
UNIT 2 LIFE AND WRITINGS OF ALEXANDER POPE

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2.0 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

Our aim through this unit is to familiarize you with Pope and his major works so that you can contextualize the poem given in your course for detailed study.

At the end of the study of this Unit, you will be familiar with:

- the life of Pope,
- his major works that include 'An Essay on Criticism', 'An Essay on Man', 'The Rape of the Lock' and 'The Dunciad' and
- 'The Rape of the Lock' as a mock epic poem and social satire

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous Unit (Unit 1) you were given a brief history of English literature till the 18th century. Then you learnt about the characteristics of 18th century poetry. To refresh what you have read, we once again give you some of the distinguishing features of 18th century poetry such as the use of rhymed couplets, the employment of classical allusions, the elements of logic, reason and satire, a close adherence to form, restraint, traditional order and values, deep interest in society, men and manners, emphasis on realism, didacticism and classical rules. Pope's 'The Rape of the Lock' fulfills almost all the above features of the 18th century poetry.

Before we take up Pope's masterpiece, 'The Rape of the Lock' for a detailed analysis, let us talk about the life and writings of its author, Alexander Pope, one of the exemplary representatives of 18th century literature. Alexander Pope was a poet, critic, translator and satirist whose writings reveal his keen observation of men, manners and society. 'The Rape of the Lock' is a good example of 18th century Neo- Classical poetry for the following reasons:

1. this poem is remarkable as a mock epic, modelled on classical epics, featuring some of the features of the epic genre,
2. as a social satire, satirizing those who fail to adhere to the norms and standards of conduct and behaviour, and
3. as a poem that reflects in its poetic diction and format, the salient features of prose such as reason, logic, simple and straightforward and easily comprehensible words.

2.2 LIFE OF ALEXANDER POPE

Alexander Pope was born in a Roman Catholic family in London in 1688. Unfortunately, he contracted tuberculosis of the bone early in his years which affected his spine and he suffered from stunted growth, standing four feet and six inches. Pope with his physical impediment did not go to any university and was self educated with his avid reading. He also developed an appreciation for the natural world where he recognized Nature's order designed to keep on par with the Universal order. Though he remained in ill health throughout his life, he was able to support himself as a translator and writer.

Pope, a short man with a curved spine, was sensitive to physical appearance and developed a deep psychological complex with reference to his personality. He could not get admission in any university, which at that time in England was mainly Protestant and discriminated against the Roman Catholics. He did not have any physical activity because of his damaged spine that caused his short stature. But he had a sharp mind and diverted all his time to reading and writing. By the age of 12, Pope had written two of his best early poems – 'On Solitude' and 'A Paraphrase of St. Thomas Kempis'.

These two poems are significant as they reveal the poet's love of solitude, imposed on him by his physical deformity and his everlasting faith in God.

2.3 LITERARY WORKS OF POPE

A razor sharp witted satirist of public figures and their behavior, Pope had his quota of supporters and detractors. Jonathan Swift, the brilliant satirist of that period was among his select close friends. To read his work is to be exposed to the order and wit of the 18th century poetry that preceded the Romantic poets. Pope primarily used the heroic couplet, and his lines are immensely quotable. From "An Essay on Criticism" come famous phrases such as "*To err is human, to forgive, divine,*" "*A little learning is a dangerous thing,*" and "*For fools rush in where angels fear to tread.*"

2.3.1 “An Essay on Criticism”

Barely in his early twenties, Pope’s making of a poet -critic was in evidence in his ‘An Essay on Criticism’. Though titled an essay, it was written not in prose but in verse. This piece revealed the influence of ancient Latin and Greek critics, notably Quintillian, Horace, Aristotle, and his French contemporary, Nicolas Boileau.

