
UNIT 6: ALEXANDER POPE: “THE RAPE OF THE LOCK” (BELINDA'S DRESSING ROOM)

UNIT STRUCTURE

- 6.1 Learning Objectives
- 6.2 Introduction
- 6.3 Alexander Pope: The Poet
 - 6.3.1 His Life
 - 6.3.2 His Works
- 6.4 The Text of the Poem
 - 6.4.1 Explanation of the Poem
 - 6.4.2 A Brief Idea of All the Cantos
 - 6.4.3 Major Themes and Contexts
- 6.5 Poetic Style
- 6.6 Let us Sum up
- 6.7 Further Reading
- 6.8 Answers to Check Your Progress
- 6.9 Model Questions

6.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through the unit, you will be able to:

- find out the content of the extracted verse in the larger context of the poem
- familiarise yourself with the life and works of Alexander Pope
- learn briefly about the Neoclassical age and the spirit of the Augustan age
- analyse the content and themes of the prescribed fragment
- develop further interest to read the entire poem “The Rape of the Lock”

6.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit in discussing an extracted verse from "The Rape of the Lock" will also introduce you to Alexander Pope who is regarded as the representative poet of the 18th century. The literary works of Pope are distinctly marked by a sharp sensibility towards neo-classical ideals of reason in approach, measure in expression, manner in presentation, refinement in taste and sophistication in style. Some of the literary contemporaries of Pope were Jonathan Swift, Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, with whom he was also associated with, in the course of his literary career. David Fairer in *The Cambridge Companion to Alexander Pope* ('Pope and the Elizabethans') describes Pope's literary interests as such: "Pope, like his Elizabethan predecessor, was fascinated by the spaciousness of the human mind, its labyrinths, locked rooms and inviting doorways, where hope, fear, and desire are shaped into images. He was aware of these as sites of creativity as well as delusion". (91)

As also mentioned in M.H. Abrams' *A Handbook of Literary Terms*, for the convenience of study of the history of English literature, the Neo-classical period (1660-1785) as a whole may be sub-divided into three periods namely the Restoration Age (1660-1700), the Augustan Age (1700-1745) (to which we shall refer to in the unit) and the Age of Sensibility (1745-1748). Have you wondered about the term 'neo-classical'? Splitting the word into two 'neo' means 'new' and the term "classical" refers to the ancient Greek and Roman writers whose works had inspired the writers of the period as a whole.

Some of the dominant literary ideals that characterised the neo-classical period are reason, precision, measure, refinement, elegance, urbanity and sophistication. The writers of the age practiced a certain literary decorum in keeping with these ideals, drawing inspiration from the ancient classical writers and also satirising the social issues of their time. Also, the characteristics of the period which delineated the contemporary mindset, fashion and tastes had come to be termed as 'via media' or the 'golden mean' (as also inspired by Aristotle's "golden mean" of literary decorum)

which *The Cambridge Guide to Literature in English* defines as an "artistic manifestation being a delight in proportion." (49)

The Augustan Age (1700-1745) derives its name from the Roman Emperor Augustus (27 B.C-14 A.D). During the rule of Augustus, the arts and in particular literature had greatly achieved an excellence through the works of the classical masters Homer, Virgil, Horace, Ovid, Longinus, Theocritus and Bion. The major writers of the period, Alexander Pope, Jonathan Swift, Joseph Addison and Richard Steele drew their literary parallels to the classical writers like Virgil, Homer, Horace, Ovid and Dante. Their classical works were regarded as traditional models worthy of meditating on, emulating, as well as, re-creating.

Thus, we can consider Alexander Pope as a poet of the Augustan age which is also known as the age of reason and the following unit briefly highlights the social context of the time in which he wrote through the selected poem. Also, it encourages you to read the prescribed poem at length in order to appreciate "The Rape of the Lock" in its entirety.

6.3 ALEXANDER POPE: THE POET

Before reading the extracted poem, let us discuss and find out the times that Pope lived in together with some of his major literary contributions.

6.3.1 His Life

Alexander Pope (21 May 1688- 30 May 1744), an English poet of the 18th century was born in London to Alexander Pope, a linen merchant and Edith Turner, a home-maker. As a young boy he discovered a close affinity towards nature, with his countryside home at Binfield located near the Windsor Forest. The surrounding environment stirred in him a love for nature and also found a certain reflection through his poetry. Although, his formal education was cut short due to the political situation in England and he suffered from Potts disease at the age of twelve, he spent his time effectively by reading and developing his own tastes in literature. Thus, he was

mostly self-taught and had cultivated interests in the classical works of Chaucer, Shakespeare and Dryden. Also, he took a keen interest in several languages and read a variety of works in French, Italian, Greek and Latin. Prior to the end of his formal education, he had attended two Catholic schools in London.

