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VICTORIAN POETRY

We are going to study "**Absalom and Achitophel**" by John Dryden. This poem belongs to the Neo-classical School. Neo-classical is the age of satire and reason. "**Absalom and Achitophel**" deals with political satire.

This poem has two backgrounds:

The 1st one is Biblical which tells the story of Absalom who rebelled against King David.

The 2nd one is political which criticizes a famous political figure at that time. The poet uses these nicknames to refer to the real political characters.

▪ Why this poem is famous?

Because it criticizes human beings. It criticizes a famous political figure.

▪ Why did the poem choose names from the Bible?

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The poet used names from the Bible to add a kind of dignity to the poem. This gives the poem respect and importance.

▪ **Why the poet criticizes political figures indirectly?**

To avoid corruption.

- *The poem is 3030 lines, but don't worry because we'll study 50 lines only.*

• **Now we will start explaining the poem:**

Some had in Courts been Great, and thrown from thence

Like Fiends, were harden'd in Impenitence.

The poet starts describing "some" people who were "great" judges. Some people were great judges, but they were dismissed from their works (maybe because of some error

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they committed). When they were dismissed they shifted from being loyal to more aggressive enemies who would not repent. Those people did not ask for forgiveness, and they became aggressive enemies to the king.

Note: the poet used rational power over the emotional one. He used reason (mind) in his criticism. At first, he mentioned the character's good qualities as a judge, and then he criticized him as a political figure. This shows that the poet is objective and that he used the law of Nature (reason and logic).

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Some, by their monarch's fatal mercy grown,

From Pardon'd Rebels , Kinsmen to the Throne;

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- The poet speaks about another kind of people. Some people grow by the forgiveness of the king. They were rebels against the king, but they were forgiven. They changed from being against the authority to be close to it. This may show that the king is somehow weak because he wants to gather people around him.

Were rais'd in Pow'r and publick Office high :

Strong Bands , if Bands ungrateful men coud tie.

- Those people had high positions in society and were close to the king. They were not loyal; they pretended to be loyal to have power so they can secretly conspire against the king. They are a group of hypocrite people.

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Each one of them wants to achieve his own aim. They are selfish. Every one of them has his personal goals.

Of these the false Achitophel was first :

A Name to all succeeding Ages curst.

- Here, the poet starts criticizing a certain person. He starts specifying. One of those people (the two types of people mentioned previously) is "the false Achitophel". Achitophel was the leader of the rebellions. He was the first one to rebel.

The poet says that Achitophel will be cursed by all ages whenever someone says his name. Everyone will curse him, generation after generation. The poet speaks for all people, not for himself. He is not expressing personal thoughts or emotions. He is expressing a general attitude.

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For close Designs , and crooked Counsels fit;

Sagacious, Bold ,and Turbulent of wit:

- The poet gives reasons why people will curse Achitophel. They will curse him because he holds meetings and plots against the king.
- The poet is being objective. He gives reasons and follows the law of Nature. Although he criticizes Achitophel, he also mentions his good qualities like being wise and clever.

Restless ,unfixt in Principles and place;

In Pow'runpleas'd , impatient of Disgrace.

- Achitophel is a restless hardworking man. He has no stable principles or morals. He will do anything to gain power. He doesn't have political loyalty, and can change his morals to

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get what he wants. He is selfish and hypocrite. "Impatient of Disgrace" means that he doesn't accept forgiveness. He refuses anyone who is against him.

A fiery Soul, which working out its way,

Fretted the Pigmy-Body to decay:

Achitophel uses his ambitious soul in a wrong way and wastes it in villain plots. His restless "fiery soul" will lead his small body to death. This means that he doesn't care about his life or body. He only wants power.

- The neo-classical elements in the poem:

1.The Artificiality of Language.

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The poet uses difficult words and strange expressions.

2.The Use of Figures of Speech.

3.Following the Laws of Nature (mind and reason).

4.General Subject.

The poet is not expressing his feelings or opinions about a person. He is speaking for all people and providing reasons. We can see that in the use of some words such as "some", "all".

"some", "all"

5. The Use of Heroic Couplets.

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“Absalom and Achitophel”

John Dryden

We will continue with the explaining the poem.

A daring Pilot in extremity

- The poet describes Achitophel as a “daring pilot”. It is a kind of metaphor which compares Achitophel to a brave leader who is so brave to the extent that he leads his ship “people” to danger. This shows that Achitophel is not a good leader for his people, because he leads them to wrong directions.

