



DEPICTION OF CONTEMPORARY LIFE IN *THE RAPE OF THE LOCK*

By Alexander Pope

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Abstract

Alexander Pope has been the most representative poet of the eighteenth century. He is as representative of his age as Chaucer was of the late fourteenth century and Tennyson of the Victorian Age that his age is known as the Age of Pope speaks of the sovereign position in his age. His most representative poem 'The Rape of the Lock' very faithfully mirrors at least a certain section of English society in the eighteenth century. It captures perfectly the ethos of the aristocratic society of the day. "No writer", says Leslie Stephen, "reflects so clearly and completely the spirit of his own day as Pope does." And it is in the Rape of the Lock that he reflects the life of the fashionable aristocratic society of his time completely. The artificial tone of the age, the frivolous aspect of feminist nowhere more exquisitely pictures than in this poem. It is the epic of trifling; a page torn from the petty, pleasure-seeking life of fashionable beauty.

Keywords: Alexander Pope, The Rape of the Lock, Contemporary life, fashionable society

Introduction

Imagine: You're sitting there, having a perfectly lovely day, when someone you thought was your friend betrays you in the worst way possible. They cut off a lock of your hair. Okay, so that situation has a bit of the ridiculous about it. But Alexander Pope is nothing if not a bit ridiculous. And he uses just such an occasion—someone cutting off a friend's lock of hair—to craft this long, funny, famous poem, *The Rape of the Lock*.

We know: nowadays the word "rape" usually describes a horrific situation at which laughing is strictly—and rightly—forbidden. But back in 1714, when Pope published *The Rape of the Lock*, the term "rape" had a broader definition. Sure, they used it as we do, but it could also refer to





the act of seizing or taking anything by force (you can see where our more specific use of the word today comes from—and both meanings, as you'll also see when we dive into analysis, are active in this poem).

Two years earlier, at a very fancy party just outside of London, the young Lord Petre had snuck up behind a young lady, Belle Fermor, and snipped off a lock of her hair (literally seizing it by force) without her consent. That actually happened. Neither Belle nor her parents appreciated this assault on her hairstyle, especially since they had been considering Lord Petre as a potential husband for her. Yeah, that marriage didn't exactly pan out. Instead, the two families fell out hard with each other.

Alexander Pope is as representative of his age as Chaucer was of the late fourteenth century and Tennyson of the Victorian Age that his age is known as the Age of Pope speaks of the sovereign position in his age. His most representative poem 'The Rape of the Lock' very faithfully mirrors at least a certain section of English society in the eighteenth century. It captures perfectly the ethos of the aristocratic society of the day. At that time, society was gradually recovering from the licence that had marked the Stuart Restoration. The Restoration had brought England closer to the France of Louis XIV. The influence of France was generally civilizing, but this influence gradually deteriorated in Pope's times. It was an age when chivalry was dead and women had discarded all those normal values that give solidarity to society. There was an all pervading degradation that had entered into the life of male and female. It was an age of spiritual hollowness. Under the outward splendour and glitter, there were only confusion, variety and vexation.

'The Rape of the Lock' – a Mirror of the Age

It is the ethos of this age that has been caught in 'The Rape of the Lock'. J.R. Lowell remarks 'The Rape of the Lock was a mirror in the drawing room but it gave back a faithful image of society, yet still as human in its own way as the heroes of Homer I theirs'. The fashions, frivolities, the vanities and the follies of the upper class of society are faithfully presented by Pope.

The Frivolities of Womenfolk

'The Rape of the Lock' very faithfully mirrors the frivolities of the womenfolk of that time. Belinda represents the typical fashionable ladies of that time. There is not the slightest glimpse of seriousness or sincerity, goodness or grandeur of human life in any of her words and actions.





She is a beautiful lady; she has a host of admirers; she is a coquette. She controls the moods of the people around her – Belinda smiled and all the world was gay.

This lady Favours to none, to all she smiles extends off she rejects, but never she offends.

But despite all the disdains they showed for their lovers, these ladies of the court did secretly pine for love as Ariel, the guardian sylph, discovered about Belinda –

Suddenly she viewed, in spite of all her out

An earthly lover, lurking at her heart.

Though these ladies apparently seemed to reject their suitors, they secretly harboured ambition to get married to lords or men holding some high titles. They were always guided by considerations of material property through matrimonial relationships and dreaming of the rich prospects, women like Belinda sleep late and are used to rise late from their beds –

Now lap-dogs give themselves the shake

And sleepless lovers, just at twelve awake

The toilet, in fact, is the great business of her life and the right adjustment of her hair, the decoration of her face and the chief employment of her time. Behind all these fascinating descriptions, there is a pervading sense of vanity and emptiness. Pope's satirical gift is shown at his best when he shows the outward charms and the inward frivolity of fashionable ladies. "Their hearts are toy-shops. They reverse the relative importance of things; the little with them is great and the great little".

Hollowness of the Gentlemen of the Day

The gentlemen are as frivolous as the ladies. Lord Petre and his fellows are the representatives of the fashionable society of the time. They are all idle, empty-minded folk, and seem to have nothing else to do except love-making or flirting with ladies. The 'battle' between the ladies and the gentlemen shows emptiness and futility of their lives. They visit clubs and coffee-houses and there they indulge in empty scandalous talks. In 'The Rape of the Lock', ladies and gentlemen alike meet in the Hampton Court "to taste the pleasures of a court. (In their gossip –

A third interprets motions, looks and eyes

At every word a reputation dies.

Snuff or the fan, supply each pause of chat with singing, laughing, ogling and all that. There they play the game of Ombre and utter words which are unsurpassed in their emptiness.)





Levity was the prominent feature of the women and men of this age. Their manners and behaviour were artificial and effected. The very Hampton Court, the palace of the English Queen was resorted by the ladies and lords to talk about society scandals.

Here thou, great Annal whom three realms
Dost sometimes counsel take and obey.....

The serious and the frivolous are mentioned in one breath. The poem reflects the confusion of values as well. Mr. Elwin points out the relative importance of things “the little with them is great and the great little.” They attach as much importance to a China jar as to their honour, as much to religion as to dances and masquerades, as much to their lap-dogs as to husbands.

Conclusion

This was the kind of life led by the fashionable people of the upper classes in the age of Pope and Pope has described it in gorgeous colours on the one hand and with scathing satire on the other. While he shows the grace and fascination of Belinda’s toilet he indicates the vanity and futility of all. There is nothing deep or serious on the lives and activities of the fashionable people – all is vanity and emptiness and this Pope has revealed with brilliance and art. No English poem is at once so brilliant and so empty as ‘The Rape of the Lock’. It reflects the artificial age with splendour and inward emptiness.

References

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