During this period, The Test Acts which favoured the established Church of England were a series of harsh laws imposed particularly on practicing Catholics. They were denied their basic civilian rights such as voting or any form of education among other restrictions. Being of a Catholic descent, Pope's family had to struggle against the severe laws enforced against both Catholics and Non conformists alike. As Catholics were prevented from living within 16 kms of London or Westminster, Pope's family had moved to the small estate situated near the royal Windsor Forest countryside in 1700.

Pope read extensively and drew inspiration from the Elizabethan poetry and particularly Edmund Spenser. Through his early poetic works, Pope had established repute among his immediate literary circles and his contemporaries. He had translated Homer's *Illiad* which was completed in 1720 and with the money he received, he shifted in 1719, to a villa at Twickenham known for the grotto and gardens he had designed. Pope's grotto (i.e., a garden with a small man made cave) which still stands today by a riverside was built as a personal shrine, embellished with mirrors, diamonds, crystals and other such precious gems and stones. He brought his aged mother to his home after his father passed away in 1717 and it was at Twickenham that he had spent most of his years and churned out some of his best works. He was a member of the satirical 'Scriblerus Club' and was well acquainted with both Joseph Addison and Richard Steele. Some of his life long friends were John Caryl, the Blount sisters (Teresa Blount and Martha Blount) and also the members of the Scriblerus Club. The friendship that he had shared with Teresa Blount had enabled him to endure his health problems. Along with Jonathan Swift, he was one of the last surviving members

of the Scriblerus group, who owing to his fragile health breathed his last in 1744.



LET US KNOW

Alexander Pope was a trained painter under Charles Jervas and was inclined towards all the arts with the exception of music as he was tone-deaf. Yet he wrote wonderful verses which on the contrary reflect his sense of measured rhythm. Also, his interest in landscape-gardening, as well as, architecture is well reflected in his own Twickenham villa, grotto and the gardens which was designed in both an aesthetic and appealing way.

6.3.2 His Works

Both as a poet and satirist, Alexander Pope stood for the ideals that came to dominantly characterise the literature of the neo-classical as a whole and the Augustan age in particular which he had synthesised in his works. He had embodied a certain literary decorum in his works which was in many ways a strict adherence to reason instead of (say) the Romantic imagination.

Pope's first work ***The Pastorals*** was written at the age of 16 and was published much later as part of a leading publisher, Jacob Tonson's Sixth *Miscellany* in the year 1709. Based on the theme of the four seasons and written in the pastoral form of poetry *Pastorals* was very well-received paving his way into the literary scene in London. This publication was followed by his next poem *An Essay on Criticism* (1711) which brought him to the attention of Joseph Addison and Richard Steele who were the co-founders of *The Spectator* and *The Tatler*. Through their association, Pope published an eclogue titled ***Messiah*** (1712) in *The Spectator* as well as the first draft of "The Rape of the Lock". But owing to their Whig connection, he gradually moved out of their association (as Whigs were anti-Catholics and Addison was affiliated to the Whigs) and

partly due to his own affiliation with the Scriblerus Club who were Tory supporters. Pope thus came to be associated with the club and became a life-time member of the Scriblerus Club that comprised members like John Gay, Jonathan Swift, Thomas Parnell and John Arbuthnot.

Drawing from the locales of his childhood, he wrote "**Windsor Forest**" in 1704, (published in 1713) in the pastoral form, which was centered on the theme of anticipated peace under the rule of Queen Anne. But the political reality of the time was such that Queen Anne passed away in 1714 with the result of the Hanoverian Kings coming into power rendering the Tories politically powerless for another fifty years. During this time, due to certain compulsions his family had to shift from their home at Binfield to a more secure home at Chiswick located at West London. During this period, Pope translated Homer's epic *Illiad* in heroic couplets which saw its publication in 1715. The next translation of *The Odyssey* was shared with William Broome and Elijah Fenton was completed in 1720 the publication of which in 1726 brought him financial prosperity.

The publisher Jacob Tonson had commissioned him to write an edition of *Shakespeare's Works* which was published in 1725. Inspired from Dryden's *Mac-Flecknoe*, a literary satire *The Dunciad* in its first version (comprising of three books) was published in 1728 and later a fourth book was added and published in 1742. He had published his *Essay on Man* (1733-34) anonymously and this work delved on social and philosophical issues related to man and nature. His *Imitations on Horace* (1733-38) which had also adapted and translated the works of Homer contained various discussions on the social issues of his time. The satirical work *One Thousand Seven Hundred and Thirty Eight* again adapted in Horace's style was published in 1738.

