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## UNIT 4 CHARACTER ANALYSIS AND STYLE

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### 4.0 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

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After your study of Canto 3 of ‘The Rape of the Lock’ and the full story given of the five Cantos of ‘The Rape of the Lock’, this Unit gives you an analysis of the different characters who appear in Canto 3.

At the end of your study of this Unit, you will be able to:

- evaluate the specific traits of the characters presented in Canto 3
- evaluate the role they play in the story
- analyze characters while critically examining the poem and
- appreciate the style in which the poem has been written.

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### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

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Reading a text or a story or a poem is basically a subjective experience. It is either exciting or interesting or it fails to hold the reader’s attention. The pleasure of reading is proportionate to the way we relate to the written piece. A story grips our attention if we can relate to the characters. It is not necessary that we like a

character because we see something of ourselves in him/her. That is being subjective and biased. But it is also possible that we like a character when s/he emerges as representative of a society or of a particular period in history or shares traits common to all human beings. Hence character analysis is an important dimension to one's study of a novel or a poem or a play. While theme, i.e. content or plot and its presentation i.e. form, are important, the analysis of characters assists in a critical evaluation of the narrative.

What is character analysis? It is the process of evaluating the specific traits of characters who figure in the text. The characters can be major players in the story or minor ones. The reader has to understand the role the characters play in a story, their behaviour, the conflicts they face, their personality traits that come through in the author's description and presentation. Character analysis involves an objective study of the words, emotions and actions both in isolation and in their engagement with other characters. In this Canto, we have two major characters Belinda and the Baron. They take centre stage as on them hinges the lead action of the poem. The Baron acts and Belinda responds. Action triggers response. In particular, a negative action elicits a counter measure that can be equally harsh or just the contrary, positive. It ultimately rests on how the action is viewed. Here Pope cleverly presents the Baron's action not as altogether negative, certainly not as constituting a heinous rape but as arising out of infatuation with a beautiful woman. So Belinda's mixed response of awe and anger along with inner satisfaction of being appreciated for her beauty reveals her character. She inwardly enjoys such attention from her admirer though for the sake of society she has to sob, sigh, scream and show a sense of outrage.

### Check Your Progress 1

- (i) Who are the other characters in this Canto? Read the poem and list them out.

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(Check your answers with those given at the end of this unit.)

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## 4.2 A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO THE CHARACTERS IN CANTO 3

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We are giving you a bird's eye view of the characters that appear in Canto 3. Try and think of the characters of classical epics and see how Pope upends the traditional hero / heroine to suit his purpose of a mock epic satire.

### 4.2.1 Belinda

Belinda in real life was Arabella Fermor, who hailed from a Catholic family known to Pope and his lifelong friend John Caryll. Arabella was the victim of a real-life 'rape'. In the year 1711, Pope's friend John Caryll's relative Robert, Lord Petre (the Baron in the poem), caused a serious quarrel by snipping a lock of Miss Arabella Fermor's hair (Belinda in the poem). Caryll requested Pope to

write a humorous poem to laugh the families out of their anger, and Pope obliged him by writing 'The Rape of the Lock'. The first two cantos were written in 1712 i.e., a year later after the incident as requested by John Caryll with the sole objective to bring about a reconciliation between the two feuding families.

Thus Arabella Fermor was the historical inspiration for Pope and he made her the heroine of his poem, basing his plot on the real life incident of Lord Petre (the Baron in the poem) snipping off a lock of hair from Arabella Fermor's unsuspecting head precipitating a rift between their two families. Pope turned the real time misfortune of Arabella into a heroic comical poem. Fearing that his poem might further hurt Arabella the real life heroine -victim by adding insult to injury Pope wrote a dedicatory letter to Arabella Fermor, prefacing the 1714 edition of 'The Rape of the Lock'. Alexander Pope claimed that his poem 'was intended only to divert a few young Ladies, who have good sense and good humour enough to laugh not only at their sex's little unguarded follies, but at their own'.

Belinda thus serves Pope to satirize the foolishness of aristocratic, privileged young women of the 18<sup>th</sup> century society, in particular their vanity, hypocrisy and triviality.

