

Pope's the rape of
the lock and wilde's
the importance of
being earnest essay
sam...



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Although written over 150 years apart, both Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* (hereafter referred to as *The Lock*) and Wilde's *The Importance of being Earnest* (hereafter referred to as *Importance*) share a significant characteristic - their respective elaborate and witty social satire. Wilde wrote *Importance* at the height of his popularity as a dramatist; but he was also a celebrity. From this position, Wilde created his deceptively flippant commentary on London society. Deeply embedded amongst the frills and frivolities of his position, the satire he presents is critical but not sanctimonious.

A homosexual at a time that homosexuality was not only taboo but illegal, it is possible that even at his most popular and influential Wilde was something of an outsider, allowing him the position of an observer. Pope too, although most definitely involved in London life, had been set apart from others throughout his life. Initially, this was due to his Catholic upbringing, and later augmented by the deformities caused by childhood tuberculosis. That is not to say, however, that he was out of touch - whilst he never married he formed close friendships in London literary circles.

Satire is a literary technique by which ideas, customs, behaviour or institutions are held up to mockery and contempt, often through use of ridicule, sarcasm, hyperbole and irony with the intent of exposing vices, abuses and absurdities. It is, in essence, 'laughter with loathing'. In their separate ways, both works expose and attack the extreme triviality the authors encountered in British society, which was even more steeped in customs, behaviour and grand institutions (that are so often the subject of satire) than it is today.

<https://assignbuster.com/popes-the-rape-of-the-lock-and-wildes-the-importance-of-being-earnest-essay-sample/>

The writers' attack on society from their respective vantage points within it creates each piece as a remarkable social satire. Unsurprisingly, therefore, striking similarities can be traced between the targets of Pope and Wilde's ill affections, despite the distance of time between writing. Although both display some common characteristics, each author presents his social satire in a unique way, through skilful use of a variety of techniques including characterisation, language, form and style. Cecily and Belinda, the leading ladies, are characterised as sickeningly sweet and moral; proverbial innocence incarnate.

This is a somewhat excessive hyperbolic presentation of two upper class young women. However, there is considerable contrast between their characters. Whilst Belinda is clearly the product of London society, Cecily is something of an antithesis to this. Her home at the Manor House in Woolton a far cry from the bustle of London, clear through Jack's actions to remove himself to London. In this setting Cecily is presented as wholesome with an affinity for the natural world. Such an impression would be formed by her first appearance - the setting is described as " Garden at the Manor House.

A flight of grey stone steps leads up to the house. The garden, an old-fashioned one, full of roses. Time of year, July. Basket chairs, and a table covered with books, are set under a large yew-tree". Cecily is engaged in watering flowers. Additionally, later in Act 2, Algy describes Cecily as, " like a pink rose". The effect of this natural imagery associated with Cecily both visually, when presented dramatically, and from the language Wilde chooses is to portray Cecily as possessing great natural purity, a girl untainted by the

fashions of town. Furthermore, Wilde creates Cecily as the epitome of the desired virtues of the Victorian Age.

This notion is presented both through her own actions and indirectly through the speech of other characters. Indeed, Canon Chasuble comments on her actions in reconciling the two warring brothers: " You have done a beautiful thing today my child". Gwendolyn appears to suggest that her nature is reflected even in her name: " Cecily, what a very sweet name", reinforcing the audience's image of Cecily by acting as a character reference.

Additionally, Cecily appears the most plain speaking character in the play, adopting a far less ' knowing' attitude than Gwendolyn.

This effective use of contrast presents her as a simple and straightforward young lady. Wilde has skilfully layered techniques to create a full and clear picture of Cecily building up her naive and caring innocence to the point of absurdity if reflected on. Drawing on traits held in high regard at the time of writing, Wilde uses Cecily's character as a source of immediate humour.

Although satire in itself, the satirical effect is augmented by Cecily's fascination with all things " wicked": " You, I see from your card, are Uncle Jack's brother, my cousin Ernest, my wicked cousin Ernest".

In this quotation, the repetition of the phrase ' my cousin Ernest' with the addition of the word ' wicked', the second time separated by commas, has the effect of audibly breaking the line up. By slowing the line down, Wilde creates a meditative and musing tone, suggesting Cecily's fascination with the wicked side of Ernest/Algy's personality. Although Belinda is indisputably a different character to Cecily, she shares similar traits that each writer has

used to create social satire. Cecily encapsulates all the desired virtues of her society, in physical allure, wit, intelligence and strict morality.

Similarly, Belinda is presented as divine. As a woman and specifically, a 'belle', she is treated with reverence throughout the poem, with women being described as "the Fair" and "Angel-like ador'd" and Belinda singled out as the "Fairest of mortals". Her toilette, the climax of the first canto, becomes an altar whilst her dressing is presented as a rite: "Trembling, beings the sacred ties of Pride", whilst her jewellery and other such adornments become "off'rings". Through Pope's presentation of Belinda's dressing, he creates a subverted picture of what is sacred and holy.