We have the foreshadowing of Pope’s genius in this early poem “An Essay on Criticism” written in heroic couplets employing the language of conversational and straightforward prose. The content is about the qualities of a good critic which approximates to classical conventions of maintaining good and true taste. A good critic should know his limits and should not launch beyond his depth: “*Launch not beyond your depth, but be discreet, / And mark that point where sense and dullness meet.*”

Pope’s commitment to order where art should imitate Nature and to the worth and value of the ‘Ancients’ has its beginning in his powerful maiden effort on literary criticism.

As stated earlier, 18th century is famous as the age of satire and one of the main reasons for the development of satire was the growth of political partisanship between the Tories and the Whigs. The two great poets of the 18th century who were famous as satirists were John Dryden and Alexander Pope. The third writer of the 18th century Jonathan Swift, the author of *Gullivers’ Travels* was a prose satirist. Dryden’s *Absalom and Achitophel* is considered to be the greatest political satire in English literature.

Alexander Pope was best known for his four major works: ‘An Essay on Criticism’ (1711), ‘The Rape of the Lock’ (1712–14), ‘The Dunciad’ (1728), and ‘An Essay on Man’ (1733–34), -- the two essays mentioned are in verse form while the other two ‘The Rape of the Lock’ and ‘The Dunciad’ are verse satires.

Dryden often considered as the father of English literary criticism, defined satire as “an employment of sarcasm, irony, or keen wit in ridiculing some prevailing vices, absurdities, abuses or follies in an individual or social group” He said the true purpose of satire is ‘amendment of vices by correction’. “Satire is a kind of poetry, without a series of action, invented for the purging of our minds; in which human vices, ignorance, and errors, and all things besides, which are produced from them in every man, are severely reprehended; partly dramatically.” Apart from political satires, this genre was employed in the 18th century to improve the morals and manners of people.

Satire is an essential feature of Pope’s poetry. While Pope was a genius, his satires were more of a personal nature, vindictive and harsh to cause pain to his enemies whom he targeted. He is considered one of the best of epigrammatic poets in English literature. Pope came from a Roman Catholic family. Pope had many close friends belonging to his religion. One of them was the wealthy squire John Caryll who persuaded him to write ‘The Rape of the Lock’, on an incident involving his relatives.

His earliest attempt at verse, “An Essay in Criticism” brought him success and fame as early as in his twenty- third year. His epigrams have become a part of our daily usage of English. Before we take up ‘The Rape of the Lock’ for a critical

study, let us briefly give the theme of Pope's other two major poems, 'An Essay on Man' and 'The Dunciad'.

2.3.2 'An Essay on Man'

'An Essay on Man' is a summary of Pope's belief that God's creation of the universe is perfect. He states that his objective in writing this poem is mainly to 'vindicate the ways of God to men'. So the assumption that he explores in the poem is almost close to what Robert Browning the poet who came a century later said: "*God's in His heaven — all's right with the world!*" Accepting the order designed by God is the first and foremost duty of Man. Man has his place in the hierarchical order that constitutes the 'vast chain of being' is next to the angels and above God's other creations like beasts and birds. To God all creatures are the same and He has no favourites and whatever He has designed should not be violated. Pope says even if man cannot know God's purposes, he cannot complain about his position in the 'Great Chain of Being' and must accept that "Whatever IS, is RIGHT" meaning that all is for the best and that everything happens according to God. This kind of acceptance is what later writers like Voltaire dismissed as fatalism. But at the time Pope wrote, it was regarded as 'optimistic philosophy'. Man should understand and accept his place in God's scheme of things. "Know thyself" is his exhortation to Man who should use the power of reason bestowed on him to regulate his behaviour. Pope then discusses Man's relationship with others in the society— his social contract with family, government, and religion. He focuses on the bonds that unite Man with others, in particular the bond of love. From instinct that guides Man in his infancy, he moves towards reason, then self love and finally universal love that bind him to all of God's creation. The poem written in four epistles dwells "On the Nature and State of Man, with Respect to Happiness" and depicts Man's various attempts to achieve true human happiness. Pope sounds moralistic when he says that virtue alone can generate such happiness. Pope's thesis of acceptance of the hierarchical order of the Divine that governs the vast chain of the universe is possible only if we accept the disparity among men as a part of reality and as a part of the heavenly design and not militate against it.

