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Alexander Pope's The Rape Of The Lock As A Social Satire On Eighteenth Century English Society.

By: **Dr Deepti Bajpai Kukrety,**
Assistant Professor-HR and General Management,
Prestige Institute of Management and Research, Indore.
deepti_bajpai@pimrindore.ac.in.

Abstract

The Rape of the lock is a mock-epic written by the eighteenth century English Poet Alexander Pope. The poem is satirical take on eighteenth century "Augustan England" and the lives of the wealthy families. The mock epic is regarded as one of the finest and wittiest narrations of a trivial incident between two aristocratic families. The poem is considered the best in the English language in the genre of mock-epic poems and theme of the poem has universal and timeless appeal.

Key Words

Mock-epic, Satire, Wit, Humor, Augustan age.

Review of Literature

According to Hazlitt (1818), The Rape of the lock is the most piercing sample of the filigree work ever created. The small is made large and the large trivial. You cannot make up your mind whether to show contempt or to cry. It is the very perfection of a mock epic.

As per Johnson (1781) "To the praises which have been accumulated on The Rape of the Lock by readers of every class, from the critic to the waiting-maid, it is difficult to make any addition." Lord Byron (1818) praised The Rape of the lock by stating that "Your whole generation are not worth a canto of *The Rape of the Lock*." Sitwell (1930) described The Rape of the Lock as "a poem so airy that it might have been woven by the long fingers of the sylphs in their dark and glittering Indian gauzes."

Williams (1941) said "*The Rape of the Lock* is the culminating triumph of the mock epic…….this, for so young a man, was an output remarkable……for an instinctive sense of detail and proportion, for mastery of words, and for accomplishment in versification'.

Rape of the Lock as a Satire on eighteenth Century English Society

The Rape of the Lock is a mock epic poem written by Alexander Pope. First published anonymously in Lintot's Miscellaneous Poems in May 1712 containing two cantos with 334 lines. Revised, expanded and reissued in an edition in 1714 containing the five-canto version with 794 lines. The final version was made available in 1717 with the addition of Carissa's speech on good humor.

The poem is based on a real event witnessed by Pope's friend John Caryll. The incident deals with the sniping of a lock of hair from the real life subject ArabellaFermor by Lord Petre. Hence the title- The Rape of the lock. Rape here specifically means taking away, snatching or

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grabbing without approval. The event was witnessed by John Caryll and lead to animosity and ill will between the two aristocratic families. John Caryll intended Pope to write a poem focusing on the event so that the two families could settle the matter harmoniously, thereby giving the world the greatest satirical poem in English language and literature.

At the time of writing this poem, Pope was translating the Greek Classics of Homer- Iliad and Odyssey into heroic couplets in English. These translations gave assess to people especially the women of the eighteenth century to these epics. The parallels between the translations of these epics and Pope's Rape of the Lock are startling.

In canto I, Pope utilizes the epic conventions to his mock-epic by elevating the trivial and trivializing the significant. The intention of writing an epic is to exalt and glorify the subject or event. Pope uses the mock epic genre to satirize and reveal the eighteenth century Augustan England's Urban Society of Belles and Beaux. A newly carved out society of wealthy aristocratic men and women with access to constant flow of cash resulting in a highly relaxed lifestyle.

He employs the epic tradition by turning it upside down to mock and ridicule the shallow values of this society. Women who have nothing to do but doll themselves with make-up and perfumes and the most fashionable clothes. Men on the other hand were busy making more and more money and trying to woo the most beautiful lady by competing against each other.

As we go through one canto to the next written in iambic pentameter in heroic couplets, we marvel at the genius of Pope and cannot help but approve of his choice of this genre to tell this tale.

Sol thro' white curtains shot a tim'rous ray,...
……
'Twas then, Belinda, if Report say true, [I, 17-117]
With the introduction of Belinda- the protagonist of the poem and through her dream, Pope not only mocks Belinda and her world but also launches the supernatural machinery in the narrative of the poem. In typical epic tradition, this would have been the introduction of Gods, superheroes, angles and ghosts however, in Pope's poem this supernatural machinery involves, the spirit-world of salamanders, nymphs, genomes and sylphs as explained by Ariel, the guardian angel of Belinda.

