

A satire of the english nobility in alexander pope's poem the rape of the lock

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Unlike Milton, in *Paradise Lost*, Alexander Pope was not trying to make any moral pronouncements or display any larger than life message in his mock epic, *The Rape of the Lock*. Pope was merely satirizing the English nobility of his time and chose to use the style of the epic to further prove just how ridiculous his subject matter was. By using elevated language, holy metaphors, and other techniques native to epics, Pope was able to silently mock the silliness of his subjects' behavior by portraying them as far more important than he felt they really were; he made them seem worthy of an epic.

The incident on which the epic is based took place between two real life lovers. As the story goes, a lock of hair belonging to Arabella Fermor was clipped and stolen by her lover, the son of close family friends. The reason he did this is unknown, but although he seemingly meant no harm, this act infuriated the Fermor's family and sent the two families into a feud. John Caryll, seeing how preposterous this all was, asked Pope to write a poem that could lighten the mood of these families and show them how impractical they were behaving.

To emphasize the epic-like style of writing, Pope starts off the poem by calling for the inspiration of a muse, an occurrence common in past epics, and uses grand metaphors to describe minor happenings right from the start. Describing a card game between Belinda and two of the men, Pope writes,

Behold, four Kings in Majesty rever'd,

With hoary Whiskers and a forky Beard;

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And four fair Queens whose hands sustain a Flow'r,

Th' expressive Emblem of their softer Pow'r;

Four Knaves in Garbs succinct, a trusty Band,

Caps on their heads, and Halberds in their hand;

And Particolour'd Troops, a shining Train,

Draw forth to Combat on the Velvet Plain.

This display of grandeur to something is simple as a card game was Pope's main technique throughout the poem. By using exaggerations of this type, Pope is able to prove how trifling the aristocracy can be. Similarly, he compares the interaction of the two sexes to combat when he says " thrice the foe drew near," describing the Baron's attempt at Belinda's hair.

Further proving this point, throughout Rape of the Lock, Pope uses rhymes that would otherwise seem opposite. For example, when he writes, " Here Thou, great Anna! whom three Realms obey, Dost sometimes Counsel take- and sometimes Tea," he asserts that, to these people, matters of government are just as important as matters of social pleasure, such as tea. In this way, by using his sense of humor, Pope is able to make a hysterical situation seem somewhat more amusing to those observing as well as those involved in it. When Pope writes,

Oh, hadst thou, cruel! been content to seize

Hairs less in sight, or any hairs but these!"

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he is obviously criticizing Belinda's obsession with her outward facade proving that the actual act of "violating" her by cutting her hair wasn't what truly upset her. Rather, it was the effect it will have on her reputation now that she will no longer be perfect in appearance. By using strong verbs such as "ravish", "betray", and "rape", Pope further perpetuates the sexuality of the poem, portraying Belinda as a sexual conquest for the Baron. After the turmoil dies down, she demands the lock of hair back, and a battle similar to the Trojan War ensues, evoking past Roman gods and alluding to the Aeneid. This poem closes much like other epics: giving compliments to the hero, in this case Arabella, the one whom Belinda was based on, and giving credit to the author for immortalizing her and her "adventure."

In Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*, a noble family's dilemma is trivialized through the use of a mock epic. In his epic, Pope's content is decisively petty, his style is incredibly light-hearted, and his plot extremely thin, all of which contribute to the inconsequential nature of the people he is poking fun at. By bringing to light the absurdity of the matter, Pope manages both to reconcile the two families and to prove his incredible knack for comedy and wit.