This is the world of the coquette where attractions are paramount; Belinda worships at the altar of her toilette, and her capitalised "Image" is to be worshiped. This subversion of religion in a society where piety was expected would have struck a chord with Pope's audience. When used to characterise Belinda, it would make her character immediately recognisable to contemporary readers, who would pick up on the astute satire of vanity and superficiality as rightfully hallowed. Such an effect would be greatly added to by her guardians in the sylphs, ethereal beings who were once belles themselves.

Their role is as guardians of a maiden's purity, which they will only do if she rejects man and remains chaste. This gives the impression of Godly protection of Belinda's considerable virtues. From this position in "distinguish'd care", the 'rape' of a lock of her hair becomes a terrible crime against an innocent. Pope plays on his characterisation of Belinda as chaste

and untainted in her immediate reaction to the 'rape', stating that nobody "E'er felt such rage, resentment, and despair / As thou, sad Virgin!

For thy ravish'd Hair". By capitalising the word 'Virgin', Pope implies that being a virgin is a desired state, a label that he has attached to Belinda. Both Pope and Wilde make use of classical illusions as a source of satire, notably in the characterisation of their leading ladies. Whilst Canon Chasuble in *Importance* states "I must not disturb Egeria and her pupil any longer", Pope makes extensive use of sylphs and other mythical creatures. Belinda and Cecily are both, to different extents, society figures or indeed, celebrities.

Built up with classical references, they are grand but without founding, somewhat empty headed and concerned with trivialities, as Miss Prism criticises Cecily for in *Importance* "To your work, child, these speculations are profitless", whilst Belinda views a game of Ombre at Hampton Court to be of the utmost importance. Referring to the two characters by or associating with them classical illusions juxtaposes with their actual characters to humorous effect. Satire is derived from this comical mockery of the two womens' behaviour and the incongruity of the comparison of such earthly beings with classical illusions.

Similarly, both *The Lock* and *Importance* share a character in a 'cad'.

Although Pope's deem him less worthy of the lavish description he endows on Belinda, the Baron of *The Lock* performs a most dreadful crime in cutting Belinda's hair. The Baron's speech of triumph at the end of the third canto presents him as unrepentant: "Let wreaths of triumph now my temples

twine". Here, there is a suggestion that The Baron wishes to be looked upon in the same light as a victor in the Ancient Greek tradition.

The alliteration of the line gives the impression of a formal, premeditated mode of oratory, which presents the Baron as triumphant in his offence. If a cad is defined as one who is morally reprehensible, then the Baron may certainly be regarded as such. He has violated the sweet and innocent Belinda, without so much as a single note of remorse: " So long my honour, name, and praise shall live! " - his selfish motivations are thus turned into a point for satire by Pope, who is suggesting that rape has taken place for self advancement of the perpetrator.

In the second canto, the Baron expresses his intentions with the line " by force to ravish or by force betray". Aimed at Belinda, such behaviour could be regarded as similar to Algy's towards Cecily when engaging in ' Bunburying'. Whilst he does not have accusations of rape levelled at him, Algernon Moncrieff cannot be regarded as a completely morally wholesome character. His subverted sense of social norms, as displayed in the line: " I hate people who are not serious about meals. It is so shallow of them" are a source of immediate humour but an importance factor in his characterisation.

As with the Baron, it is apparent that Algy is immensely proud of himself in every regard, an inflated ego and obvious sense of arrogance beyond his achievements. These characteristics contribute to view of both of them as ' cads' through use of bathos. Both writers have made use of bathos to satirise the characters of Algy and the Baron; whilst the Baron is enormously

proud of his achievement in 'raping' Belinda, Algy is deeply concerned that Jack has "no taste in neck ties". This pride and vanity in trivialities and petty things serves to satirise the everyday concerns of the upper classes.

The male equivalent of 'ladies who lunch', Pope and Wilde have satirically exaggerated the trifling amusements used to fill the free time of the wealthy into epic concerns, consequentially presenting those engaging in them as 'morally reprehensible' given the levels of unemployment and poverty in London at the times of writing. It is under these circumstances, therefore, that both authors launch their respective scathing attacks on the false values they encountered in their societies.

The clearest illustration of this is through both writers' satirical view of religion amongst the classes they describe. In both the Victorian period and the 18th century, piety and devotion were held in high regard. Pope and Wilde, therefore, effectively satirise the notion of 'outward piety', by which the upper classes would assume religion for appearances, used as any other method of social advancement would be. It is said Belinda has: "On her white breast a sparkling cross she wore / That Jews might kiss, and Infidels adore".