The only drama he had contributed was to John Gay and John Arbuthnot's *Three Hours after Marriage*. He had also written epistles which reflected his affection for his friend Teresa Blount, as

well as, Martha Blount, who her younger sister. Apart from the prescribed extract of "The Rape of the Lock" you may also be interested to read some more of the poems by Pope like his "Epistle to a Lady", "Epistle to Arbuthnot", "Eloisa to Abelard" among others. Although during his literary career, Pope had his share of controversy and clash of ideas with his contemporary critics, he had also established his own place in the literary scene of his time.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. State whether true or false:
a. His early years were spent in the countryside home at Binfield located near the Windsor Forest. **T/F**

b. *An Essay on Criticism* (1711) had brought him to the attention of Joseph Addison and Richard Steele. **T/F**

c. Pope was politically inclined towards the Whigs **T/F**

d. The only drama he had contributed was *Three Hours after Marriage*. **T/F**

Q2. What were the Test Acts? Why did Pope's family suffer under these harsh laws?

Q3. Name the three historically sub-divided periods under the Neo-classical period

Q4. Mention the two major translation works of Alexander Pope.

Q5. Name the members of the Scriblerus Club.



Toilet: dressing room.

6.4 THE TEXT OF THE POEM

The Rape of the Lock

(Belinda's Dressing Room)

Canto 1 (lines 121-148)

"And now, unveil'd, the **Toilet** stands display'd, (121)

Each silver Vase in mystic order laid.

First, **rob'd** in white, the **Nymph** intent adores,



Rob'd: (robed) dressed in

Nymph: a mythical spirit in the form of a beautiful, young woman

**Th' inferior Priestess:**

The maid

Off'rings: (offerings) things

Decks: to dress up and get ready

Glitt'ring: shining or sparkling

Spoil: the best of dresses and jewellery

Casket: an ornamental box which is small in size

Tortoise: tortoise shell used to make hair combs and accessories

Elephant: implies Elephant ivory.

Billet -doux: a sweet love letter

Sylphs: airy spirits

Plait: form neat folds (in the gown)

With head uncover'd, the Cosmetic pow'rs.
 A heav'nly image in the glass appears, (125)
 To that she bends, to that her eyes she rears;
 Th' inferior Priestess, at her altar's side,
 Trembling begins the sacred rites of Pride.
 Unnumber'd treasures open at once, and here
 The various **off'rings** of the world appear, (130)
 From each she nicely culls with curious toil,
 And **decks** the Goddess with the **glitt'ring spoil**.
 This **casket** India's glowing gems unlocks,

And all Arabia breathes from yonder box.
 The Tortoise here and **Elephant** unite, (135)
 Transformed to combs, the speckled, and the white.
 Here files of pins extend their shining rows,
 Puffs, Powders, Patches, Bibles, **Billet-doux**.
 Now awful Beauty puts on all its arms;
 The fair each moment rises in her charms, (140)
 Repairs her smiles, awakens ev'ry grace,
 And calls forth all the wonders of her face;
 Sees by degrees a purer blush arise,
 And keener lightnings quicken in her eyes.
 The busy **Sylphs** surround their darling care, (145)
 These set the head, and those divide the hair,
 Some fold the sleeve, whilst others **plait** the gown:
 And Betty's prais'd for labours not her own.

6.4.1 Explanation of the Poem

Before discussing the extracted verse the following sub-section highlights the brief explanation of the opening canto of "The Rape of the Lock".

The poem begins with an invocation to Pope's Muse, his close friend John Caryll who had inspired him to write on a real-life incident

involving two warring English families (Fermors and the Petres) who were loggerheads with each other. What had caused such a furore was the act of Lord (Robert) Petre's cutting of a lock of Arabella Fermor's hair by force. Thus John Caryll, who was Pope's life-long friend and also a close relative of the Fermors had suggested Pope to write a poem based on the incident. The idea behind such a suggestion was also to reflect the triviality of the incident and to reconcile the two families. Thus, Pope adds an element of the comical through the mock-epic/heroic form in order to lighten the serious theme.

Pope dedicates his poem to John Caryll in acknowledging his gratefulness for inspiring him to write the same. In this sense, Pope also differs from the traditional invocation addressed to the nine Classical Muses at the onset of an epic-poem by invoking a person instead. The invocation begins thus:

"What dire offence from am'rous causes spring,
What mighty contests rise from trivial things
I sing-This verse to CARYL, Muse! Is due:"

The first Canto set in London well past the morning hours with Belinda and her lap dog Shock in her bed chamber. She is asleep in her bed with the sun at noon time, pouring through her bed curtains. And while Belinda rests her head on the pillow dreaming, her guardian sylph, Ariel whispers something into her ear. The poet glorifies the young Belle Belinda's youthful beauty and describes how the "unnumbered" airy elves and spirits hover above her to guard her, decking her place with gifts and "golden crowns and wreaths of heav'nly flow'ers" out of their fond affection towards her. Thus, the sleeping beauty is guarded by the presence of her airy spirits while she dreams of a young man glorifying her beauty and expressing his admiration for her. But it turns out that what her guardian sylph Ariel whispers to her is a warning (to be careful) sensing a foreboding omen in the air. This is what her sylph whispers in her ear:

"This to disclose is all thy guardians can:
Beware of all, but most beware of Man!"

