



**UNDERSTANDING POPE:  
THE RAPE OF THE LOCK**

Robert A. Albano

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**MERCURYE PRESS**

**Los Angeles**

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## Understanding Pope

## BACKGROUND ON ALEXANDER POPE

**Alexander Pope** was born in 1688 and died in 1744. At this time in England the conflict between **Protestants** and **Roman Catholics** was still quite strong. And the Catholics, being the minority group, were often the victims of prejudice and unjust laws. Alexander Pope was a Catholic. Because of this, he could not attend a university; he could not vote; and he could not hold any public office. But despite these obstacles, Alexander Pope became one of the most prominent men of letters in the history of England. He was a critic, a translator, an editor, and, most importantly, a poet.

Pope was also a financial success. Fairly early in his career, his writing, especially his **translations** of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, provided him with a sufficient income. He was thus able to live the life of a gentleman. He was also the friend of many other notable writers during the time, including the other truly great writer of this particular time in history, **Jonathan Swift**. Achieving the status of gentleman and literary great, Pope was able to socialize with aristocrats and the more fashionable society of England. As certain critics suggest, he would often join "the masculine world of coffeehouse and tavern." His life was a comfortable one.

Critics divide Pope's literary career into three stages:

**1710-17            Period of Light or  
Non-Controversial Poetry**

"An Essay on Criticism" (1711)

"Rape of the Lock" (1712)

Revision of "Rape of the Lock" (1717)

**1717-27            Period as Translator and Editor**

Translation of *The Iliad* by Homer (1720)

Edition of Shakespeare's Works (1725)

Translation of *The Odyssey* by Homer (1726)

**1727-44            Period of Sharp Satire and  
Ethical Poetry**

*The Dunciad* (verse satire, Books 1-3, 1728)

*An Essay on Man*

(poetry on ethics and philosophy, 1734)

*The New Dunciad* (The Fourth Book, 1742)

## SOCIAL CRITICISM

Pope wrote many other works besides the ones listed above. However, one of the listed works that deserves special mention is *The Dunciad*. In this **satire** or **mock epic**, Pope ridicules (or makes fun of) his literary enemies. In this regard, Pope's work is quite similar to a work of satire from the preceding age, *MacFlecknoe* (c. 1678), by **John Dryden**. But *The Dunciad* accomplishes several other goals in addition to mocking Pope's literary enemies. (1) It reflects the **Age** that Pope was living in. At this time there is a noticeable shift away from the aristocracy and to the commercial class as a social force of power and influence. Not everyone in England felt that such a shift was positive or progressive. (2) The **Themes** of the satire suggest a decline in the quality of life. Pope depicts morality, education, literature, and art as being in a state of decline or decay. The world is becoming a worse place to live. Such themes would reappear in literature during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The most notable example is a long poem entitled *The Waste Land* (1922) by T.S. Eliot. (3) In Pope's poem a number of **Characters** are called **dunces** (which refers to foolish or stupid people). Pope suggests that the dunces dominate or have taken over society. This is a very obvious example of **social criticism**. Pope was not alone in viewing society as a world of dunces. His friend and fellow author, **Jonathan Swift**, suggested the same idea in *Gulliver's Travels* (1726). In that work of prose satire, Swift created a group of characters that he called **yahoos**. The yahoos and the dunces represent the same idea.

## SOME COMMENTS ON "THE EDUCATOR"

As noted above, *The Dunciad* is a satirical work of **social criticism**. Pope wrote the fourth book or section of this long poem in 1742. In this book Pope sharply criticizes the misuse or misapplication of human reason and learning. Apparently, such misuse was quite common in Pope's time, as it is today.

In the fourth book the goddess Dulness rules over the land, and numerous **dunces** (fools, weak-minded individuals) push forward to come up to her and speak. One of these dunces is the **Educator**. The Educator is a satiric portrait of someone Pope actually knew: Dr. Busby, the headmaster of Westminster School. Pope's Educator is a hard and stern taskmaster who would often beat students who did not study or did not learn their lessons properly:

[His] index-hand  
Held forth the virtue of the dreadful wand;  
His beavered brow a birchen garland wears,  
Dropping with infant's blood, and mother's tears.  
(lines 139-42)

The rod or sticks that teachers would beat their students with were often made from birch trees. The Educator wears a garland or crown made from the branches of birch trees to symbolize his cruelty. Pope also notes one boy who is pale with fear and shakes in the presence of the Educator. The scared boy is holding his breeches, the back of his pants, because he

has just received a whipping.

The Educator presents a speech to the goddess Dulness in which he explains that he only allows **rote learning** to take place in his school. Rote learning refers to memorizing large amounts of information without having the students really comprehend or understand the information. He never allows the students to use their "fancy" (line 156), their imaginations. Instead, the Educator will "confine" their thoughts. He will only allow them to memorize the information that he feels is important. As the Educator's **metaphor** explains, these teachers "hang one jingling padlock on the mind" (line 162). In other words, they try to lock up the minds of the students so that the students will not think freely for themselves. Of course, the Educator does not like poets. And he regrets it deeply if he cannot eliminate any poetic talent that a student may have (lines 163-65).

