk" from "herds" of cows or goats, "bread" from "fields" of wheat or rye, and "attire"—or clothing—made from the wool of "flocks" of sheep. Additionally, these "acres" of land would be covered in "trees" that would offer "shade" during the heat of summer and which could be chopped into firewood to use through the cold winter months.

In other words, the poem uses a pastoral—or country—setting to idealize a certain way of life, one characterized by hard work, self-sufficiency, and self-containment.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Alexander Pope was one of the most influential figures of the Augustan age, an 18th-century literary period marked by an outpouring of satire and the rise of the novel. Augustans such as Pope and Jonathan Swift, his most comparable contemporary, channeled classical poets like Virgil and Horace in order to reckon with the political and philosophical ideas of their own time. Known for having refined the heroic couplet, Pope is also one of the most-quoted authors in the English language; he is responsible for such well-known insights as "The *Sound* must seem an *Eccho* to the *Sense*" and "To Err is humane; to Forgive, *Divine*."

Pope's first major collection, *Pastorals*, came out in 1709. These poems earned him instant recognition, and two years later he published *An Essay on Criticism*, a poetic manifesto in the tradition of Horace's famous *Ars Poetica*.

Highly regarded during his lifetime, Pope lost favor with the Romantic poets that succeeded him as an interest in rigorous form and style gave way to a focus on authenticity and candor. In the early 1900s, however, the rise of Modernism, which emphasized the importance of form and style (albeit with the imperative to "make it new"), led to renewed interest in Pope's work.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Pope was born into a Catholic family in London in 1688, the year of the Glorious Revolution. This was a period in Britain's history in which a fear of Catholic tyranny resulted in the overthrow of King James II, Britain's last Catholic monarch. This was followed by the passing of the Test Acts, laws which barred Catholics from teaching, attending university, voting, holding public office, or living within 10 miles of London or Westminster.

For this reason, Pope was compelled to abandon his formal education at a young age. However, being a precocious and strong-willed child, he continued to study on his own, teaching himself various languages and soon becoming an accomplished poet.

In fact, in 1700, the very year the Popes left London for a small estate in Binfield, near Windsor Forest, Pope published "Ode on Solitude." He was only 12 years old, but the poem shows advanced insight into his situation; knowing he would be unable to participate in the formal education that was prohibited him, he took pride in his simple, rural surroundings.

The poem also expresses concerns that would come to preoccupy the Romantic writers that followed Pope: a distrust of urbanization and the desire to return to the purity and innocence of rural life. The poem's emphasis on simplicity and self-sufficiency further hint at the rise in British industrialization. Pope would in fact go on to mock mainstream society's growing desire to possess more and more unnecessary *things*—and the ease with which they could be gotten—with his satirical epic *The Rape of the Lock*.

While on the surface Pope's "Ode" may seem told from the point of view of someone who is "Blest" with "health of body" and "peace of mind," Pope himself was just beginning to experience the physical affliction that would plague him for the rest of his life. He was stricken with spinal tuberculosis that stunted his growth and left him with a severe hump in his back.

Already alienated from mainstream society by his birth into a Catholic family, he was further isolated by his poor health. Solitude for him, then, wasn't just a noble ideal but an inevitable reality. And though through his talent and determination he became one of the most respected and influential voices of his time, his poor health became insurmountable towards the end of his life, and he ceased to produce much writing after 1738. He died in 1744, at the age of 56.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Pope's Publications — Visit the British Library's website to see images of some of Pope's manuscripts. (https://www.bl.uk/people/alexander-pope)
- A Reading of the Poem — Listen to the poem read aloud. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0X-ma52ifos)
- A Biography of the Poet — Visit the Poetry Foundation to learn more about Pope's life and work. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/alexander-pope)
- Neoclassicism and the Augustan Age — Learn more about Pope's era and the literary movements he's associated with. (https://www.bl.uk/restoration-18th-century-literature/articles/neoclassicism)
- Quotable Quotes — Read some of Pope's famous quips: he's one of the most oft-quoted writers in the English language! (https://www.brainyquote.com/authors/alexander-pope-quotes)

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Mottram, Darla. "*Ode on Solitude.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 29 Jul 2021. Web. 6 Aug 2021.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Mottram, Darla. "*Ode on Solitude.*" LitCharts LLC, July 29, 2021. Retrieved August 6, 2021. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/alexander-pope/ode-on-solitude.