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SOCIAL VANITY IN "THE RAPE OF THE LOCK "BY ALEXANDER POPE

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ABSTRACT

When Robert Lord Petre cut off a lock of Arabella hermor's hair one fateful day early in the eighteenth century , he did not know that the deed would gain worldwide fame attracting attention over several centuries. Nor, perhaps did he foresee the ill feeling his act would create between the Petre and Fermor families. The story would probably have been soon lost amid the trivia of family drama, had not John Caryll asked his good friend the poet Alexander Pope to write a little poem about the episode, one that would show the comic element of the quarrel and thus help heal it.

What began as a trivial event became, under the guidance of Pope's hand, one of the most famous poems in the English language, and perhaps the best example of burlesque we have. The Rape of the Lock was begun at Caryll's behest in 1711 , Pope spent about two weeks on it and needed a much shorter version than the one he wrote two years later ; making more additions in 1717, he then developed the final draft of the poem as it now stands.

KEYWORDS: Create, Probably, Attention, Fateful, develop, Guidance.

1. INTRODUCTION

In "The Rape of the Lock," social vanity is a prominent theme used by Alexander Pope to satirize the superficiality of the 18th-century English upper class. The poem critiques the prioritization of appearance and status over substance, exposing the trivial concerns of the aristocracy.

Key aspects of social vanity in the poem :

2. BELINDA'S VANITY :

The poem features Belinda, a young woman obsessed with her appearance and social standing. Her elaborate beauty routine is described as a mock-epic, highlighting the absurdity of equating beauty rituals with heroic deeds. The scene is even depicted with religious imagery, emphasizing the emptiness of her pursuits.

The Baron's vanity :
The Baron's desire to possess Belinda's hair, a symbol of beauty, is portrayed as an act of vanity, as he seeks to elevate his status through possession.

The mock-epic battle :
The poem mocks the upper class's frivolous concerns by portraying the feud over a lock of hair as a mock-epic battle, highlighting the absurdity of their priorities.

Satirical tone :
Pope's satirical tone, achieved through exaggeration and hyperbole, underscores the superficiality and triviality of social vanity in the poem. The poem as we have it uses the essentially trivial story of the stolen lock of hair as a vehicle for making some sophisticated comments on society and man. Pope draws on his own classical background- he had translated "the Iliad" and "the Odyssey" - to combine epic literary conventions with his own keen, ironic sense of the values and societal structures shaping his age. The entire poem , divided into five cantos, is written in heroic couplets. Pope makes the most of this popular eighteenth century verse form (rhymed iambic pentameter lines), using devices such as balance, antithesis, bathos, and puns.

In "The Rape of the Lock," vanity is a central theme that Alexander Pope explores through satire. The poem mocks the superficiality and trivial concerns of the 18th-century English upper class. Vanity is depicted not only through the character of Belinda but also through the societal norms and values that prioritize appearance and status over substance.

Belinda's toilet scene is a vivid portrayal of vanity. Pope draws a parallel between her elaborate beauty routine and the arming of warriors in epic tales like the "Iliad." This comparison highlights the absurdity of equating beauty rituals with

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heroic deeds. The scene is described with religious imagery, as Belinda worships at the "altar" of beauty, emphasizing the hollowness of her pursuits. Pope satirizes the emphasis on physical appearance, suggesting that such vanity is misplaced and trivial.

The poem extends its critique of vanity beyond Belinda to the entire aristocratic society. The feud over a lock of hair is portrayed as a mock-epic battle, underscoring the frivolity of the upper class's concerns. The Baron's theft of Belinda's hair is an act of vanity, as he seeks to elevate his status through possession of a symbol of beauty. Pope suggests that in this society, status and appearance are valued above all else, leading to a shallow and superficial existence.

Pope also addresses the theme of vanity in relationships between men and women. The poem mocks the false heroism of men and the exaggerated emotional responses of women. The characters' interactions are driven by vanity and superficial desires, rather than genuine connection or understanding. This critique extends to the societal norms that prioritize beauty and status, often at the expense of meaningful relationships and personal growth.

