

The Rape of the Lock is a balanced critique of 18th century society?

The Rape of the Lock gives a complete and graphic picture of the society of the 18th century. The poem is concerned with the aristocratic society and presents a charming portrait of its features. The aristocratic people of the 18th century were primarily urban people with easy flow of money from trade and commerce and in some classes from the hoardings of land. They were luxury loving and enjoyed life in idle games and fun and frolic. Being wealthy with a new-found lust for money and craze for fashion, they got themselves preoccupied in trivialities like gossips, sex-intrigues, and courting ladies. The ladies of the time too indulged in amorous amusements and loved being wooed by the aristocratic gentlemen.

The whole panorama of *The Rape of the Lock* revolves around the false standard of 18th century society. Lowell says that "Pope is the poet of society as Shakespeare is the poet of man." Truly, Pope observed his society and its evils with much keenness and portrayed them quite punctiliously in his poem. However, the satire in *The Rape of the Lock* is not directed against any individual, but against the follies and vanities of the fashionable men and women in general. The object of Pope's writing this poem was to conciliate two quarreling families. But at the same time, the poem does impress to be a brilliant portrayal of the absurdities and the frivolities of the fashionable circle of Pope's contemporary England.

Pope, in his poem gives us an amusing picture of the society ladies of his time. Pope's heroine Belinda is the representative of the aristocratic ladies. She is the symbol of follies and frivolities that ladies of the age indulged in with pleasure. Ariel's speech that Belinda hears in a state of dreaming portrays the sex-intrigues of the dancing balls. The poet ridicules women's excessive attention to self-embellishment and self-decoration. In a famous satirical passage, Belinda is described as commencing her toilet operations in the manner of a priestess. "Puffs, powders, patches, bibles, *billet doux*" lie in confusion on Belinda's dressing table. True it is that the aristocratic ladies of Pope's time were always burning to win the heart of their lovers. They spent hours at the toilets, played card games, danced and considered the dressing table to be a place of worship. Coquetry was the only art that these ladies practiced sedulously. Nay, the ladies were fickle-minded, inconsistent and unreliable in relationships. Pretension, dissimulation and hypocrisy constituted their way of life. Levity was their common characteristic. The following lines provide their apt portrayal:

*On the rich guilt sinks with becoming woe,
Wrapt in a gown, for sickness, and for show.
The fair ones feel such maladies as these,
When each new night-dress gives a new disease*

Pope does impressively give minute details of the ladies' constant concern for enhancing their beauty with artificial means. For these ladies, the conventionally serious things of life had lost their importance. Their moods and passion were ruled by trivialities. Trifles would make them anxious or angry. These ladies, in other words, were devoid of any real moral sense, or any serious, meaningful purpose in life. To them, the death of husbands affected them only as much as that of their lap-dog or breaking of China jars. Honour, to them was almost equal to nothing. The loss of chastity was no more serious than staining of brocades. To them Church meant nothing. Missing a church congregation was not a serious affair, but missing a ball was considered an important thing. Losing heart or indulging in sex was less important than the loss of a necklace.

Therefore we find that Pope's Belinda, like Narcissus is in love with her own self. She takes all the admiration but returns none of it in love to her admirers. But then the sham of Belinda's purity is exposed when Ariel discovers an "earthly lover lurking at her heart". Belinda is punished for her hypocrisy by Ariel's desertion of her. However the woman's tantrums are satirized in the lines in which Belinda's reaction to the clipping of a lock of her hair is described. Pope writes: "Then flashed the living lightning from her eyes,/ And screams of horror rend the affrighted skies."

The gallants of the time too are not spared by Pope. They are the target of mockery which is as sharp and keen as the satire on the ladies. Truly, the men were chiefly concerned with getting richer and carrying on sexual adventures with fashion-frenzy coquettish ladies. The love letters were more sacred to them than the Bible. In the *Rape of the Lock*, the adventurous Baron builds an Alter of Love. It is built of twelve voluminous French romances and all the prizes gained by him from his former lovers. Significantly, the fire at the altar is raised with the heaps of love-letters that the Baron had received. Lord Petre's sense of victory at the cutting of Belinda's lock is symbolic of the shallowness, triviality and the emptiness of the youths of the contemporary aristocratic class.

The conversation of the ladies and the knights at the court amuses us by its emptiness and shallowness. The talk generally cantered round dance-parties, court-visits, and sex-scandals. Pope says that at Hampton court, "At every word a reputation dies". The pauses in conversation were filled by snuff-taking, fan-swinging, singing, laughing, ogling, etc. The poet doesn't spare the hungry judges and the jury men who were in a hurry to get back home. He says that at 4 O' Clock in the afternoon the judges hurriedly signed the sentences and rushed to their homes for dinner in time. The two principal diversions of the time, the game of Ombre and coffee-drinking, have also their share of ridicule. Each ceremony highlights a social absurdity because of the extravagant importance that it receives at the cost of serious concerns of life.

The Rape of the Lock is an epitome of the eighteenth century social life. In this poem, Pope has caught and fixed for ever the atmosphere of the age. The poem is a delicate, playful, humourous, original and witty satire on the aristocratic men and women of the age. Hence in conclusion it may be said that, Pope's poem is a perceptible mirror of the drawing room but at the same time it provides faithful picture and an unbiased criticism of the 18th century society.