Pope obviously did not appreciate the educational system in England. In the passage on the Educator, the poet is explaining that people become poets or great statesmen despite the educational system, not because of it.

## PURPOSE AND METHOD IN *THE RAPE OF THE LOCK*

The story told in *The Rape of the Lock* is based on a true incident or event. In a fashionable teahouse in London, a man named Lord Petre cut off a lock of hair (a curl) from a woman named Arabella Fermor. Lord Petre did this as a joke and, perhaps, because he was also attracted to the woman. Arabella Fermor, however, did not find the matter amusing or funny at all. She became quite angry with Lord Petre, and that anger created a large conflict between her friends and family and his friends and family. The conflict lasted for some time. Alexander Pope, who personally knew both Petre and Fermor, decided to write this poem as a way to get them to see how ridiculous or silly their fight was. Pope wanted them to become friends again. This, then, was the primary **purpose** of the poem.

Pope was only partially successful in achieving his purpose. At first both Lord Petre and Arabella Fermor were quite pleased with the poem. But then a number of people began to comment on the **sexual imagery** in the poem. This imagery suggested that there was something more than just a friendship existing between Petre and Fermor. Then Petre and Fermor began to have second thoughts. They were no longer quite so pleased with Pope's work. Pope, though, did have the best of intentions. He even dedicated the poem to Arabella Fermor.

As time passed, the poem continued to be a favorite among many people Pope knew. In fact, it was so popular that Pope decided to revise it and improve it. The first version, written in 1712, was only two cantos

(or sections) long. The second version, completed in 1717, contains five cantos. This second version, especially, established Pope (as some critics suggest) as the master of "witty, urbane **satire**." Some critics even add that it is "the most brilliant **mock epic**" in English literature.

In the poem, the character of the **Baron** represents Lord Petre. And the character of **Belinda** represents Arabella Fermor. The primary **setting** is the tearoom or teahouse. And the **conflict**, quite simply, may be referred to as "the battle of the sexes." This is the expression used to describe differences and occasional conflicts between the two genders. However, it is especially used to describe the conflict between a man and a woman when their relationship develops difficulties or even falls apart.

The student should especially note two poetic devices or features. (1) Pope uses **literary allusions** or references to the great epics of the past: *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, *The Aeneid*, and *Paradise Lost*. (2) But perhaps the most important poetic feature of this poem is **hyperbole** (or exaggeration). The poet takes small, unimportant, or trivial matters and makes them appear to be great, grand, or epic. In this way the poet creates his **mock epic**. Such literary works make fun of an unimportant person or event by making that person or event appear to be great (as if the person were equal to the great Greek hero Achilles or as if the event were as significant as the Trojan War).

The student should also note a **theme** concerning **innocence** in the poem. In *The Rape of the Lock* the word *innocence* can mean both (1) goodness and (2) chastity. Pope is then using the word *innocence* as a

**pun** to suggest the sexual nature or quality of his heroine, Belinda. The **title** also suggests, perhaps, the sexual nature of the major characters. Generally speaking, in this poem the word *rape* means "to take by force." So, the literal interpretation of the title indicates how the Baron (Lord Petre) takes a lock of hair without the permission of Belinda (Arabella Fermor). However, the title also can suggest another meaning, a sexual one.

## EPIC FEATURES

As mentioned, *The Rape of the Lock* is a **mock epic**. The poet intends his poem to be humorous, but at the same time the poet uses the same conventions and characteristics of a real epic. However, the poet of the mock epic will often present such conventions in a manner that is ridiculous or opposite to the way they are presented in a serious epic.

Before examining Pope's poem, the reader may find it helpful to review the qualities of a serious epic. Almost all epics contain the following six characteristics:

1. **THE HERO:** The hero is a larger than life figure. He is bigger, better, stronger, and smarter than most other men. He is important to his nation. He may even be internationally famous. Usually, he is often an important historical figure.
2. **THE SETTING:** The setting is usually quite large or vast. The story is usually set in many great nations. Sometimes the setting may even include the entire world, the heavens, or even the underworld.
3. **THE ACTION:** The action of the epic contains deeds of great valor, wisdom, or superhuman strength.
4. **SUPERNATURAL FORCES:** Supernatural forces, such as gods, angels, demons, or monsters, usually interfere in the lives of mankind.

5. **THE STYLE:** The style is elevated or grand poetry.
6. **THE POET:** The poet is mostly objective. He does not give his opinions on the topic or story of his epic.

A number of other conventions or qualities may also appear in the epic:

1. **THE THEME:** The poet begins his epic by discussing his theme or themes.
2. **THE MUSE:** The Muses were nine goddesses from Greek mythology. They inspired artists and writers to create great works of art or literature or music. The poet usually invokes (or calls upon) his muse at the beginning of the epic. It is like a prayer. He is asking his muse for inspiration. This is sometimes referred to as "the invocation of the muse."
3. **IN MEDIAS RES:** The Latin phrase "*in medias res*" means in the middle of things. The epic poet does not begin his story at the very beginning. Rather, he starts in the middle of the action. For example, in *The Iliad* Homer tells the story about the Trojan War. That war lasted for ten years. However, Homer begins his tale at the ninth year.

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