

B.A.(H) Second year

EN202: Poetry and Drama From 1660 to 1785

Unit34: Augustan Poetry

The Rape of the Lock

By Alexander Pope

The Poet

Pope was born in London in 1688 in a catholic family. The period covering the age of Pope is generally known as the Augustan age of English literature. The writers of this age took the Classical authors as their role models and attempted to adhere to the principles of harmony, propriety, order, reason and restraint. “It was the age of reason and the age of prose, our excellent eighteenth century”, in the words of Matthew Arnold. To most authors of the period, life meant only the life of the fashionable society of the town tinged with numerous vices and follies from which flourished the vehement satires of the time. The aspiring poet Alexander Pope, being the victim of the anti-catholic sentiments at that time, was compelled to leave the capital and moved to Binfield with his family in 1700. Another disadvantage of his life was his deformed body due to his tuberculosis at the age of twelve. Whatever calamity was there in his personal life, Pope's literary career was voluminous. He was acclaimed greatly after the publication of *An Essay on Criticism* (1711), an aphoristic verse proclaiming the neo-classical good manners and common sense. His *An Essay on Man* (1733-34) rediscovered the kinship between human race and the Newtonian Universe. The four *Moral Essays* (1731-35), impinged with the idea of balance in private and public life, established his recognition as a poet of universal appeal. Pope's *An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot* (1735) made distinctions between right and wrong deeds, between good and bad literature. His two most well-known satires were *The Rape of the lock* (1712) and *The Dunciad* (1728).

The Poem

The Rape of the Lock was first published anonymously in Lintot's “Miscellaneous Poems and Translations” (1712). A revised edition of the poem was published in 1714 with its five cantos. Pope following the suggestion of a friend namely John Caryl, writes this poem for the reconciliation of the quarrel between two families – the Fermor family and the Baron family. The conflict arises from the trivial issues of cutting the lock of a lady and the delineation is in imitation of the classical epics of *Aeneid* by Virgil, *Iliad* by Homer. Although their epics recount the serious battles with great heroes and deadly armours, Pope ridiculously deals with the pretentious lifestyle of the belles and beaux of his time in the mock-heroic vein. He also follows the Rosicrucian doctrine from the French book “*Le Comte de Gabalis*” according to which the four elements are inhabited by four kinds of spirits – Sylphs (air), Gnomes (earth), Nymphs (water) and Salamanders (fire). In the opinion of G. Wilson Knight “The light militia of

the lower sky”(the Sylphs) , like the gods and goddesses of the ancient epics, increases the dramatic suspense of the poem.

The main objective of good satire is providing moral to the audience for rectifying their vices by castigation. The satire in this poem is directed not against an individual but against the frivolous activities of the young men and women of the then society. The baron typifies the aristocratic gentlemen – flirting, card playing, driving in Hyde park, visiting theatres, writing love -letters and so on and so forth .The ladies also visit those places ,sleep late at night, get up from bed in noontime , embellish themselves with puffs ,powders , perfumes , cosmetics and embroidered gowns in order to allure the fops.

Ariel , a guardian sylph of Belinda , invokes her morning dream through which he warns her of an impending danger. The game of ombre is presented as a political game of chess between the male and female counterparts, in which one party wins and the other loses. After this game , the baron treacherously cuts the beautiful lock of Belinda with the secret assistance of Clarissa.

The moral of the poem is revealed through the mouth of Clarissa in the canto five of the Rape of the Lock. Clarissa serves the spokesperson of Pope and instructs the readers that virtue of the heart ultimately prevails albeit beauty strikes the sight.

Some issues of the poem-

1. Mock -heroic conventions,
2. Mirror of the aristocratic society of the eighteenth century London,
3. Role of epic machinery,
4. Pope' s didacticism.

References

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