#### 4.2.2 The Baron

This is the pseudonym for the historical Robert, Lord Petre, the young gentleman in Pope's social circle who offended Arabella Fermor and her family by cutting a lock of her hair. As stated earlier, Pope was commissioned by his friend John Caryll to write a humorous poem that could bring a reconciliation between the two families without offending either of them. The Baron's action is not condemned by Pope but he uses it to expose the inane and juvenile actions of the Lords and the vanity and hypocrisy of the ladies of the 18<sup>th</sup> century belonging to aristocratic families. The hypocrisy is seen in Belinda's feigned anger as though her chastity had been violated even as she inwardly experiences her deep sense of happiness and satisfaction over the attention she receives from the Baron. The Baron has no worthy quality to have a worthy stature as an antagonist though he is made the antagonist of the poem. His stealthy action is far removed from any act of heroism and manly courage. Pope uses the incident to expose the shallowness that surfaces in the upper classes enjoying their wealth, status and leisure.

#### 4.2.3 Clarissa

Clarissa is the only character with a brain. She is among the many ladies in attendance at the Hampton Court party. Hence it is surprising that she lends the Baron a pair of scissors when he is fumbling to reach Belinda to cut off her hair. But the same Clarissa later in Canto 5 emerges as a wise woman and delivers a moralizing lecture to patch up the rift between Belinda and the Baron. Effectively she becomes the voice of Pope. She alone has the ability to discern that beauty is transient- 'frail beauty must decay' and that coquetry is ultimately self-defeating and one must cultivate good humour to laugh at human follies. Her name Clarissa is from Latin *clarissima* that means 'the most famous' and suggests her illustriousness and clarity of vision. Here in Canto 3, her role is the opposite of what she is in Canto 5 as she encourages the Baron in his attempt to cut the lock of hair. Maybe she is broadminded and liberal as she regards the Baron's attempt

as something insignificant and inconsequential. She ridicules Belinda and the host of ladies with her, that their sense of outrage over such a trivial incident is nothing but an act of juvenile reaction.

#### 4.2.4 The Sylphs

The Sylphs are the Guardian spirits of the air, designed to protect virgins and their chastity. There are four sylphs and a Gnome:

Ariel — Belinda’s guardian sylph, who oversees an army of invisible protective deities

Brillante — The sylph who is assigned to guard Belinda’s earrings

Momentilla — The sylph who is assigned to guard Belinda’s watch

Crispissa — The sylph who is assigned to guard Belinda’s “fav’rite Lock” and

Umbriel — The chief gnome who travels to the Cave of Spleen and returns with bundles of sighs and tears to aggravate Belinda’s vexation. Umbriel, who comes after Ariel leaves to take care of Belinda is a melancholy gnome who receives horrible noises, tears, sorrows, and griefs from the queen of bad tempers. He pours his magic substances over Belinda, magnifying her rage and sorrow.

#### 4.2.5 Thalestris

Belinda’s friend, named to stand for the Queen of the Amazons and represents the historical Gertrude Morley, a friend of Pope’s and the wife of Sir George Browne (rendered as her “beau,” Sir Plume, in the poem). She eggs Belinda on in her anger and demands that the lock be returned.

#### 4.2.6 Sir Plume

Sir Plume is Thalestris’s “beau,” who makes an ineffectual challenge to the Baron. He represents the historical Sir George Browne, a member of Pope’s social circle.

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### 4.3 CHARACTER ANALYSIS IN DETAIL

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Now let us analyze the major characters in detail

#### 4.3.1 Belinda

She is a wealthy and beautiful young woman, belonging to the nobility. It is her beauty that attracts the Baron who in his infatuation snips off her lock of hair. Pope’s lines

*If to her share some female errors fall,*

*Look on her face, and you’ll forget ‘em all*

are a tribute to her beauty, almost to the point of exonerating the Baron’s action. Pope satirizes the 18<sup>th</sup> century society’s moralistic stand that woman’s honour can be violated even if it is an innocuous act such as cutting a ringlet off Belinda’s lovely tresses. The shock and awe of Belinda and the women appears puerile and immature because cutting a lock is not the same as raping a woman. Pope without overly saying that it is not a heinous act makes the point that since Belinda is

ravishingly beautiful, the desire to possess a lock of her hair cannot be viewed as an immoral act. This is Pope's ingenuous way of bringing rapprochement between the two fighting families.