Her joy is gilded Chariots, when alive,
And Love of Ombre after death survive, [I, 54-55]
These lines mark Belinda's lopsided lifestyle of pomp, frivolity, splendor and idleness suggesting that she enjoys and values nothing more than her vanity.

With varying Vanities, from ev'rypart,…..
……..,
Where Wigs with wigs with swords-knots Sword-knots strive, [I, 98-100]

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These lines display the misplaced values and mock the society of eighteenth century England that believes in displaying pride, wealth and ostentation.

And now, unvei'd the Toilet stands displa'd,
……,
To that she bends, to that her eyes she rears: [I, 121-126]
The iconic and ironic display of Belinda at her dressing table at the end of canto I draws from the epic Iliad by Homer where Achilles' armor and weapons along with the battlefield are described in exalted and dense manner. In Rape of the Lock, Pope ridicules by transposing those Cosmic Powr's of Homer's epic to Cosmetic Powr's indicated by
Puffs, Powders, Patches, bibles, billets-doux, [I, 138]
suggesting the significance of beauty products and vanity for Belinda and her bent sense of morality as the Bible is placed alongside items of beautification. This make-up ritual illustrates her desire and narcissism, as she is leaving no stone unturned in beautifying herself more and more in preparation for her trip.

In canto II, Pope describes in vivid details the beauty of Belinda by comparing her to the Sun again. In true epic convention Belinda's radiance is second not even to the Sun's. Pope by glorifying Belinda's beauty displays the follies of society in placing more importance to external beauty than morals.
Not with more Glories, in th'Ethereal Plain,
The Sun first rises o'er the purpled Main,
Then, issuing forth, the Rival of his Beams,[II, 1-3]

The use of simile in the following lines continues Pope's description of Belinda's beauty by comparing the brightness of Belinda's eyes to that of the sun and just like the radiance of Sun, her eyes shine at everyone alike.
Bright as the Sun, her Eyes the Gazers strike,
And, like the sun, they shine on all alike, [II, 13-14].

The locks of Belinda are now revealed to us. Her shiny and radiant locks as if in agreement with each other are perfectly hung on her smooth ivory neck captivating every looker and ruining their peace of mind. The metaphors in lines 23- 24 offer us a peek into how beautiful and well-kept lock can act like slender chains to enslave their beholders. Lines 25-28 locks are trappings to catch admirers just like a bird's trap or fishing net. In these lines Pope is describing the power of Belinda's nurtured hair along with the power of a beautiful lady who can entice men with a single hair.

This Naymph, to the destruction of Mankind,
……,
And Beauty draws us with a single hair. [II, 19-28]

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Immediately we are introduced to the person responsible for the Rape of the Lock-The Adventurous Baron-Lord Petre. He appreciates Belinda's locks when they are together on the boat that is carrying them on river Thames to Hampton Court Palace. No sooner The Baron's eyes catch a glimpse of Belinda's locks, he is determined and years to have them. He plans to employ every and any mode available whether it is strength or deception to acquire the lovely locks of Belinda.

Th'advent'rous Baron the bright locks admir'd:

……,

By force to ravish, or by fraud betray: [II, 29-32]

The lines that follow reveal the elaborate rituals that the Baron follows in order to garner success in his endeavor of grabbing lock of Belinda's hair as his prized possession thereby mocking the epic convection of offering sacrifices to the gods before embarking on a journey or battle consequentially belittling the event.

Lines 47-72 mark Pope's use of colorful imagery to describe the form, of sylphs, words like transparent, fluid, dissolved in light, airy, glittering, filmy, gilded, purple are purposefully used to portray the beautiful, colorful and delicate form of the sylphs.

In true epic tradition where there is always a grand speech by an important character, Pope in his mock epic, commissions Ariel, the guardian angel of Belinda to deliver a rousing speech incorporating the occupation of each sylph and warns all the other sylphs of an imminent danger about to strike Belinda.