Pope wrote in the 18th century, which among other things is known as the age of Enlightenment. The Enlightenment began in the middle of the 17th century and lasted until the end of the 18th century. With a strong emphasis on reason and on the advancement of science, the age of Enlightenment reflected the ideal that man could understand the world around him. This hope for understanding and outlining the human condition is at the heart of 'An Essay on Man'.

2.3.3 'The Dunciad'

Let us look at one more of Pope's celebrated poems, a mock heroic satire, 'The Dunciad'. What is a mock epic satire? There are three words- epic, mock epic and satire. Mock-epic is also referred to as mock-heroic which adapts the elevated heroic style of the classical epic poem to deal with a trivial subject. All the epic devices such as prayer or invocation to the Muses or the Goddesses of poetry, the intervention of supernatural agents in human affairs, grandiose speeches and exalted diction are employed by the mock epic poet to delineate a worthless and trivial subject. The outstanding English mock-epic genre was perfected by Alexander Pope. We will study his brilliant outstanding poem in this genre, 'The Rape of the Lock' (1712–14), which has for its theme a society gentleman's theft

of a lock of hair from a society lady. Pope treated the incident as if it were comparable to events that sparked the Trojan War.

More than a decade after the publication of the ‘Rape of the Lock’, Pope wrote ‘The Dunciad’, an equally powerful, vitriolic mock epic satire. The work exists in three versions, published in 1728, 1742, and 1743, the year before Pope’s death. This poem is a satirical attack on fellow literary figures, who Pope felt were the cause for the moral and intellectual decline both in England and Europe.

In the first two versions, Pope targets his rivals—the writer and editor Lewis Theobald and the playwright Colley Cibber attacking them of dullness and for their ambitious audacity to rise high in the literary world. The final version of The Dunciad uses mythological allusions portraying the goddess of dullness crowning a dull poet Bayes to be the King of the realm of darkness. Bayes is intended to be a reference to Colley Cibber. Pope then describes a competition among all dull literary figures of his time which is presented in vulgar and bad taste. The poem ends with the ultimate triumph of Dullness as a fulfillment of the prophecies that Cibber dreams. Pope presents both good and evil as allegorical figures representing good and evil. Those that represent good include art, science, religion, morality, logic, and so on. The poem depicts the defeat of reason and intellect and presents chaos as the triumphant force. It ends with a return to the earlier state of chaos from which the world had emerged due to the positive forces of reason and logic. In conclusion the poem conjures up an apocalyptic vision whereby England and Europe will be buried in universal darkness. Pope begins the poem on a light hearted note through the employment of the mock epic style and moves to an angry and bitter tone to attack his rivals. The classical allusions are not easy for an ordinary reader to make sense of, without proper annotation. *The Dunciad* is different from ‘The Rape of the Lock’ mainly because its subject matter is personal. The poem is more of an exercise in personal revenge.

Check Your Progress 1

(i) Give a brief summary of Pope’s ‘An Essay on Criticism’.

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(ii) How did Dryden define satire?

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(iii) What is the central idea of ‘An Essay on Man’?

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(iv) Give an example each of irony, sarcasm and wit.

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(Please check your answers with those given at the end of this Unit.)

2.4 THE RAPE OF THE LOCK

You have now read about Pope and his three famous works – ‘An Essay on Criticism’, ‘An Essay on Man’ and ‘The Dunciad’. The three poems give us an insight into Pope’s genius and mind as a poet and a satirist, as a creative artist and as a critical satirist. We find these views are present in ‘The Rape of the Lock’. For example his views that a critic should possess a true and refined taste, his strong belief in the hierarchical order of creation whereby Man has to accept whatever is bestowed on him and not complain about disparity in status and position in society and his intolerance of mediocrity and dullness among writers that is the root cause of intellectual and moral decline are presented in ‘The Rape of the Lock’, albeit not explicitly. Though ‘The Rape of the Lock’ was written a decade earlier than ‘The Dunciad’, it is a poem that exhibits all the views and brilliance of Pope where his sharp satire is tempered by good humour and geniality.