Pope subtly introduces Ariel, the chief guardian Sylph to warn her of a lurking danger to her virginity and that he is there to protect her. The fact that Belinda does not take Ariel's warning seriously is seen when she exquisitely dresses and goes to mingle with peer groups of lords and ladies in Hampton's Court. She loves socializing with people of her class. Belinda does not bother about Ariel's early warning and the vial of sobs and sighs and sorrows that Umbriel, the Gnome pours later on her, does not affect her response to the Baron's action. They are simply hypocritical manifestations of the 18<sup>th</sup> century societal norms and are presented as dictated by the supernatural powers like the Sylphs and the Gnome. Belinda covertly relishes the Baron's infatuation and all the sighs and sorrows are artificial, engineered by the Gnome. Ariel who has the duty to protect her virginity recognizes there is really no sense of wounded pride in Belinda over the Baron's passion; on the contrary she loves such attention paid to her beauty that satisfies her vanity. Ariel gives up his assigned duty to protect her:

*Just in that instant, anxious Ariel sought  
The close recesses of the virgin's thought;  
As, on the nosegay in her breast reclined,  
He watched the ideas rising in her mind,  
Sudden he viewed, in spite of all her art,  
An earthly lover lurking at her heart.  
Amazed, confused, he found his power expired,  
Resigned to fate, and with a sigh retired.*

Belinda is the heroine of the poem as she is the cause and the prime mover of all actions. She is the central character almost like Helen of Troy whose face, it is said, "launched a thousand ships and who was fairer than the evening air/ Clad in the beauty of a thousand stars". The comparison stops there. But she has no quality to make her claim the status of a hero of an epic poem. Belinda displays no heroic quality and her prowess in the card game amounts to registering an early win over the Baron. Look at the contrast. We have a heroine in place of a hero. Remember this is a mock epic poem. She is an attractive young woman and she is vain about her looks, far removed from the classical hero known for his strength and power. Her power lies in her beauty manifest in the lovely tresses that the Baron wants to cut and preserve.

Is she chaste? Again for all outward purposes she is seen hurt and offended by the violation of her honour. But deep within she is not and she only feigns anger. Pope was given the task of bringing about a reconciliation between the two families. Hence the portrayal of Belinda is softened and muted. She displays no genuine anger and the artificial outburst of sighs and sorrows are more of Umbriel's making than hers. Her display of heroism is limited to playing cards, a far cry from the battlefield where the classical hero reveals his awesome superior fighting prowess over the enemy forces he confronts. Unlike the classical hero of the epic straddling like a colossus, Belinda is here reduced to a heroine, whining, pretending to be hurt and wounded. Belinda is capricious, impulsive and mercurial and hides



her innate coquettishness under a false pretence of moral and behavioural norms expected of a 18<sup>th</sup> century woman in society

### 4.3.2 The Baron

The Baron is based on the real character Lord Petre who cut Arabella Fermor's lock of hair that caused a rift between the two families. In the poem he thus becomes the antagonist. If you recall the classical epic, *The Iliad*, the single action that triggers the mighty war is when the Trojan prince Paris elopes with the Greek beauty. Thus Helen was responsible for the epic war between the Trojans and the Greeks. When Ravan abducted Sita, the war ensued between Ram and Ravan. Here the Baron's foolish action triggers the conflict between Belinda and the Baron. He falls in love with Belinda's beauty. Besotted and captivated by her beauty he rashly snips her lock and refuses to give it back, thereby bringing about a conflict between the two families. Since his initial attempts to win over Belinda do not succeed, he settles on "raping" her lock. "And while his cutting of the lock is not equated with rape in the modern sense—in the context of the poem, it means "theft" or "pillaging"—Pope is still using the word to connote injustice, and to unequivocally state that he has taken what he had no right to take. The fact that the Baron is only referred to by his title, revealing his masculinity and his station but nothing else, or else is satirically figured as a "knight," the height of courtly masculinity, allows Pope to metonymically cast a kind of witty judgement over *all* noblemen, and to question the contemporary assumption that they were the intellectual and moral leaders of their day." Again Pope is not presenting any valiant hero as a worthy antagonist for Belinda. Just as Belinda as a heroine is given the pride of place solely for her beauty without any heroic quality to go with it, the Baron, has no chivalric attribute that could give him an exalted status.

