

# THE RAPE OF THE LOCK:

**Q: Write a short essay on The Rape of the Lock as a social satire.**

**Ans:** The Rape of the Lock has been justly acclaimed as Alexander Pope's masterpiece of satirical poetry. Thomas De Quincy placed it as "the most exquisite monument of playful fancy the English literature offers". However, the period from the Restoration to the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century comprising the ages of Dryden and Pope was the rich flowering time of the growth of satire: literary, political and social. It was primarily because the more 'middle class' reading public could no longer subscribe whole-heartedly to the celebration of war and military virtue of the heroic age. Therefore the prime focus of the neoclassical writers shifted towards social realism. The period after the puritan regime, chiefly noted for its immorality and licentiousness invited satirical attacks from writers and thinkers.

The Rape of the Lock was, however, written solely to allay the enmity between the two catholic families after the ill incident of Lord Petre's stealing of lock of hair from Arabella Fermor's head. Pope himself records that John Caryll, 'a common acquaintance and well wisher' to both the families, desired him "to write a poem to make a jest of it and laugh them together again." He also states the purpose of the poem, *i.e.*, "to laugh at the little unguarded follies of female sex." Thereby the poem started as an amusing and topical *jeu d'esprit* for private consumption. But it is the art of the poet which enables a successful blend of the mock heroic satire and social banter that raised the poem to a high level of work of imagination.

Pope demonstrates the mock heroic convention to satirize the contemporary manners and attitudes and follies of *beau monde* London life of his time. His poem portrays a deeply competitive society where women are rivals for men's attention, and each sex contends for mastery over others. The poem certainly recognizes Belinda's 'awful Beauty' and holds her up to admiration as a goddess, as well as laughing at her follies. The social butterflies of the London society preferred to attend the late night balls, so surely they would slumber till noon. The lapdog Shock which awake Belinda from dream is a gentle show of her vanity. We are present at Belinda's toilet and watch the progress of "the Sacred rites of pride". At the dressing table we can label her self-absorption 'pride' in moral disapproval, and Belinda's dressing table is at one level a symbol of her disordered values: Bibles are equated with powder puffs and patches. Even the sacred Christian cross, strategically placed on Belinda's white breast becomes a mark of profanity which is adored and gazed at by both Jews and infidels. So throughout the poem a mode of sexual promiscuity is serialized.

The portentous style and elevated language do give dignity and importance to the unconsidered trifles of everyday life: the skirmishes between the sexes conducted with fans of playing cards (*e.g.* the game of ombre), are in fact 'mighty contents'; the snatching of the hairs is in effect a kind of rape. Fashionable society's warship of china jars of snuff boxes can be both the target of satire and an important contemporary issue that highlights the psychological effect of living in an economy full of commodities. This commodification was so intense like the 21<sup>st</sup> century, that objects and human beings are indistinguishable. Certainly the 'moving toyshop' of

Belinda's heart shows her affections fixed on wigs and sword-knots instead of whole human beings. Belinda's values then epitomize those of her world.

In the Hampton court in the midst of masquerade of fashion, affectation and sexual innuendoes we see it is reputation of chastity which is identified with female virtue, which though perhaps nonexistent in such a world: for breaking of 'Diana's law' is as sumptuous as a stained brocket, or the fall of a china jar, the death of a lapdog and the death of the husband are treated alike. However, if it is the beauty coupled with reputation of a dame that holds the passive power to affect the rational faculty of the men, then men too strive towards the façade and affectation of the so called world of the elites. They aspire to the passionate love of frivolous kinds, attend balls to promote their sexual agendas, such as done by the baron in ***The Rape of the Lock***, and it is the male ego that made him do his irrational act of cutting Belinda's lock. The female has their own ego which goes well with their beauty and charm which uphold their value in the market of material love: the fact is well heightened in Belinda's case through the employment of the machinery of the sylphs. The introduction of sylphs also enables Pope to satirize women of different type: coquette, prude, termagant etc. Therefore this representation of the Augustan society is done in a mode of burlesque, but what saves the poem from being a scurrilous abuse, like that of the Grub Street Journals, is the playful fancy, the delicate humour and pleasantry which take off the edge of banter, and make the satire less offensive and much more enjoyable to the reader.

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By Ashis Sir