Sensing that his mistress had overslept, her pet dog named 'Shock' happens to leap and awaken her from her sleep. The youth in her dream addresses her as "fairest of mortals" and she is almost unable to remember her vague dream as soon as she is awakened. So, the first thing she does is to read the love-letter ("Billet-doux") on which her eyes fall first and also her charms and ardors to gain her composure. But her dream vision slips away and disappears abruptly and she is unable to recall it. Thus, she moves from her bed chamber into the space of her dressing room i.e., the toilet. And she is all set to get ready for a social outing. From here begins the extracted verse prescribed for the learner titled here as 'Belinda's Dressing Room' for the convenience of reading.

Belindas's dressing room (The Rape of the lock)

"And now, unveil'd, the Toilet stands display'd, (121)

Each silver Vase in mystic order laid.

First, rob'd in white, the Nymph intent adores,

With head uncover'd, the Cosmetic pow'rs.

A heav'nly image in the glass appears, (125)

To that she bends, to that her eyes she rears;

Th' inferior Priestess, at her altar's side,

Trembling begins the sacred rites of Pride.

Unnumber'd treasures open at once, and here

The various off'rings of the world appear, (130)

In the extracted verse of "The Rape of the Lock", the toilet refers to Belinda's dressing room. The opening lines "And now, unveil'd, the Toilet stands display'd", gives the impression of an onstage theatrical performance being unraveled for the readers and the second line adds in a dash of the mystical. With this begins the description of the dressing room activities in which the young Belinda is intently occupied in being dressed and adorned in the most fashionable finery that belongs to her. Her attendant maid referred to as the "inferior priestess" here, is initially nervous, helping her to dress up in front of the dressing-table (alluded to as the "altar") but carries out her duties

of decking her mistress, suiting the occasion. The learner may note that in a string of succession the poet here refers to Belinda as the Priestess", her maid as "inferior Priestess" and Belinda's dressing table as her "altar" as though it were a temple setting where religious rites were taking place. It in away adds a mocking tone to the triviality of Belinda's preoccupation with herself in comparison to the serious occupation of a priest, as well as, the priestly rites compared to the "rites of Pride" that she is about to indulge in with all her dressing up. Instead of the Christian ideal of humility, Belinda is shown as taking a certain pride of her beauty and appearance.

Belinda's image in the mirror is likened to the heavenly image of a "nymph", a female spirit, with her uncovered mane, face decked with cosmetics and robed in her first under layer of white clothes. Usually the word 'heavenly' is associated with 'cosmic powers' but here the words "Cosmetic pow'rs" are used in a satirical tone (of the mock-heroic tradition) to describe the cause of the young woman's heavenly appearance. She bends and gazes intently at her own reflection in the looking glass. Generally, the 'mirror' is symbolically associated with vanity or pride and this may be the point that the poet tries to make. Thus, she indulges in her world of abundant treasures which perhaps includes all her collection of dresses, jewellery and other accessories, laid open like treasure troves for her to select from, indicating how she may simply be spoilt for choice owing to the abundance of her personal treasures.

**From each she nicely culls with curious toil,
And decks the Goddess with the glitt'ring spoil.
This casket India's glowing gems unlocks,**

**And all Arabia breathes from yonder box.
The Tortoise here and Elephant unite, (135)
Transformed to combs, the speckled, and the white.
Here files of pins extend their shining rows,
Puffs, Powders, Patches, Bibles, Billet-doux.**



Enjambment: in poetry, the continuation of the sense without a pause beyond the end of the line.

Now awful Beauty puts on all its arms;

The fair each moment rises in her charms, (140)

With searching eyes, bearing a certain sense of curiosity and at the same time a careful handling and sorting, the maid helps her to make the best of selection. She then dresses Belinda in all the glittering finery. The poet now likens Belinda's gradually transforming appearance to that of a "Goddess". The caskets around her hold the best of finery and adornments brought from faraway lands, such as precious gems from India and also the best of Arabia among other treasures. Hair combs designed from tortoise shell and elephant ivory find their place of fancy in her dressing room. In the description here suddenly the images of a living tortoise or elephant is 'reduced' to mere fancy hair accessories thereby bringing to mind the question of such fanciful necessities like hair-combs only to fulfill a ladies fancy to adorn herself.

Belinda's hair-pins, powders and patches, Bibles and love letters are arranged as though these were files, rows and ranks of the army. The war imagery is again (and also mockingly) extended here to liken her to a 'warrior' geared up in the best of armour and ready to fight. Similarly, Belinda is dressed in her best and is (almost) ready to triumph over anyone with her exuding charm and beauty.

Repairs her smiles, awakens ev'ry grace,

And calls forth all the wonders of her face;

Sees by degrees a purer blush arise,

And keener lightnings quicken in her eyes.

