

Social satire in The Rape of the Lock/ Picture of contemporary life

The Rape of the Lock, like Pope's other great poems The Dunciad and Essay on Man, is a faithful mirror of the eighteenth-century life, particularly the frivolous, artificial life of the *beau monde*; of the beaux and belles. Lowell rightly observes, "As truly as Shakespeare is the poet of man as God made them, dealing with great passions and innate motives, so truly is Pope the poet of society, the delineator of manners, the exposor of those motives which may be acquired, whose spring is in habits and institutions of purely worldly origin." Pope, Addison, Steele, Swift, all caught the social conditions of their time in their works. It was Pope's success in The Rape of the Lock that he drew the picture of society of his times so admirably well and in such a fine satirical vein. The Rape of the Lock is a social satire and the purpose of the poem, as Pope himself declared was "to laugh at the little unguarded foibles of the female sex." It is a veritable apotheosis in literary guise of scent, patches and powder, and a dependable document of the eighteenth-century high life with its follies, foibles and vanities, its intrigues and jealousies. The poet's intention is to extricate the fashionable belles and beaux from the cobwebs of their follies, frivolities, vanities, moral lapses and spiritual bankruptcy.

In The Rape of the Lock Pope rails mercilessly at the follies and vanities of the fashionable women of his time who learn the arts and tricks of coquetry even before they attain womanhood. Pope's description of even the pious ladies who are under the particular care of the Sylphs is tinged with stinging satire. Their fickleness, their shifting from one lover to another is mercilessly exposed by the comparison of their heart to a moving toyshop. The fickleness and frivolities are railed at with unsparing wit which reminds us of the genial satire of Addison. Pope also satirizes the vanities of the fair sex as regards their artificial modes of improving their physical charms-their dress, complexion etc.

Addison referred to the general condition of women in one of the Spectator Papers, 'The toilet is their great scene of business, and the right adjustment of their hair the principal employment of their lives.' Pope knew the fashionable life of ladies more intimately than Addison, and in The Rape of the Lock he has presented it. Pope's description of the fashionable ladies' excessive preoccupation with toilet is informed with his sarcastic humour. He depicts the toilet operations of a belle as a sacred religious rite performed by her-she being both the priestess and the goddess of fashion. His satiric intention is clear from his painting Belinda's adoring as the arming of Achilles: 'Now awful beauty puts on all its arms.' Elwin rightly says that in the The Rape of the Lock the "world of fashion is displayed in its most gorgeous and attractive hires, and everywhere the emptiness is visible beneath the outward splendor. The beauty of Belinda, the details of her toilet, her troops of admirers, are all set forth with unrivalled grace and fascination, and all bear the impress of vanity and vexation." The moral and spiritual bankruptcy of the fashionable ladies comes in for the most pungent satire of Pope. Merciless satire whips the lines,

"Here files of pins extend their shining rows,

Puffs, powders, patches, bibles, billet-doux."



Through the juxtaposition of the Bible with billet-doux and toilet articles Pope reveals the moral and spiritual bankruptcy of the fashionable aristocratic ladies like Belinda. Pope rails at scandal-mongering which reigned supreme among the belles and beaux, of the time. The horrible exposure of the dreadful scandal-mongering is to be found in the deadly wit:

"At every word a reputation dies." (Canto III)

Through his brilliant portraits of Belinda's toilets, the voyages in the river and the game of ombre, Pope exposes the emptiness and the perversity at the high English society of the then time.

One of the fashionable pleasures of the beau monde was the trip on the Thames in the afternoon in decorated barges. The fashionable young men who were as idle and vain as their female counterparts accomplished the belles. Neatly gilt French romances of enormous length, extending to as many as twelve volumes and running to several thousand pages were their favourite study. The beaux of the day boasted of conquering the hearts of many beauties, and their main concern was to run after new beauties. Pope's raillery of the beaux' emptiness, silliness and foolishness is pungent enough. As G.H. Mair rightly says, 'From no other poem could you gather so fully and perfectly the temper of the society in which our classic poetry was brought to perfection, its elegant assiduity in trifles, its brilliant artifice, its paint and powder and patches and high-handed shoes, its strutting walk in life as well as in verse.'

Amidst purely poetic description and romance sometimes does Pope pile up series of phrases or sentences in pure seriousness of tone, though never far away from the sarcastic grim peculiar to Pope, that creates an unexceptionally poignant bathos. For example,

"No louder shrieks to pitying Heav'n are cast,

When husbands or when lap-dogs breathe their last."

Here Pope satirizes the distorted perspectives and muddled trivialities of Belinda's world. Pope diffuses his satirical views on society in its varied aspects. His range of satire is much wider. The true end of satire is the amendment of vice by correction. The satirist is no more an enemy to the offender than the physician to the patient when he prescribes harsh remedies to an inveterate disease.

Pope's social banter is a marvel of wit and art. His sharp invectives are artistically enwrapped in fancy and fantasy to prevent them from degenerating into a personal libel. To have given in a single poem the maximum expression to the social and moral characteristics, the manners and literary taste, of an epoch is a feat that few have been able to perform. Lowell rightly says that "Pope stands by himself in English verse as intellectual observer and describer of personal weaknesses."