Daring: brave

Extremity: in a bad direction.

Pilot: leadership, caption.

Storms: stand for troubles.

**Pleas’d with the Danger, when the Waves went high
He sought the Storm ;but for a calm unfit,**

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- Achitophel is actually “pleased” happy with danger, because he wants to show off his power. He is careless and selfish. He chooses the bad conditions to sail (to lead his people) through these bad conditions.

This means that he leads his people to bad directions in bad situations also. However, when the weather is calm it is not qualified (suitable).

Storms: refers to danger and risk

Would Steer too near the Sands, to boast his Wit.

Great Wits are sure to Madness near alli'd;

- Again the poet says that Achitophel would go on dangerous directions to show off his wit. Another ides says that madness and wit (cleverness) are so close to each other. There is a thin line between them. Achitophel is so clever that he becomes mad eventually!

And thin Partitions do their Bounds divide:

Else, why should he, with Wealth and Honour blest,

- The poet returns to talk about the second group of people; people who gather themselves to conspire against the king. This group of people can easily separate; any small disagreement will cause their division.

This, of course, because this kind of group is based on its individual's interests. Thus every one of them wants his own benefit, and they don't have main aim and that's why they are weak and easily divided. The second line says that why someone like Achitophel who is blessed and honored with wealth and grace do this.

Refuse his Age the needful Hours of Rest ?

Punish a Body which he could not pleas;

- The poet wonders why Achitophel who is blessed with wealth and honor refuses the needing of his body for hours

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of rest. He refuses to give his body rest although he has everything that makes his life easy. He is not taking rest as if he is punishing himself.

Bankrupt of Life, yet Prodigal of Ease?

And all to leave , what with his Toil he won,

- The poet says that Achitophel's life is worthless and meaningless and he still refuses to rest. And after all, he will leave all his achievement which he reached by hardworking.

Bankrupt: life of no value
meaningless life.

Prodigal of Ease: refuse to
take a rest.

Toil : hardwork

won : achieved

To that unfeather'd, two-legg'd thing, a Son

Got, while his Soul did huddled Notions trie;

- Achitophel refuses any kind of rest and works hard, although he knows that he will leave all his achievements to his son who is unlike his father, useless and he doesn't deserve any of his father's achievements.

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To that: refers to
Achitophel's son

Unfeathered: so young

Thing: in animated thing
(shapeless).

And born a shapeless Lumb, like Anarchy.

In friendship false, implacable in Hate:

- Achitophel's son is described as a thing that is shapeless. The poet wants to say that Achitophel doesn't have to work hard because after all he will leave everything to his useless son who doesn't deserve his wealth. The second idea is that Achitophel has no real friends and no true relationship with anyone. All his friendship will change into hatred.

Lump : a thing with no
shape.

False : fake

Anarchyn : disorder

Resolv'd to Ruine or to Rule the State.

To compass this, the Triple Bond he broke

- Achitophel has made up his mind (decides) to either ruin or rule the country, and to achieve his aim he broke the trinity (

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a kind of agreement between three countries). This means that he is able to do whatever to achieve his aim to either rule or ruin the country.

Resolved : made his decesion	Compass : achieve, carry out his aim.
Triple: tready, agreement	

The Pillars of the Publick safety shook

And fitted Israel for a Foreign Yoke.

- Achitophel is so selfish, and ready to sacrifice his own country's security to achieve his aim. He allied with the enemy and put his country's security under danger.

Pillars : principals	Israel : refers to the enemy
Fitted: allied with the enemy, make agrement or contract.	Safty: security, peace.

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Shook : under danger

**Then ,seiz'd with Fear , yet still affecting Fame,
Usurp'd a Patriot's All-attoning Name.**

- Achitophel starts to feel afraid, yet he pretends to be strong. He is doing so because he searches for fame. He also guides his people by frightening them pretending that he is powerful. He was given the title “patriot” also by power.

Seized: rule

Patriot: A little given to a brave person.

❖ **Lines from “So easy still...since in another's guilt they find their own” are not required.**

**Yet, Fame deserv'd, no Enemy can grudge;
The Statesman we abhor, but praise the Judge.**

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- The poet, again focuses on the idea that Achitophel is a great judge and no one can deny this fact. However, the poet still criticizes him as a politician. This indicates the use of the law of Nature and the general subject of the poem. The poet is totally objective, he puts his emotions and personal opinions aside, so that the reader can sense the rational power over the emotional one in the whole poem.

grudge: deny

abhor: criticize.

The End