‘The Rape of the Lock’ is the most complete and the most popular of Pope’s works. It is a mock epic poem in five cantos and has for its subject a conflict between two Roman Catholic families, who were allied to his friend John Caryll. It depicts a trivial incident of a young man snipping a lock of hair from a young lady belonging to another family. Pope was requested by his friend, John Caryll to write a poem to reconcile the two families. Pope treated the dispute that ensued as a mighty epic war similar to the war between Greeks and Trojans in *The Iliad* written nearly 2500 years ago in 759 BC by the Greek poet Homer. The war in *The Iliad* was over the abduction of the legendary Greek beauty, Helen by the Trojan prince, Paris. Pope uses the pomp and grandeur of Homer’s epic to depict a story of such a trivial nature. Hence it is known as a mock epic where it ridicules the participants engaged in a quarrel over a courtly gentleman(the Baron) sniping a small curl of a genteel aristocratic lady (Belinda) more to keep it as a treasured lock. The poem also ridicules the elite society in which they lived but the tone is less serious, and more pretentious and lighthearted than what one comes across in ‘The Dunciad’. Belinda feels deeply flattered that her beauty has caught the fancy of the Baron, but she displays artificial anger that her modesty had been violated. Pope mocks the glitter and glamour of this elite world even though he has a sneaking appreciation and admiration for the heroine of the poem, Belinda. She is beautiful, charming, and her pretentious anger and resentment over the Baron’s act is in keeping with the 18th century morals and code of conduct.

Though the prescribed text is Canto 3, we will give you a summary of the entire poem so that it makes it easy to place Canto 3 in the overall scheme of the poem.

The poem is in the mock epic genre, using all the exalted epic style and devices in a narrative on a trivial subject. The main features of a mock epic include:

- a) A sarcastic (mocking) tone.
- b) The heightened or elevated style and form of the serious epic poem. (The classical epic had an exalted theme and an elevated style to complement it)
- c) Ridiculing a trivial or inconsequential subject

Among the many epic devices used at the beginning of a poem are an announcement about the theme of the poem; an invocation to the Muses i.e., prayers to the Muses to inspire the poet to write the poem and the use of supernatural elements. (The classical epic made the intervention of Gods in human affairs and thus there was no blurring of the link between the natural and the supernatural)

‘The Rape of the Lock’ begins with an announcement of the theme of love and war followed by an address to the Muse. The poet also dedicates the poem to his friend John Caryll who commissioned the poem.

The summary given is just an outline of the poem with no reference to the Classical gods and goddesses who interfere in human affairs. We will refer to them when we analyze the prescribed text Canto 3 in the next Unit.

Check Your Progress 2

(i) What are the main features of a mock epic poem?

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(ii) What epic devices does a mock epic poem employ?

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(For answers please refer to the end of this Unit)

2.4.1 Canto 1

Belinda, the heroine is still sleeping even as dawn breaks out. She dreams about a handsome youth telling her that she has the protection of a large number of Spirits—like the Gods and Goddesses we come across in the Classical epics

like *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* who are the invisible guardians of women's chastity. Her personal guardians, the youth tells her, are the Sylphs and they specially protect women who reject Man and his overtures.

Ariel the chief of the Sylphs warns her that a dreadful event is likely to happen to her and that she should be wary of Man. When Belinda wakes up, she forgets the dream and gets ready to go to the card party at Hampton Court. Her dressing is an elaborate ritual similar to warriors putting on their armour before going to the battlefield. She looks at the mirror and feels happy to see her mirror image surpassingly beautiful almost like a goddess. While the classical reference to Helen of Troy is implicit, Belinda is not Helen of Troy. Belinda's battle field is the card table and the game of cards is the battle. Canto 1 sets the tone of the poem, mocking at the inane and meaningless activities of the elite women in society.