The busy Sylphs surround their darling care, (145)

These set the head, and those divide the hair,

Some fold the sleeve, whilst others plait the gown:

And Betty's prais'd for labours not her own.

The effect and wonder of cosmetics is finally reflected on Belinda's face which both adds and hones her facial features that are naturally beautiful. With this her natural poise and grace gradually awakens and adds to her composure and her natural charm rises

over the artifice of her make-up layers. It adds a glowing radiance to her smile on her face and also highlights the powdered red blush over her naturally blushing cheeks. This adds a beauty to her eyes which flash and sparkle (like lightning), also reflecting a certain eagerness and excitement in her composure.

Hovering above her head are the busy "slyphs" or the airy spirits lovingly engaged in parting and setting her hair, folding the sleeve, tucking neat pleats on her gown and adding their final touches to her appearance before she is ready to step out of her dressing room. The final line of the verse concludes with the poet's comic observation that finally she is all set for her social outing, to receive all praises and compliments for all the toils of her maid and her airy spirits. Thus, the first stanza ends with the Belinda donned in her best and all set to go.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

- Q6.** How does the first canto of the poem begin? Briefly describe the real incident behind the poem?
- Q7.** What war imagery can you find that presents Belinda as the mock-epic hero?
- Q8.** What are the activities of the hovering airy spirits or the slyphs in the first canto?

6.4.2 A Brief Idea of All the Cantos

Does the first canto leave you curious about what follows in the rest of the poem? Then, you may be interested to know a little more about the poem before reading and finding out for yourself. The unit is divided into a total of five cantos which reveals the foreboding omen that Belinda's guardian slyph senses and whispers to her in warning.

The first Canto thus, takes place in Belinda's residence in London in her bed chambers where she is asleep and dreaming of a handsome youth. With the sublimation of her dream vision, she

wakes up from her bed and enters her dressing room to get ready for a social gathering.

Following the end of the first canto, the second Canto opens with the bright beauty Belinda setting sail on a gilded boat "on the bosom of the silver Thames" surrounded by her protective nymphs. This is when the "advent'rous Baron" sees her, admiring and eyeing her bright locks with a wish to possess them and secretly resolving to win them as well. His desire is so intense that he burns the tokens of love that he had won from his previous lover in a pyre, praying fervently to the heavens to bless him to achieve and "possess his prize".

The third Canto finds her in the meadows of flowers beside the river Thames where stands the majestic structure of the Royal Hampton Court Palace, a place where Queen Anne of England and Scotland sat for counsel or sometimes for tea. It is here that Belinda meets two adventurous knights and plays Ombre, a game of cards which turns into a sort of a battle game. Belinda like the (mock) hero wins the card-game with the help of her guardian spirit Ariel. But this is the chance that the knight takes to snip off the bright lock that he so desires.

Thus, in the fourth Canto with the help of his aide Clarissa, he draws "with tempting grace", "a two-edged weapon from her shining case." And so the knight arms himself with the shining "forfex" (scissors) to violently cease and snip the lock of Belinda's hair. Having committed this daring act of violence, the proud Baron declares his victory of "the glorious Prize". Even Clarissa expresses no sense of apology and rather treats this incident as a trivial matter. Thus, the damage is already done and as the act of snipping a lady's lock both violates and humiliates her, she feels a helpless sorrow. On seeing Belinda lost and lamenting in her sadness being unable to gather her composure, a sprite Umbriel (in a comical description) hurries to the deep Underworld to summon a bagful of Furies in order to help her avenge the knight's insulting act. Thus, Umbriel visits the

'Cave of Spleen' which is where he fetches and returns with the "wondrous bag" of potions.

The fifth Canto finds the potions magically affect Belinda who turns furious and finally decides to avenge herself repeatedly crying "Restore the lock! Restore the lock!" It thus describes the combat that takes place between her and the Baron in the Hampton Court. Finally, the bright lock of hair rises through the air to the skies with the flying sylphs "kindling" the flying lock as if it were a consecration to the heavens. The poet again mocks at how the lock of hair shall be glorified and turn into the center of attraction for the entire "Beau-monde" or the fashionable upper class society. The poem ends on the note that there will be a day when her mortal being has to give way and even her tresses "shall be laid in dust" as none can escape the inevitability of death. Thus, this irresistible desire to possess or engage in mindless war, all for a lock of hair is all in vain. The ending lines conclude the fate of the lock and the belle to whom it belonged to thus,

"This lock, the Muse shall consecrate to fame
And 'midst the stars inscribe Belinda's name."

6.4.3 Major Themes and Contexts

The snipping of Belinda's lock of hair by force explains the 'title' of the poem *The Rape of the Lock*. Do you think that the title of the poem is apt? Consider referring to the entire poem or the brief description of the cantos above to express your take on the title of the poem. Here in the poem Belinda's "sacred hair" finds its place in the heavens serving as a consecration. So appealing is the description and significance of the 'lock of hair' that it turns into a central image throughout the poem. The opening canto of the poem certainly points at to the theme of vanity in the description of a beauty-conscious Belinda, preoccupied in her dressing room with the best of cosmetics and finery.