The cross, a religious icon, is being used as decoration to the 'real' object of devotion - Belinda, a somewhat blasphemous notion. Use of the word 'kiss' suggestively draws attention to Belinda's breast. In this manner, Pope mixes ideas of the sacred with those of the profane, creating effective satirical technique by an ambiguous usage of 'which'. Religion for convenience is used as a point of satire in Importance, also, as Jack looks to be baptised to

suit his own needs. Realising the future of his relationship with Gwendolyn depends on his assumption of the name ' Ernest', he states: " No!

I would like to be christened myself, this afternoon, if you have nothing better to do". Attaching the phrase ' nothing better to do' to a request of a most serious ceremony creates an air of triviality, viewing the ritual as less important than anything else Chasuble may choose to occupy himself with. Separating the quotation by use of punctuation would break up the line, the effect of which is augmented by an informal sentence structure. This gives the impression of a stream of consciousness, implying that baptism is a thought just passing through Jack's mind.

With regard to his earlier baptism, he goes on to state that: " I do not remember it", emphasising the notion of living in the here and now opposing the concept of immortality and the eternal as proposed by religion. Both authors thus make use of religion as a yardstick to attack the false values of their own societies. A serious matter, religion, becomes subject to the indolent whims and idle thoughts of frivolity. Similarly, Pope uses zeugma in the line, " Puffs, patches, powders, Bibles, billets-doux".

There is huge incongruity between the Bible and the list of trivialities and accessories to vanity. Both Pope and Wilde create effective satire from the resultant ridicule of upper class behaviour achieved through a hyperbolic presentation of ' society's' careless attitudes towards religion. The distorted value system of the upper classes is presented clearly in both works. Such clear presentation forms satirical technique, as the extreme contrast of the serious with the trivial highlights the ridiculous concerns of ' society'.

In these circumstances Pope is at his most vicious, with statements such as: " Here thou, great Anna! Whom three realms obey, Dost sometimes counsel take - and sometimes Tea". This is somewhat audacious as Pope is essentially suggesting the Queen at the time, Anne, is shallow and superficial. He uses zeugma - a single verb is applied to two objects, counsel and tea, which although correct uses of the verb ' to take' read incongruously when put together. This satirical technique is at the heart of Pope's mockery as it implies both objects are of equal importance.

Whilst the importance of ' Tea', emphasised by capitalisation, seems ludicrous, zeugma creates a point of political satire also; If Queen Anne takes counsel in the same manner she takes tea, it cannot speak much for her regard of matters of state or her political ability. Tea was obviously a contentious issue to both authors, as taking tea becomes the backdrop to a key scene in Importance. As Gwendolyn and Cecily make dignified swipes at each other under the guise of proper manners and respectability, Wilde weaves farcical comments on fashion with serious disagreement.

Wilde gives Gwendolyn lines such as: " Bread and butter, please. Cake is rarely seen in the best households nowadays". Placing such inconsequential concerns as rationale for argument and objection is a satirical technique that highlights the artificial nature of the society around Wilde and their ultimate overall concern - image. Despite the elegance of the mockery normally engaged upon by Wilde and Pope, there is a departure from the seemingly gentle teasing of the surface. In Importance, Wilde's characterisation of Lady Bracknell could be viewed as the most scathing satirical technique of the play.

<https://assignbuster.com/popes-the-rape-of-the-lock-and-wildes-the-importance-of-being-earnest-essay-sample/>

She appears fearsome and formidable, placing a great deal of importance on 'respectability' and social status. On closer inspection, however, a character presented as a column of Victorian high society is little more than froth; her values superficial and her concerns mercenary. The statement, "A man should always have an occupation of some kind. There are far too many idle men in London as it is" seems, on first inspection, to be a moral and rational comment on London society at the time.

However, given thought, the notion of smoking being a reasonable and worthwhile occupation for a man is hyperbolic, displaying the utter triviality with which the upper classes concerned themselves and deemed respectable. The horror of such a state of affairs is augmented when placed in its social context; the rapidly rising levels of unemployment and poverty in London at the time. It is also through Lady Bracknell that Wilde comments on this, with the most vicious of his satire being delivered from Lady Bracknell's perspective.

Her comment on the education system: "The whole theory of modern education is radically unsound. Fortunately in England, at any rate, education produces no effect whatsoever. If it did, it would prove a serious danger to the upper classes, and probably lead to acts of violence in Grosvenor Square" is both comical and cutting; whilst her advocating of a reverse of the aim of education provides immediate humour, her motives to do so are shocking. Fundamentally, Wilde is playing on the notion of 'knowledge is power'; a power only available to the wealthy.