In keeping with the mock epic genre, Belinda and the Baron's characters have no heroic trait and despite belonging to the gentry and enjoying the highest status of the society as aristocratic nobility, Pope deflates their status as epic characters. The seemingly trivial episode shows the triviality of court life as lived by the nobility. A foolish and juvenile action is shown to trigger a courtly war. The war here as in *The Iliad* is a war of erotic passion, but in the case of the Trojan war, it was wounded pride while here a whimsical and mischievous action sparks the fight, and ironically even the fight is infantile and immature.

Throughout the poem, Pope uses the tradition of epic poetry—poems about serious conflict and heroism—to show, by comparison, the triviality, hollowness and conceitedness of court life. Unlike epic poems with a serious and lofty theme about heroism and brave warriors, Pope's poem is about an insignificant incident about the loss of a lock of hair to institute a close comparison between the intensity of battle and the triviality of court culture. The Baron's clumsy use of scissors is a contrast to the dexterous use of swords in the classical epic. The battle of cards on the green table highlights the contrast between the noble activities of Homeric men and the vain activities performed by these courtly lords and ladies.

### 4.3.3 Ariel

In an earlier Unit you have studied the features of a classical epic narrative. The intervention of the supernatural elements in the lives of men and women is an important aspect of an epic. The point to note here is these guardian sylphs are

not visible to the characters. They are airy incorporeal (in substantial, without body or form) beings, believed to have powers to affect the course of human events.

Ariel is the chief of the sylphs. He is the guardian sylph. As Canto 3 opens, he warns Belinda through a dream that he is given the responsibility to protect her beauty and chastity. He warns her to be careful of men, 'beware of man,' and tries to ward off danger that would happen to her in the near future. He calls his army of sylphs to guard her. But when the Baron is about to scissor her lock, Ariel discovers "An earthly lover lurking at her heart," and that she is not as chaste as she should be. At the vital moment he does not come to protect her. Ariel who is tasked with protecting Belinda's morality by ensuring her chastity, abandons his responsibility. Ariel's withdrawal reinforces Pope's contention that the courtly lords and ladies do not have any genuine respect for chastity and morality and this trivial incident is an example of laxity in their approach.

**Check Your Progress 2**

- (i) Attempt a character sketch of Belinda.

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- (ii) Attempt a character analysis of the Baron.

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(Check your answers with those given at the end of this unit.)

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**4.4 STYLE**

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Pope's reputation as a poet has undergone several fluctuations down the ages. His reputation at the time of his death was immense. His mastery of the heroic couplet, which he put to many uses, made all other forms of verse redundant. The heroic couplet, which Pope wrote his poetry in, is a traditional form for English poetry commonly used for epic and narrative poetry. It refers to poems constructed from a sequence of rhyming pairs of iambic pentameter lines. The pattern of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed one is called iambic and because there are five stresses in each line the meter is called pentameter. The iambic pentameter couplet came to be called heroic because in the 17<sup>th</sup> century it was regarded as the proper form for dealing with heroic subjects. The mock heroic style that Pope used created a lot of humour in his works. He mingled the trivial with the grand. With his knowledge of the epics and the manners of the society of his times, he successfully created a sort of anti-climax, leading to

humour. ‘The Rape of The Lock’ is perhaps the best example of a mock- heroic poem that is replete with wit, humour and irony.

The neat epigrammatic style of Pope brought him many admirers besides enriching the English language. No one could dress up a commonplace sentiment in finer clothes than Pope. Epigrams like “An honest man is the noblest work of God” or “Hope springs eternal in the human breast” have passed into the common speech of men. Although he lacked the easy breadth and vigour of Dryden in his satirical verses, yet he excelled his predecessor in exquisite finish achieved through his choice of words.

Pope was the chief of living satirists in verse, as Swift was easily the greatest master of prose. Pope’s morbid sensitivity of his disposition caused him to pick up quarrels with many people like John Dennis, a writer and Ambrose Phillips, a pastoral writer among many others whom he satirised in his famous ‘Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot’. Pope’s fame created many envious foes who often ran him down. He never forgot those who maligned him and was determined to take revenge when the right time came. Theobald who had criticized his edition of Shakespeare, was ridiculed by him in ‘The Dunciad’ and later Colley Cibber met the same fate as he had made fun of a play produced by Pope’s club.