Ye Sylphs and, Sylphs to your Chief give ear,

……

And guard with Arms divine the British Throne. [II, 73-90]

In lines 91- 100 Pope gives up a glimpse the responsibilities of sylphs to help with hair, make-up and fashion until in lines101-111 Ariel throws a wind of caution about 'black Omens' that will harm Belinda's pride.

Lines 112-122 are devoted to assigning and allocating strategic positions to sylphs to guard Belinda in the wake of the threat. Pope's use of pun in terms of the names of sylphs is his brilliance of imagination. Zephyretta is assigned the responsibility of taking care of her fan, Brillante for her ear rings, Momentilla to look after her watch, Crispissa her locks, Ariel would watch over the lapdog Shock.

An entourage of 50 specially chosen sylphs were trusted to guard her petticoat- a sign of chastity in those times.

To fifty chosen Sylphs, of special Note,

We trust th' important Charge, the Petticoat: [II, 117-118].

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Canto II ends with Ariel illustrating in lucid detail the punishments that await any sylph that is found disregarding his duty. After Ariel ends her speech, the sylphs form a guard of circle around Belinda taking charge of their posts apprehensive of the nature danger that lurks ahead.

Canto III displays Pope's extensive and suitable use of heroic couplets. It begins with Belinda reaching The Hampton Court Palace, after offering a brief description of the venue, Pope begins to mock at the absolute inactivity of the people gathered there. All ladies and young men do is vile away time, gossip and chat about trivial events and things, ultimately slaying the reputation of people one by one (lines 8-16). These trivial events are juxtaposed with more serious and significant issues related to court trails and executions along with economic matters in lines 19-24.

As the day progresses Belinda is motivated by her urge for fame thus throws a challenge to two knights to play a game of Ombre with her.
Belinda now, whom Thirst of fame invites,
Burns to encounter two adventurous Knights, [III, 25-26].

In lines 29-100, interpreting the epic battles once fought now being turned into leisure card games; Pope once more mocks the silliness of these events as a front for flirtation and romantic liaisons. Although his satire is not vicious or nasty, it serves as a grave reminder of the pettiness of the eighteenth century English society and its aristocratic ways. The game has its shares of ups and downs, with fortunes turning both ways. At one point Belinda was on the verge of losing the game, however she is the victor at the end. She celebrates her victory by shouting so hard that her voice it seems reached the sky. Pope here is mocking Belinda's joyous celebratory screams, as she is oblivious of the misery that lies ahead.
Oh thoughtless Mortals!ever blind to fate,
……..
Andcurs'dfor ever this Victories Day. [III, 101-104].

As the guests come together to sip hot coffee from expensive tea pots the curling vapors of the freshly grind coffee reminds The Baron of his intentions of clipping Belinda's locks as he schemes up a plan. At this moment, Clarissa pulls out a pair of scissors and hands them over to The Baron for the act of snipping Belinda's locks. In the third attempt through a constant bid by the sylphs to guard Belinda's precious locks by fanning them, twitching her diamond earrings, even coming in between the shears and the last attempt by Ariel to get into her brain, by opening the blades of the scissors wide, the Baron manages to sever the Locks. **There it is- The Rape of the Lock,** Belinda's beautiful and precious locks are separated from her captivating head forever.

The juxtaposition of epic tradition with the frivolous is astonishing. Pope in these lines is meticulous in contrasting the two, as a hero prepares for a battle in an epic and his lady hands

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over a sword to him, similarly Pope mocks as Clarrisa hands over a pair shears to the Baron in his venture of slicing Belinda's hair.

But when to Mischief Mortals bend their Will,

……,

From the fair head, for ever, and for ever! [III, 125-154].

Canto III ends with another quip by Pope on the distorted values of his society. He supports this by giving a riveting deception of Belinda's response to cutting of her hair. She is furious as if lightning dashed from her eyes, and screams of horror from mouth. Screams so deafening that such screams would not have been heard when the ladies lost their husbands or when their favorite lapdog suffered his final fate, or even their expensive China wear fell on the ground broken into pieces. On the other hand, the Baron is basking in his glory of attaining the locks of hair, his gloating is theatrical and amusing as he claims that successful completion of his enterprise will make his fame will live forever.