Belinda who conducts herself and her way of life in

accordance to the ways of the rich and leisurely aristocratic class to which she belongs to is much given to vanities. *The Bible* warns against any form of 'vanity' but in the poem, the presence of Belinda's "Bibles" along with her cosmetics and fancy things itself reflects her casual attitude to Biblical wisdom. Instead of embodying the Christian virtues of austerity and humility, Belinda is seen (like the women of her time) to indulge in her womanly wiles or what is phrased here as the "rites of Pride" and vanities. The aristocratic class of her time had the wealth and leisure to indulge in the fashions of their day with much pomp and show, involving in practices of courting, socialising, etc. But true to the old adage-"pride goes before a fall", Belinda who is proud of herself pays the price of her beauty. That beauty is only skin-deep and does not last forever renders it vain for any young women like Belinda to be so proud and conscious of is hinted in the 'dressing room' extract.

Peter Conrad in *Cassell's History of English Literature* writes that "*The Rape of the Lock* is a poem in defence of art and of its perverse, neurotic cost to the artist: a tragic work and a genuinely epic one, no mere mock-epic deriding feminine triviality" (321). In the light of this comment, the closing of the poem where the Muse eternally consecrates the lock of hair to fame may also be read as an act of preservation through these immortalised verses, a work of art. The closing lines of the poem are given below to provide you with an idea of the same:

"When, after millions slain, yourself shall die:
When those fair suns shall set, as set they must,
And all those tresses shall be laid in dust,
This Lock, the Muse shall consecrate to fame,
And 'midst the stars inscribe Belinda's name."

Therefore, although with time all vanities are reduced to nothingness and one's mortal remains to dust, Belinda's (atleast one) lock of hair escapes a mortal fate in being an immortal consecration (to fame) that rises up to the heavens. Also the leisurely

ways enjoyed by the upper class (indicating sufficient time for leisure and indulgence) is satirised in the first canto. Belinda awakens at noon time in her bed chamber and thus can afford to be a late-sleeper that is to wake up at her own leisure and indulge in her beauty regimen, given to choices of her dressing room treasures and spoilt by the services of her maid and guarding sylphs. All in all, the poem which is set in the 18th century London represents its aristocratic class and intends to point at the trivialities of their time and practice. The poem in its entirety succeeds in humourously projecting the triviality of all the feud and combat, ego-clashes and extremities for just a lock of hair.

In your opinion do you consider Belinda's rage as justified? The learner may also find that the very title as well as the reoccurring image of 'the lock of hair' in the poem comes to personify Belinda or even symbolise or signify her sense of dignity and self-esteem.

6.5 POETIC STYLE

"The Rape of the Lock" is a poem which is written in the mock-heroic or the mock-epic form. The mock-heroic/epic form draws from the traditional epic narratives (like the *Illiad*, *Aenied*, *Odyssey etc.*) in its grand and elevated style but it also serves the purpose of satirising and mocking (often with humour) at the triviality of representing the insignificant with grandeur. The learner is to note that there are certain similarities and differences in style and presentation of the mock-heroic/epic form and the formal epic form. These may be listed as follows:

Similarities:

- a. The style and language employed in both the forms is grand and elevated. The use of the Heroic couplet in order to write in an elevated style and also to differentiate from ordinary language.
- b. The presence of the supernatural elements is present in both the forms. In "The Rape of the Lock" you will come

across airy spirits like the sylphs, nymphs and gnomes. Also, the visit to the Underworld is a common occurrence in both the forms. Such supernatural elements of the epic poem were termed as 'machinery'.

- c. The gods and goddesses are involved in the action of the poem. In the five cantos of the poem, you will find the presence of Phoebus, Venus, Thalestris, Olympus, Hermes, Latona, Pallas and Mars.

Differences:

- a. The traditional epic begins with an invocation to the nine Muses for showering divine inspiration on the poet who is to undertake the task of writing an epic. But in the case of "The Rape of the Lock" it is the opposite where the invocation is dedicated to his inspiring friend John Caryll.
- b. The quest motif, war and the spirit of adventure whether on land or in the high seas forms an integral part of the traditional epic form presented on a grand scale. Here in the poem, the purpose behind presenting (on such a grand scale) Belinda's boat-trip journey on the Thames, the battle of cards ('Ombre') with the "advent'rous" Knights and the fierce quarrel over 'a lock of hair' between her and the Baron is to only satirise its triviality.
- c. The action in a traditional epic is taken forward by the epic-hero but in the poem, the poet in mocking the idea of an ideal epic-hero presents Belinda as the mock-hero. Like a hero armed for war Belinda is dressed in her best, indulging herself in the vanities of beauty to triumph over many hearts. Also she takes part in the battle of cards and retaliates against the Knight for her stolen lock as if she were the hero waging war or indulging in battle.
- d. An epic poem is in general very lengthy consisting of various episodes or sagas whereas the poem "The Rape of The Lock" is short and structured.

