

Ode on Solitude

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

Content to breathe his native air,

In his own ground.

This first verse of Ode on Solitude begins the analogy that will carry through the poem, seen through the life of an anonymous man who is described as being an ideal for happiness. His deepest desires, the narrator notes, extends a few acres of his own land, where he is content to live and work. The inclusion of the word “parental” suggests that the land belongs to this man by inheritance, and therefore belongs solely to him. “Content to breathe his native air” could also be a commentary on being happy with what a person has, rather than constantly wishing for more (although this might not have been quite as significant an idea in 1700, when the poem was written, as it may be interpreted today).

The verse structure and rhyming pattern is established here; three lines of eight syllables each, followed by one line of four syllables, rhyming in an ABAB pattern. This persists up until the final two stanzas, at which point the final line lengthens to five syllables.

Whose herds with milk, whose fields with bread,

Whose flocks supply him with attire,

Whose trees in summer yield him shade,

In winter fire.

This verse simply means that the man is self-sufficient. His land, now shown to be a farm, provides for all of his needs — his herds provide him with milk, he is able to bake his own bread. In the summer, his trees provide ample shade, and in the winter the wood from those same trees can be lit to keep him warm. He has no need of anything beyond his own land.

While this verse reads strangely, as “bread” and “shade” do not rhyme, it is important to remember that Ode on Solitude was written over three hundred years ago. During this period in Britain, “bread” was pronounced with a longer vowel sound. While word pronunciation is a difficult thing to estimate and predict throughout different eras of history, it makes sense to believe that at one point, “bread” and “shade” could be used as rhymes for one another.

Blest! who can unconcern'dly find

Hours, days, and years slide soft away,

In health of body, peace of mind,

Quiet by day,

The narrator considered this farmer blessed! Time almost doesn't have meaning for this man; his world provides for all of his needs. Hours go by, days go by, years go by, and everything remains the same. The health the man is in at the beginning of this cycle is the health he remains in when it is finished. Peace of mind is normal for him — what is there to trouble him? It seems as though, in a world of peace and quiet, there is absolutely nothing that could disrupt the life of this farmer, and the narrator sees that as a high blessing.
Sound sleep by night; study and ease

Together mix'd; sweet recreation,

And innocence, which most does please,

With meditation.

This verse sees the start of the final lines being five syllables long, and continues the sentiment of the verse before it. The idea of innocence is introduced here, and is a fair way to describe a man who lives his life in isolation; he is innocent, which means he himself probably doesn't appreciate the kind of life he leads in the same way the narrator, author, or reader does. It's a strange idea and casts the character of the farmer in a different light. He could, in fact, be viewed as a naïve and ignorant individual, one who simply doesn't know enough about the world, or he could be viewed as living the ideal life.

Thus let me live, unseen, unknown;

Thus unlamented let me dye;

Steal from the world, and not a stone

Tell where I lye.

The narrator of the poem clearly agrees with the latter of the above sentiments — here he wishes for escapism, and begs for an unseen life, one where he may live in solitude until his dying days, which will come and go, unnoticed, unremarked, and unadorned, a perfect life of solitude and peace.

Historical Context

Because of the very mature concepts expressed by Ode on Solitude, particularly the bit about wishing to die alone, many might be surprised to learn that Alexander Pope wrote Ode on Solitude in 1700, at the age of twelve. At the time, Pope had just moved to a small estate by a forest, in a small village far from the main British towns. His family had been forced to live there because of their Catholic faith, and it could be here, in the village now known as Popeswood (named after Pope himself) that the young child found his ideals in solitude, undoubtedly being inspired by his new natural landscape, particularly the Windsor Forest.

It was also at this time that Pope's formal education ended, another unfortunate result of being Catholic at the time. However, instead of giving up on learning altogether, Pope attempted to educate himself, drawing on classical literature, paying particular attention to well-known poets of the era.

With all of this background, it is altogether unsurprising that one of Pope's earliest works would be a very mature poem about solitude. Abandoned largely by the world, it makes sense to think that solace in solitude was an everyday occurrence for the young Alexander Pope. When discussing earlier whether an entirely isolated farmer was a man to be looked down upon for his naïvety or respected for his independence, the perspective of Pope is clear — he envies the man. Understanding that Pope was essentially forced out of mainstream society because of his religious beliefs might lead one to believe that Pope would have viewed total exclusion from that mainstream society as the best thing that could happen to a person.

It is difficult to enter the mindset of the twelve-year-old Alexander Pope. When we writes, "let me live, unseen, unknown," is almost sad to think that this is not at all what happened — Pope did not live a life of seclusion but rather was a respected poet during his time, and remains so today. Whether or not he changed his views on solitude is difficult to say. What is clear is that his Ode on Solitude was just the start of what would eventually become a literary career of classical fame and definite ingenuity for the now-famous Alexander Pope.