#### 4.4.1 Picture of Society

‘The Rape of the Lock’ is a delicate, cynical and witty poem. It embodies not only the peculiar flavour of Pope’s genius, but the light tone and shifting colours of his time as well. As an expression of the artificial life of the age — of its parties, cards, toilets, lap-dogs, tea-drinking, snuff taking and other idle vanities. ‘The Rape of the Lock’ is as perfect an expression of the Augustan age as *Tamburlain* by Marlowe is of the boundless ambition of the Elizabethans. In its blending of mock-heroic satire, and delicate fancy, this exquisite specimen of filigree work, as Hazlitt called it, remains unmatched. We cannot emphasise enough the capacity and power of Pope as a delineator of social manners of his age.

Even though Pope, Addison, Swift, Steele and Fielding, all depicted 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 the society of his times so well and in such a fine satirical vein. It is a social satire and the purpose of the poem as Pope himself declared was to “laugh at the little unguarded foibles and weaknesses of the female sex, through the portrayal of Belinda”. It is a masterpiece of a satire upon feminine frivolity. The ladies drove in guilt coaches or in sedan chairs. A pleasure trip on the Thames and delightful social meetings at the Hampton Court were pleasurable diversions to break the monotony of theatres and balls. Drinking, gambling, playing cards, lovemaking and coquetry were the little activities with which the ladies of the day kept themselves socially engaged. The young gallants of the time were equally busy with gay frivolities and fashions. The young men lounged about fashionably in their wide-skirted coats and high-heeled shoes, flaunting their snuffboxes and their canes during that time. The moral of the poem presented through Clarissa’s speech in Canto 5 is that young ladies should not care so much for attractiveness and beauty but for virtues. Beauty without virtue is useless and virtue alone can bring happiness.

#### 4.4.2 Genre of Mock Epic / Heroic

The poem perhaps is the most outstanding example in the English language of



the genre of mock-epic. The epic had long been considered as one of the most serious of literary forms. It had been applied, in the classical period to the lofty subject matter of love and war and by Milton to the intricacies of the Christian faith. The strategy of Pope's mock-epic is not to mock the form itself, but to mock its society in its very failure to rise to epic standards. He exposes its pettiness by casting it against the grandeur of the traditional epic subjects and the bravery and fortitude of epic heroes. Pope's mock-heroic in 'The Rape of the Lock' underscores the ridiculousness of a society in which values have lost all proportions, and the trivial is handled with the gravity and solemnity that ought to be accorded to truly important issues. The society he displays through this poem is one that fails to distinguish between things that matter and things that do not. The poem mocks the men it portrays by showing them as being unworthy of a form that is suited to a more heroic culture. Thus the mock-epic resembles the epic in that its central concerns are serious and often moral, but the act that the approach must now be satirical rather than earnest is symptomatic of how far the culture has fallen.

Pope's use of the mock-epic genre is intricate and exhaustive. 'The Rape of the Lock' is a poem in which every element of the contemporary scene conjures up some image from epic tradition or the classical world view, and the pieces are wrought together with the cleverness and expertise that makes the poem surprising and delightful. Pope's transformations are numerous, striking and loaded with moral implications. The great battles of epic times become bouts of gambling and flirtatious tiffs. The great, if capricious, Greek and Roman gods are converted into a relatively undifferentiated army of basically ineffectual spirit. Cosmetic, clothing and jewellery substitute for armour and weapons, and the rituals of religious sacrifice are transplanted to the dressing room and the altar of love. Running true to the literary forms of the eighteenth century English Poetry, Alexander Pope presented a parody of the heroic style and made it into a comical poem. "It would be almost true to say" observes Holden "that in this heroic comical poem it is the comical part which most appeals to us, as the heroic part did to our ancestors. In the mock heroic, lofty incidents, characters and style are applied to a trivial subject. The theme of 'The Rape of the Lock' is the cutting off a lock of a ladies hair. The subject is too trivial for any epic treatment. Yet Pope gives to this absurd subject the dignity of an epic treatment. Like an epic poet makes an invocation to some gods in the beginning of the poem, Pope too invokes the muse and proposes his theme. Following the convention of an epic which must have some peculiar passion as the distinguished feature, coquetry may be regarded as the reigning passion of 'The Rape of the Lock'.