M. H. Abrams quotes Alexander Pope as "the greatest master of the metrical, syntactical, and the rhetorical possibilities of the closed heroic couplet (127)". Pope had extensively employed the use of '**heroic couplet**' in his verses and drew his influence from John Dryden. The heroic couplet which was first introduced by Geoffrey Chaucer (*The Canterbury Tales*) is composed in the iambic pentameter (i.e. a line of ten syllables consisting of an unstressed syllable followed by stressed syllable) with the rhyme scheme aa, bb, cc and so on. Here is an example from the extract to give you an idea of the rhyme scheme.

First, rob'd in white, the Nymph intent **adores**,
With head uncover'd, the Cosmetic **pow'rs**.
A heav'nly image in the glass **appears**,
To that she bends, to that her eyes she **rears**;
Th' inferior Priestess, at her altar's **side**,
Trembling begins the sacred rites of **Pride**.

Throughout the body of the poem, Pope uses a range of literary tropes but in the given extract of the poem you will find just a few examples of such employed devices. For an instance, Pope is seen to employ a form of exaggeration known as 'hyperbole' as in the line: "And all Arabia breathes from yonder box" or uses words with similar repetitive sounds known as 'alliteration' as in "Puffs, Powders, Patches, Bibles, Billet-doux". Also the idea of the "Rape" of the lock is metaphorical, because the snipping of a lock of hair is projected as an act as brutal as rape. As Pope's idea behind the poem was to bring out the triviality of the feud centered on the lock, he had subtly employed irony throughout the body of the poem to achieve his poetic end.

According to Hayden Carruth the American poet, both Dryden and Pope wrote with the aim of "liberating poetry" from the more traditional stanzaic forms widely practiced in English poetry. This explained Pope's choice of the heroic couplet which while being a poetic form in verse was also closest to the prose form. Pope was

of the opinion that the blank verse made a poet more conscious of his language, in trying to articulate in such a way so as to make it sound different from prose. But on the other hand, stylised rhyme allowed a poet like him to articulate more naturally.

He preferred brief and concise language and in his "Essay on Criticism" mentioned that any words used as 'cant', unnecessarily or out of measure were to him mere "expletives" (*Cambridge Companion* 46). Pope was of the opinion that both art and nature were harmoniously synthesised in the works of Homer and thus he considered it important for the young poets to read the great poet.



LET US KNOW

According to *The Cambridge Guide to Literature in English*, the term mock-heroic is used to describe a satirical work that employs "for comic effect an epic style elevated out of all proportion to its trivial or dismal subject matter" (674). It also quotes Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* and *The Dunciad* along with John Dryden's *Mac-Flecknoe* as examples. The term mock-heroic is also used alternately with the term mock-epic. M.H Abrams in *A Handbook of literary Terms* describes the mock-heroic form as "purposely mismatched to a lowly subject" (40).

In the introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Alexander Pope* Pat Rogers writes: "A love of Pope starts with a love of words, and it is readily accountable that poets should long have relished the effects he taught himself to achieve" (3). Samuel Johnson had observed how Pope continuously revised and worked his every word and line to its smallest details. Thus, it is Pope's credibility of working at his craft with masterly scholarship that distinctly defines his literary work. Also his works are characterised with a certain eye for precision and measure, infusing wit and humour, injecting irony and satire, reflecting urbanity and sophistication, a skillful play of tropes and yet a balanced harmony.

In *Laureate of Peace* G. Wilson Knight opines that "Shakespeare

gives us drama and Milton epic, and Pope builds from both in *The Rape of the Lock* (1712-14)" (22). The learner will find that there is a blending of the real world, the mental or inner world (Belinda's hopes and fears, her mind) and the supernatural world (slyphs, gnomes or other airy spirits) in the poem. According to Cynthia Wall, the presence of the mythical slyphs dissolves one's notion of time and space in the poem. She comments that "The Rape of the Lock reproduces the social spaces of early eighteenth century England with crisp contemporary detail" (*The Cambridge Companion* 52). The poem in its entirety captures the imagination of the readers owing much to the addition of the 'machinery' (the supernatural elements), something that Addison had initially suggested not to include. But the spectacular effect that this addition had on the poem became one of the many reasons of Pope's criticism of Joseph Addison.

