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The Rape of the Lock: A Running Commentary on Fops and Coquettes of 18th Century Society

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The Rape of the Lock depicts its 'Manners' of its time faithfully and realistically. It is a running commentary on the shallow but displaying living of the fops and coquettes of the glittering society of the eighteenth century. While reading this poem, we must take notice of the fact that nothing in it is to be taken literally. Since the poem is a mock up, the style and tone of the poem is not only satirical but mocking also. It is a ridiculing mockery of the showy gentry of so called sophisticated society in which poet lived. The particular focus of the poet is not the whole society of his times but the upper class town people with their skin deep fashions and opinions, customs and vices.

Introduction

"I am so vain as to fancy *The Rape of the Lock* a pretty complete picture of the life of our modern ladies in idle town"

Alexander Pope

Although we should not follow the poet but the poem yet the above statement made by the poet about his masterpiece writing is every inch true of its subject matter. Like most of the writings of his contemporaries, "*The Rape of the Lock*" also depicts its 'Manners' of its time faithfully and realistically. It is a running commentary on the shallow but displaying living of the fops and coquettes of the glittering society of the eighteenth century. The attack of the poet is directed against both men and women. It is their funny and disgusting behavior and mannerism which makes the central theme of this long poem.

It was the society marked with hollowness and shallowness. In place of heroes and heroines, there were jesters and clowns. They had no manners but mannerism. It was peopled with fashionable ladies and funny gentlemen. While reading this poem, we must take notice of the fact that nothing in it is to be taken literally. Since the poem is a mock up, the style and tone of the poem is not only satirical but mocking also. It is a ridiculing mockery of the showy gentry of so called sophisticated society in which poet lived. He simply translated whatever he saw. Pope was gifted with a probing eye. He could not only look at things but through them as well. What was going behind the veil is depicted by him in his usual angry and bitter idiom.

The poet himself compares the modern women with ancient poets who 'let an action be never so trivial in itself, they always make it appear of utmost importance'. He rightly strikes the key note

to the general character of most of the women. Women have the rare but useless trait of making a mountain of mole hill. They can blow hot even at trifles. Minor and insignificant things, like minor poets, are taken seriously. In a way, all these traits of women make the theme of this poem satirical. Going by supposition, if Belindahad cared little of the minor social scandal about her, there would have been no mock battle in the public. And the scandal- if it was at all any scandal- would have died out of its own. But it was not to be, after all Belinda was a woman. This poem seemed to have sprung from poet's own angry and ironical attitude towards women. According to Pope, the lifelong companion of a woman is her false vanity. Even after death, all these showy things, the love for Ombre, gilded chariots and other vanities abide. As Ariel holds:

“Her joy in gilded chariots when alive

And love of Ombre after death survive”

The age of Pope was that of clubs and societies. Men and women loved to play frequent visits to courtly bells and midnight meetings. There, the so called daring and gallant fops would always try to take an undue advantage of the presence of women. They would do their best to use them. at the same time, these balls were a source of scandal but men and women enjoyed them very much. Outwardly they might talk against them but inwardly they were all for them. The high social position was considered a status symbol. It would specially inflate the female sex and feed their ego. The women found it difficult to resist the temptation of riches so men could exploit them without any trouble. Love as such did not exist in the society. It was not even discussed. It was reduced to a subject of chit chat. To women, it was a play thing or pastime. They bestowed the honor of their love as their vanity directed not because they had a passion for love. People laid an extra ordinary accent upon their vanity. And this vanity, to use an expression of T S Eliot ‘requires no response’.

The heroine is Belinda who is most of the time seen sitting before her boudoir and she is always making her up. Her cosmetics are her deities. This attitude of Belinda makes her not an individual but a type character. She becomes a representative of women who spend a lot of money and time to look beautiful. The dressing table of Belinda is blessed with cosmetics of many types. Women first paint their faces with the help of make up the go for a show. In fact false vanity and painted beauty were the religions of 18th Century society women. Women used to take so much care to look smart so as to attract men. Men in return did not lag behind. They did whatever their capacities enabled them to do to win their female counterparts. The men were philanderers who were prepared to use force to achieve their goals. To second it, Pope describes this in mock heroic manner. These men are not at all interested in matrimony. They posed to make victories over women and women were considered trophies by them. Unlike the chivalry of the ancient knights, there is a cruelty associated with the assault of these ‘lords’.

The poet has depicted sir Pas a typical 18th century fop. He is expert in fashionable external like the management of his spotted cane and snuff box of which he is very much vain otherwise he is

only an empty but dull headed. His round, unthinking face amply displays his inner emptiness. His speech replete with meaningless swear words in fashion also surfaces his empty headedness.

Sir Plume is a representative of typical 18th century fop. The young man and woman were supposed to be serious minded. Their hobby was to read French romances and talk in an idle manner. Men were fond of snuff boxes and ladies never forgot to take fan with them. In each pause of chat, snuff or fan came for their help. Next to it, coffee was a passion with these people. It was a must to be served at every gathering.

The speech delivered by Clarissa speaks much of the character of men and women of those days. It describes that it was a custom with the fops to crowd round the ladies. So much so, men sitting in the side boxes of the theaters used to bow forward and survey women seated on the front boxes. In return, men were also in the habit of paying compliments to the eyes and beauty of ladies in a very farfetched idiom. These men were very fond of feigning death to die at the funny frowns of ladies. They could be revived by the similes of ladies and also eclipsed of their wits by women.

As sketched above, “The Rape of the Lock”, one of the memorable mock satirical poems in English literature introduces us to the funny and fashionable society of eighteenth century. The particular focus of the poet is not the whole society of his times but the upper class town people with their skin deep fashions and opinions, customs and vices. The camera of the poet pans slowly but realistically on what they did and what they said. Theirs was a comic attitude towards even the solemn affairs of life. What they lacked completely was any tinge of seriousness in any walk of life. It was an age of fashionable fops and clownish coquettes. The trifles of life were taken by them very seriously. It was the Age when the significant and insignificant exchanged roles. And Pope has described it in a style that is not only his own but unique as well.

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