Similarly an epic must contain many episodes. Pope has introduced in this poem several episodes such as the episode of the game of Ombre which is the prelude to the central action. Supernatural machinery is introduced in epic poetry. But instead of the Gods and Goddesses of Homer and Virgil and the angels and devils of Dante and Milton, Pope has introduced the gnomes and sylphs of the Rosicrucian system. The light militia of the lower sky is more appropriate to a mock heroic poem and Pope has achieved this triumph in his art. The description of weapons in the poem is also in the mock heroic way. The pair of scissors with which Lord Petre performs the "rape" has been described as "two edged weapons", "little engine", "glittering forex", "fatal engine", "sheers", and "meeting points". The game of Ombre is similarly dignified with several similes. Therefore, we see that no words are spared in using poetic diction to describe the smallest things. This is the perfection of the mock heroic.

### Check Your Progress 3

(i) Explain the form in which Pope wrote his poems.

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(ii) How does Pope present the society of his times through his poem?

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(Check your answers with those given at the end of the unit)

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## 4.5 GLOSSARY

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Feuding:	Engaging in a bitter quarrel
Dedicatory:	Note prefixed to a literary, artistic, or musical composition dedicating it to someone in token of affection or esteem.
Inane:	Empty, pointless, lacking in sense
Juvenile:	Not fully grown or developed, characteristics appropriate for children
Hero comical:	Combining both the heroic and the comical
Pseudonym:	A fictitious name adopted, especially by an author
Feigned:	Pretended
Gnome:	One of a fabled race of dwarflike creatures who live underground and guard treasure hoards
Innate:	inherent, natural
Innocuous:	Harmless, having no adverse effect
Puerile:	Immature, especially in being silly or trivial; childish.
Rapprochement:	The state of reconciliation or restoration of cordial relations
Covertly:	Not openly practised
Coquettishness:	Quality of a woman who flirts insincerely with men to win their admiration and attention
Beau:	Boyfriend of a girl or woman
Infatuation:	Foolish or extravagant passion
Besotted:	Infatuated
Metonymically:	In a metonymic manner, a figure of speech in one word or phrase is substituted for another with which it is closely associated, as in the use of <i>the sword</i> for military power.

Conceitedness:	Holding or characterized by an unduly high opinion of oneself; vain
Dexterous:	Having mental skill and adroitness or deftness or mastery
Incorporeal:	Insubstantial, without body or form
Chastity:	The condition or quality of being chaste, especially the condition of not having had sexual intercourse or of abstaining from sexual relations.
Dichotomy:	Division into two exclusive, opposed, or contradictory groups eg. <i>a</i> dichotomy between thought and action.

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## 4.6 SUMMING UP

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In this Unit we provided you with material to:

- understand the story in relation to different characters that appear in Canto 3
- analyze the characters both major and minor
- recognize the roles played by the characters
- appreciate the distinctive style used by Pope
- understand how Pope makes use of epic tradition to satirize the 18<sup>th</sup> century society of lords and ladies.

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## 4.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Check Your Progress 1

- (i) The other characters include Clarissa, Thalestris, Sir Plume and the five sylphs-Ariel, Umbriel, Brillanta, Momentilla and Crispissa. They do not have any significant role to play but their actions in many ways influence Belinda and the Baron.

### Check Your Progress 2

- (i) Character sketch of Belinda: she is a bundle of contradictions. She is very beautiful and well aware of her beauty. Therefore, she is vain. She is based on a friend of Pope's called Arabella Fermor.
- (ii) The Baron is based on Lord Petre, a gentleman in Pope's social circle. He is the antagonist of the poem as he snips off Belinda's lock of hair.

### Check Your Progress 3

- (i) Pope wrote in the heroic couplet consisting of rhyming pairs of iambic pentameter lines.
- (ii) Pope presented the society of his time in a satirical way exposing the frivolities and artificialities of his age.