Although admired by scholars today, during his literary career Pope had stirred up controversies and had attacked and counter-attacked some of his contemporary critics and writers through his works. At times he was on the receiving end of criticism and at times he was on the attacking side. And thus holding both personal and professional grudges for some reason or the other, Pope had criticised Bentley in *The New Dunciad* (1742) and other poets and critics like Lewis Theobald, Colley Cibber, John Dennis and Ambrose Philips. Also Lord Harvey, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu were attacked in his adapted works of Horace which was again counter-attacked and to which responded through his "Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot" (1735). While there were poets like Colley Cibber who poked fun at Pope's only play *Three Hours after Marriage*, there were also others like Charles Lamb who is known to have spoken in defense of the poet in an august gathering.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

- Q9.** What is reflected in Belinda's attitude to Biblical wisdom or Christian ideals?
- Q10.** What is the mock-epic/heroic form? Define a heroic couplet.
- Q11.** What is meant by 'machinery' in the epic poem? Why did it turn into one of the reasons for Pope's criticism of Addison?
- Q12.** Who were the poets, writers and critics who were subject to the attacks of Pope's criticism?



6.6 LET US SUM UP

At the end of the unit you have learnt about the life and works of Alexander Pope. The unit highlights the extracted verses from the first canto of *The Rape of the Lock* along with a brief idea of the content in all the five cantos of the poem. The poem has been discussed with reference to the context, the social backdrop and the relevant themes. Also an idea of the mock-epic or mock-heroic form has been discussed in order to acquaint you with the style and language employed in the poem. As you read the poem at length your imagination will be stirred with the magical elements of the supernatural world, the triviality of the real world along with the comical aspects of the Underworld in Alexander Pope's masterly control of rhyming heroic couplets.



6.7 FURTHER READING

- 1) Ousby, Ian. (1992) *The Cambridge Guide to Literature in English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 2) Rogers, Pat. (2007) *The Cambridge Companion To Alexander Pope*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- 3) Sinha, M. P. (2011) *Alexander Pope: A Critical Study of His Major Poems*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers.



6.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1. a. True b. True c. False d. True

Ans to Q No 2. The Test Acts which favoured the established Church of England were a series of harsh laws imposed particularly on practicing Catholics. They were denied their basic civilian rights. Being of a Catholic descent, Pope's family had to struggle against the catholic laws as catholics were prevented from living within 16 kms of London or west minister.

Ans to Q No 3. Restoration Age, the Augustan Age and the Age of Sensibility

Ans to Q No 4. *Illiad, The Odyssey*

Ans to Q No 5. Scriblerus Club: John Gay, Jonathan Swift, Thomas Parnell and John Arbuthnot.

Ans to Q No 6. An invocation to Pope's Muse, his close friend John Caryll had inspired him to write on a real-life incident involving to warring families (Fermors and the Petres) that were at loggerheads with each other. John Caryll suggested Pope to write a poem based on this trivial incident.

Ans to Q No 7. Her hair-pins, powders and patches, Bibles and love letters are arranged in the order of files, rows and ranks of an army. The war imagery (also mockingly) extended here to liken her a warrior. Similarly, a simile of her dressing up is employed here.

Ans to Q No 8. The hovering spirits above Belinda's head are the busy sylphs or the airy spirits who lovingly engaged in adding their final touches to her appearance before she is ready to step out of her dressing room.

Ans to Q No 9. *The Bible* warns against vanity but Belinda's "Bibles" along with cosmetics and fancy things itself further reflect her casual attitude to Biblical wisdom.

Ans to Q No 10. Mock-heroic/epic form draws traditional epic narratives in it grand and elevated style. But it also serves the purpose of satirising and mocking. The heroic couplet is composed in the iambic pentameter with

the rhyme scheme aa, bb, cc and so on.

Ans to Q No 11. 'Machinary' refers to the super natural elements, something that addition had initially suggested not to include. But the spectacular effect that this addition had on the poem became one of the many reasons of popes criticism of Joseph Addison.

Ans to Q No 12. Bentley, Lewis Theobald, Colley Cibber, John Dennis, Ambrose Philips, Lord Harvey, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and Joseph Addison.

6.9 MODEL QUESTIONS

- Q1.** How was the early life and education of Alexander Pope affected by the Test Acts?
- Q2.** Describe the literary ideals and the works of Alexander Pope.
- Q3.** Give a detailed explanation of the extracted verses of 'Belinda's Dressing Room' taken from "The Rape of the Lock".
- Q4.** Briefly discuss the contents of all the five cantos of the poem "The Rape of the Lock".
- Q5.** Explain with reference to context:
 "A heav'nly image in the glass appears,
 To that she bends, to that her eyes she rears;
 Th' inferior Priestess, at her altar's side,
 Trembling begins the sacred rites of Pride"
- Q6.** Explain with reference to context:
 "Now awful Beauty puts on all its arms;
 The fair each moment rises in her charms,
 Repairs her smiles, awakens ev'ry grace,
 And calls forth all the wonders of her face"
- Q7.** What are the similarities and differences of the epic and the mock-epic/heroic forms?
- Q8.** Give a brief critical reception of Pope and the poem "The Rape of the Lock"?

**** *