2.4.2 Canto 2

Belinda is the centre of attraction of the party she goes to by taking a boat ride to Hampton Court. While she looks arrestingly beautiful her crowning glories are the two ringlets that dangle on her ivory neck. One of the young gentlemen on the boat, the Baron, particularly admires Belinda and is determined to steal the ringlet and keep it as his priceless possession. The Sylphs, who are Belinda's protectors hover over her to protect her. The cutting of the locks is what the poem is all about and this is an euphemism for man's conquest over women. Pope questions the sexual mores of the period when he says

"When success a Lover's toil attends, / few ask, if fraud or force attain'd his ends".

'The Rape of the Lock' represents a threat to woman's chastity more serious than just the mere theft of a curl. The comparison is with Helen's abduction by the Trojan prince Paris

2.4.3 Canto 3

Belinda sits down to a game of cards, described as the battle field. The cards are troops combating on the "velvet plain" of the card-table. Belinda, under the watchful care of the Sylphs, begins to play. This frivolous pastime is followed by the next ritual amusement of the serving of coffee. The curling vapors of the steaming coffee remind the Baron of Belinda's swirling ringlet and of his intention to cut it. The Sylphs try to protect her, but when their chief Ariel, discovers "an earthly lover lurking at her (Belinda's) heart." he gives up protecting her. The implication is that she secretly loves being admired and feels flattered even if her honour is violated. Finally, the shears close in on the curl. The deed is done, and the Baron exults while Belinda's screams fill the air. But her screams are more of an affectation than genuine. Society demands such a reaction as the correct response when women's chastity is threatened.

2.4.4 Canto 4

While Belinda shows her anger and resentment over the incident, her friend Thalestris asks her to take revenge. Thalestris then goes to Sir Plume, "her beau," asks him to demand of the Baron that he returns Belinda's lock. Sir Plume makes a weak request to the Baron who disdainfully refuses to agree to part with the

lock. Belinda goes into a fit of sorrow and self-pity and regrets not having heeded the youth's dream-warning, and laments the lonely, pitiful state of her sole remaining curl.

2.4.5 Canto 5

The Baron remains impassive against all the ladies' tears and reproaches. This is followed by a moralizing speech by Clarissa (the wise woman who represents Pope's voice) but it falls on deaf ears. Belinda, Thalestris and the rest of the ladies assembled there ignore Clarissa and proceed to launch an all-out attack on the offending Baron. In the battle between the two opposing genders, Belinda gains an advantage and she demands the Baron return the lock. But unfortunately the ringlet gets lost in the chaos, and cannot be found. The poem ends on a note that the lock has moved from the earth and ascended to heaven and shines like a star in the sky. In this way, the poet reasons, it will attract more envy than it ever could on earth as a large number of people can now see the visible and beautiful star.

2.5 GLOSSARY

Exemplary:	Praiseworthy, commendable
Poet Critic:	The "creative" writer who also feels the need to write literary criticism, as if the creative act of writing poetry is not quite finished unless it is accompanied by some critical analysis
Salient:	Noteworthy, important
Roman Catholic:	One who belongs to the Christian Church based in the Vatican (near Rome) and presided over by a Pope
Stunted:	Undersized, diminutive
Impediment:	Hindrance
Protestant:	Western Christian, but not an adherent of the Roman Catholic
Discriminate:	Differentiate
Detract:	To defame, to disparage
Wit:	One who has the ability to express oneself intelligently in a playful or humorous manner,
Ancients:	The ancient Roman and Greek authors
Dunciad:	A World of Fools
Epigrammatic:	Terse and witty and like a maxim
Squire:	A dignitary, a gallant
Vindicate:	Show to be right
Hierarchical:	Classified according to different levels
Vast Chain of Being:	A hierarchical order of all beings arranged according to an order of perfection.

