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Absalom and Achitophel Themes

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Political Satire: “Absalom and Achitophel” is a powerful example of political satire. Dryden wrote this poem during the Exclusion Crisis (1679–1681). The main issue was whether James, Duke of York, should become king after his brother Charles II. James was a Catholic, and many people wanted to stop him. The Whigs supported Charles’s illegitimate son, the Duke of Monmouth, as king instead.

Dryden strongly supported the legal line of kings. He believed that the throne should go to the next rightful heir. In the poem, Dryden uses satire to attack the rebels and their leaders. He makes fun of their greed, pride, and fake patriotism. Like modern comedy shows that mock politicians, Dryden’s poem used humour and exaggeration to make the public think seriously.

Biblical Allegory: Dryden wrote this poem as a biblical allegory. He did not directly name real political figures but used characters from the Bible to represent them. At that time, the Bible was the most well-known and widely read book in England. So most readers could easily understand the deeper meaning of the poem. In the allegory:

King David: represents Charles II.

Absalom: David’s son, stands for the Duke of Monmouth.

Achitophel: the false counsellor, stands for Shaftesbury, the leader of the Exclusion movement

By choosing the famous story of Absalom’s rebellion, Dryden compares the political crisis in England with a well-known religious story.

Desire for Power: Another major theme in the poem is the desire for power. Dryden demonstrates that many individuals, whether in politics, law, or religion, are driven by a passion for power. This desire can make even good people turn against their king or country.

For example, Absalom is shown as a loving and brave son. He respects his father. But when Achitophel praises him and offers him the crown, Absalom becomes proud and tempted. In the same way, Achitophel already holds a powerful position in the state, but he still wants more. His ambition drives him to betray the king.

Lx Notes

Dryden does not say that ambition is always wrong. But he warns that it must be controlled by morality and legal right. If someone wants a position without having the true right to it, then the lawful ruler has every right to resist him with force. This theme teaches us that ambition without justice brings chaos and destruction.

LX Notes