Satirical technique in *Lady Bracknell*, therefore, serves as a scathing indictment of an education system that perpetuated an elitist class based system. Attacking a rigidly stratified society fundamentally founded on manifest inequalities, Pope shares in an apex of moral and political condemnation through satirical technique. His comes in the third canto, with the rhymed couplet “ The hungry Judges soon the sentence sign / And wretches hang that jury-men may dine” assuming an almost Swiftian satirical style.

This is one of the few occasions in the poem where the daily life of London comes to the surface, not hidden beneath the veil of Pope's created world. Pope's implication is that lives are being sacrificed for convenience, a horrific suggestion that is a serious criticism of the justice system. The technique and style used, however, is so skilful that the edge is taken off the mockery through elegance of expression, initially disguising the bitter and scathing satirical technique.

In this way, Pope is able to present a more vicious form of satirical technique than Wilde. Satirical technique is primarily achieved through the style and form favoured by each author. By using the tight and controlled form of heroic couplets, *The Lock* demands sustained formality due to the mode of utterance that is not present in the exchanges of a play. These rhymed couples also provide an effective framework for the development of antithesis and zeugma; indeed, it is through these techniques that Pope creates much of his satire.

This is most clearly displayed in the second canto, with the line " Or stain her honour, or her new brocade, / Forget her pray'rs, or miss a masquerade, / Or lose her heart, or necklace at a ball". Ariel has predicted a series of disasters in a balanced set of opposing clauses that juxtapose the serious and the trivial in a ludicrous manner, often through effective use of zeugma. Ariel's morality appears confused; virtue lies in unflawed appearances. The tone and style used here allows Pope's ironic criticism of Belinda's concerns appear affectionate.

Similarly, extensive use of iambic pentameter and decasyllabic lines that Pope makes extensive use of adds to his mock epic style, which imitates the most recognisable aspects of the epic style; its form and elevated language. These combine to create an atmosphere of high classical drama that is supported by the Pope's monosyllabic rhymes of words which, on their own, have an epic tone, such as strain/pain, fame/name and glides/tydes. Much of Pope's language would not be out of place in a serious epic. His use of an inflated style ridicules the pretensions and pomposity of minor quarrels.

This satirical technique exposes the limitations of contemporary society by the implicit contrast with an expansive epic world. The idle pursuits of the ' celebrities' of the day and the low pursuits of the inner city were shown to be unworthy of a literary form associated with traditional Greek heroes. The satire of this style lies in the fact that he applies elevated language to ' the life of modern ladies in this idle town', as he described in a letter to one of his lady friends. Importance, by contrast, does not adopt a similar tone; from the outset, it declares itself to be, " A Trivial Play for Serious People".

Wilde's use of farce can be regarded as satirical technique, but satire is created in a different manner to that of Pope's mock epic. Farce aims to entertain the audience by means of unlikely and extravagant situations, disguise and mistaken identity, verbal humour including, in Wilde's case, sophisticated puns: "The Importance of Being Earnest" the most obvious example. The ridiculous nature of the style makes the issues and situations Wilde deals with appear equally ridiculous, highlighting their triviality and forming a critical, though affectionate, satirical attack.

Wilde's style is augmented by the form of the piece, as a dramatic presentation allows for effective portrayal of the characters. This allows for a more 'slapstick' style of humour playing on 'sight gags' made possible by the form of the piece. Jack's appearance in mourning dress provides visual references that give rise to immediate humour. As farce often entails a character trying to hide something from the rest of the cast, this is particularly appropriate, and allows satirical technique to be derived from the fact that Jack is attempting to hide inner immorality through outer morality.

Using the form of a play also permits effective interaction between characters, with Wilde presenting their speech in witty remarks and epigrams, such as Gwendolen's, "I never travel without my diary. One should always have something sensational to read in the train". These precise and carefully crafted verbal exchanges form satirical technique that is made possible through the form Wilde has chosen. In conclusion, therefore, both Pope and Wilde present witty and astute pieces of satire, focusing on the societies in which they were respectively embedded.

Comparisons can be drawn between the characterisation of both *Importance and The Lock*, where the presentation of the main characters provides a significant basis for satirical technique. The works, however, do differ notably, predominantly in their style and form. In separate ways, through Pope's stylish mock epic poetic style and Wilde's farcical play, each writer creates a suitable foundation of satirical technique to build on. From such thorough foundations, both writers go on to attack the false values they encountered in the societies around them.

Written at different times, and, indeed, by different people, it is unsurprising that the writers' main points of satire differ in both content and approach. However, in spite of this, there are huge similarities in the points the authors deem suitable for satire, launching satirical attacks on false values that were present in Pope's day as much as in Wilde's. This satirical technique gives rise to a great deal of humour that strikes a chord with modern readers and audiences, which may suggest that although times have changed, perhaps 'society' has not.