ALEXANDER POPE:
'THE RAPE OF THE
LOCK'

Fatalism:	Everything that happens is predetermined and therefore inevitable and unchangeable
Optimistic philosophy:	The theory of philosophy that the world is the best of all possible worlds
Disparity:	The condition of being unequal
Militate:	To oppose, to conflict with
Vitriolic:	Bitterly scathing, caustic
Allegory:	A form in which the action and other elements stand for something else in real life
Apocalyptic:	Foretelling of devastation or ultimate doom
Annotation:	Interpretation, explanation
Albeit:	Even though
Explicit:	Clearly expressed
<i>The Iliad:</i>	It is an epic poem. It narrates the story of the war between the Trojans and the Greeks. The war began after the abduction (or elopement) of Queen Helen of Sparta Greece) by the Trojan prince Paris. Helen's jilted husband Menelaus convinces his brother Agamemnon, king of Mycenae, to lead an expedition to retrieve her. The poem presents a realistic view of human nature. Homer understands that human beings are flawed; they are driven by raw emotions and feelings. (Keep this in mind to understand why Pope designed 'The Rape of the Lock' as a mock epic poem, in imitation of <i>The Iliad</i>)
Muses:	Goddess of poetry, a source of inspiration
The Sylphs:	Spirits of the air
Hampton Court:	The palace at Hampton Court was once the secondary residence of the British monarchy. Located a few miles from London along the River Thames, it grew into and was often used to entertain foreign dignitaries; where British "statesmen" conduct important political affairs and where the queen receives the counsel of advisors. Pope also trivializes the queen's activities by emphasizing that, as well as counsel, she takes tea.
Implicit:	Implied rather than directly expressed
Inane:	Pointless, lacking sense
Euphemism:	A mild, indirect, or vague term for one that is considered harsh, blunt, or offensive
Shears:	Scissors
Thalestris:	In Greek mythology, Thalestris is the name of one of the Amazons, race of warrior women who excluded men from their society.

Beau: A male companion or friend with whom the woman has a romantic relationship

2.6 SUMMING UP

In this Unit we provided a brief introduction to Alexander Pope's life and some of his major works. These were 'An Essay on Criticism', 'An Essay on Man', 'The Dunciad' and 'The Rape of the Lock'.

We also gave you a summary of the five Cantos which form the poem 'The Rape of the Lock'. We also talked about the poem being a mock epic by having certain features of the epic genre. The poem was also viewed as a social satire.

Pope's satires all targeted his personal, political and social opponents. 'The Dunciad' was a brilliant satire, but full of anger and hostility that Pope inflicted on all his literary rivals and critics. This satirical poem is a scathing attack on the cultural decline of his age. His two poems- "An Essay on Man" and "An Essay on Criticism" articulate many of the central tenets of 18th-century aesthetics and moral philosophy. The other major works of Pope include his translation of Homer and his edition of the works of William Shakespeare. He is recognized as a great formal master, an eloquent expositor of the spirit of his age, and a representative of the culture and politics of the Enlightenment.

As a public figure unafraid to express his opinions, Pope faced public criticism throughout his career. But there is no doubt that he was respected as a major literary voice of the Augustan Age, a key figure in the sphere of letters, with a wide satiric range that was both sublime and vulgar.

2.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress1

- (i) In 'An Essay on Criticism' Pope talks about the essential qualities of a good critic which include knowing one's limitations and not going beyond one's depth.
- (ii) Dryden defines satire as an employment of sarcasm, irony or keen wit in making fun of some prevailing vices or follies in society.
- (iii) 'An Essay on Man' is about Pope's belief that God's creation of the Universe is perfect.
- (iv) Irony: "A Fire station burns down"

Sarcasm: "That is what I needed today"- when something bad happens
Wit: "Congratulations is the civility of envy"

Check Your Progress 2

- (i) The main features of a mock epic are a mocking tone, an elevated style and ridiculing an insignificant event.
- (ii) Some epic devices are an invocation to a Muse, an announcement about the theme of the poem and the use of supernatural elements.