The burlesque genre typically takes trivial subjects and elevates them to seemingly great importance ; the effect is comic. Pope defines his tasks as showing "What dire offense from amorous causes spring,/ What mighty contests rise from trivial things". From the opening lines of the poem, suggestions of the epic tradition are clear. Pope knew well not only the Iliad and the Odyssey but also John Milton's Paradise Lost. The narrator of The Rape of the Lock harks back to Homer, raising the epic ques-tion early in the poem : "Say what strange motive, goddess ! could compel/ A well-bred lord assault a gentle belle ?" Pope's elaborate description of Belinda's toilet in canto 1 furthers comparison with the epic; it parodies the traditional epic passage describing warriors' shields. Belinda's makeup routine is compared to the putting on of armor : "From each she nicely culls with curious toil , /And decks the goddess with the glittering spoil."

The effect of using epic conventions is humorous, but it also helps establish a double set of values in the poem, making the world of Belinda and Sir Plume at the same time trivial and significant. Epic conventions contribute to this double sense in each canto : Canto 1 features the epic dedication and invocation, canto 2 the conference of protective gods, canto 3 the games and the banquet, canto 4 the descent into the underworld, and canto 5 the heroic encounters and apotheosis. In the midst of a basically silly situation, there are characters such as Clarissa who utter the always sensible virtues of the eighteenth century :

Oh ! if to dance all night, and dress all day, Charmed the smallpox, or chased old age away, Who would not scorn what housewife's cares produce, Or who would learn one earthly thing of use ?

But since, alas! frail beauty must decay,

And she who scorns a man must die a maid; What then remains but well our power to use, And keep good humor still what'er we lose?

In these lines from canto 5, Clarissa expresses the norm of Pope's satire: the intelligent use of reason to control one's temperamental passion.

The heroic couplet merges perfectly with the epic devices in the poem. As a verse form, the heroic couplet seems naturally to evoke larger-than-life situations; it is, therefore , profoundly to Pope's credit that he successfully applies such a stanzaic pattern to a trivial subject. The critic Maynard Mack has said that Pope "is a great poet because he has the gift of turning history into symbol, the miscellany of experience into meaning."

Pope, perhaps more than anyone else writing poetry in the eighteenth century, demonstrated the flexibility of the heroic couplet. Shaped by his pen, it contains pithy aphorisms, social commentary, challenging puns, and delightful bathos. (The last of these juxtaposes the serious with the trivial, as in the line "Wrapped in a gown for sickness and for show.") But the key, if there is a key, to the enduring popularity of The Rape of the Lock is the use of the heroic couplet to include -- sometimes in great cataloged lists -- those minute, precise, and most revealing details about the age and the characters that peopled it. The opening lines of canto 3 illustrate Pope's expert use of detail. The passage describes court life at Hampto Court, outside London, and is a shrewd comment on the superficiality of the people there :

Hither the heroes and the nymphs resort To taste awhile the pleasures of a court ; In various talk the instructive hours they passed. Who gave the ball, or paid the visit last ; One speaks the glory of the British Queen , And one describes a charming Indian screen ; A third interprets motions, looks, and eyes ; At every work a reputation dies. Snuff, or the fan, supply each pause of chat, With singing, laughing, ogling, and all that.

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The poet's criticism of such life is clear by the swift juxtaposition of Hampton Court life to a less pretty reality in the following lines :

Meanwhile, declining from the noon of day. The sun obliquely shoots his burning ray ; The hungry judges soon the sentence sign. And wretches hang that jurymen may dine.

Though always its critic, Pope had a keen interest in the life of London's aristocracy. A Catholic by birth, he was not always in favor with the Crown, but before th queen's death in 1714 he enjoyed meeting with a grou of Tories, including Jonathan Swift, John Arbuthnot , Francis Atterbury, and Thomas Parnell. Richard Stee and Joseph Addison, England's first newspaper editor courted him on behalf of the Whig party , but he refused to become its advocate. Thus, we can safely conclude that there is much impact of Social Vanity in "The Rape of the Lock."

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