Canto IV begins with Pope's description of Belinda's rage, resentment and despair at the rape of her lock.

And secret Passions labour'd in her Breast. [IV, 2]

The lines speak about Belinda's secret admiration for the Baron, however the manner in which he snatched her lock of hair brought her great agony and offence. Pope's satire here has a deeper meaning, he understands and even sympathizes with Belinda as he is aware that this dishonor and ill repute will hurt her chances of landing a desirable husband in the future.

At this gloomy moment for Belinda, the sylphs pulled out from their duty of guarding her, Ariel weeping inconsolably flew away from her. Pope now introduces a dark, rough and sad tempered gnome named Umbriel who flies speedily to the Goddesses of Spleen in search of more ways and means of aggravating Belinda's agony.

Hear me, and touch Belinda with chargin;

That single act gives half the World the Spleen. [IV, 76-77]

Umbriel urges Goddess Spleen to give her the power and approval to be able to perpetrate melancholy, ill humor, nervousness, anxiety, hysteria and depression on Belinda as she is a happy, cheerful, joyful beauty and she manages to keep people around her in the same merry mood completely oblivious to these states. By unleashing these pitiful states on her, several of her admirers will also fall prey to these emotions thereby engulfing half the world in misery.

The moment Umbriel releases the bag and vial of

Sigh, Sobs, and Passions, and the War of Tongues,

……..,

Soft Sorrows, melting Griefs and flowing Tears. [IV, 84-86]

on Belinda and her friend Thalestris, they become angered and raged.

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Belinda burns with more than mortal Ire,
And fierce Thalestris fans the rising Fire. [IV, 93-94].

Thalestris delivers an irate speech deliberating about how she see tears running down Belinda's cheeks as she is considered less noble and aristocratic after Baron's display of her locks to everyone. She immediately assigns Sir Plume the responsibility of retrieving the lost locks although his attempts turn unsuccessful.

In canto V Pope delivers the moral of the story through Clarissa. She presents a strong case of good sense and good humor prevailing when beauty withers away; however, the irony is apparent here as Clarissa is the one who handed over the scissors to the Baron for The Rape of the Lock.
Beauties in vain their pretty eyes may;
Charms strike the Sight, but Merit wins the Soul. [V, 33-34].
The people at the party overlook Clarissa's speech along with Belinda and Thalestris. The belles and beaus fight with each other as Thalestris along with other ladies strikes at the Baron. The fight is ridiculed by comparing it to the epic battle between Trojans and Greeks in the Iliad. The battle at The Hampton Court Palace was fought with eye gazes, glances, sniffs, smiles, angry looks, sarcasms, hair and hairpins in contrast with real battles that are fought with swords, quivers, bows and arrows.

'Restore the lock;' she cries; and all around,
'Restore the lock!' the vaulted Roofs rebound. [V, 102-103].
Belinda screams at the Baron demanding him to return the lock of hair, the scream was so loud that it was reverberated by the arched roofs of the Hampton Court ceiling. However, fate has other plans, as the precious lock of Belinda's hair are now missing, as if the Heavens have decided that such a treasure should not be confined to earthly inhabitants. Various theories and hypotheses are made about the whereabouts of the lock.

The poem ends with Pope asking Belinda to stop moaning at the loss of her lock as it is now adorning the sky as a bright star. The lock of hair is now immortalized by the power of poetry and so is Belinda.
This Lock the Muse shall consecrate to fame,
And 'midst the Stars inscribe Belinda's Name. [V, 149-150].

Conclusion

The Rape of the Lock is a mock epic mirroring the follies, hollowness and triviality of eighteenth century English Augustan society. However, never is the satire bitter or scalding, the societal tendencies that it depicts are real as is evident from the incident. . Pope has successful exposed, ridiculed and realistically presented the lopsided priorities of his times with wit, satire and mimicry and at times with sympathy towards the predicament of the young men and women Therefore, when one reads the poem one laughs at the triviality of

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the matters but understands the seriousness of the misplaced moral and ethical standards of the times that Pope depicts.

What dire offence from am'rous causes springs,

What mighty Contests rise from trivial things, [I, 1-2]

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