



Satire in Pope's The Rape of the Lock

A. Satya Swaroop,
Lecturer in English, Ideal College of Arts and Sciences Kakinada.

Abstract

It is viewed that exaggeration to the ridiculous extreme-maximization and minimization is accordingly his chief method. Then, Pope uses ignoble comparison or contrast, explicit, or implicit, to ridicule a person or a thing. And in these two methods mainly he uses such instruments as wit, irony, innuendo and other figures of speech.

Key words: exaggeration, romantic hyper bole, goddess of beauty

Narration

Satire in the Rape of the Lock is so mild and faint that it could not possibly be ranked among the proper satirical works of the eighteenth century. Nevertheless, there are satiric situations implications, and plain statements. But even when satire is there, it is subdued greatly by the powerful charms of poetry.

Much depends upon the clarity of Pope's attitude to Belinda, and through her, to the eighteenth century moral norms. As regards Belinda, it is clear that pope's attitude is not without ambiguity. At certain places he portraits Belinda in positively beautiful terms to be admired and commended; at others he means the portrait to be laughed at. At the very beginning of The Rape of the lock, Belinda's charm and beauty as embodied in the image is an instance of romantic hyper bole; but her late rising and her lap-dog licking her feet are meant to be laughed at. This is clearer in the toilet-scene. It is possible to regard the whole scene as a ceremony of ordering the universe, or as worshipping of orderly beauty and harm that Belinda is. She is even presented as the goddess of beauty. Similarly, there is an ambiguity in Clarissa's moral speech. She seems to

commend artificial make-up, even by implication, flirtation; but she does insist on moderation in these things. Let good sense and good humour blend with the embellishments and fashions that seems to be Belinda's moral lesson. Perhaps, Pope was too much of his age, in this poem, to be able to satirise at it. For if the age itself was superficial, Pope had a share of it.

However mild and faint, the satiric elements are there which arise out of the mock-epic design of the poem. Exaggeration to the ridiculous extreme-maximization and minimization is accordingly his chief method. Then, Pope uses ignoble comparison or contrast, explicit, or implicit, to ridicule a person or a thing. And in these two methods mainly he uses such instruments as wit, irony, innuendo and other figures of speech.

At the very beginning of The Rape of the Lock, Pope's satire is in evidence. In the description of "little" men engaging in the task so "bold" as cutting the lock of a lady, and then the "gentle" ladies capable of so "mighty rage" the satire is assimilated with epic conventions. But later, in the lap-dog licking Belinda's body to wake her up, it is explicit. So it is, if we look at the toilet-scene from a particular view-point, when Belinda is



shown worshipping cosmetics as cosmic powers. Ariel's speech in canto I or in canto II contains more caustic remarks couched in ironical terms. Pope exaggerates to an absurd proportion the fancy for fashions of the aristocratic ladies of his time in making Ariel say how their souls, even after the death of their bodies continue to pursue the life of fashion in the form of spirits. The categorization of the types of ladies too is satirical fiery termagants, readily yielding women, grave prudes, light coquettes, but not a single good category. Similarly the description of how the sylphs protect the beautiful young ladies from being seduced by the self-seeking lords only goes to exaggerate the flirtatious nature of women. Ironically, the sylphs protect them by inducing them to be worse and flirtatious with still larger number of people.

In the Rape of the Lock Pope satirizes more sharply the utter moral confusion of the aristocratic lords and ladies of the time. Pope induces us to laugh at it particularly in Ariel's speech in the second canto. The satire is built in Ariel's conjecturing about the cause of the impending disaster to befall Belinda. Each line of Ariel's speech in the particular context turns out to be a damning satirical contrast. For example, he makes us ridicule the vainglorious fancy of the aristocratic ladies by linking the flaw developed on a China show piece jar to the disaster of fate and to such a vital thing as the loss of chastity, or by suggesting that to them the loss of chastity was no more important than a stain on dress made of brocade.

Even the aristocratic lords are satirised for the similar lack of moral sense, and having trivialized, conventionalized, the serious vital and deeper aspects of life.

Their vanity of imagining themselves to be Knight-errants is satirised in the Baron's worshipping the goddess of love at an altar made of a knight's dress, army and above all, love, letters. He is described in highly exaggerated terms : falling flat on the ground, praying to the goddess, with his eyes half-open and turned towards the heaven. Love and sex were their chief gods and flirting with coquettes their chief preoccupations. They took great delight in writing and receiving love-letters and preserving these and other tokens of love-making as mementoes of their victory over charming ladies of the time. The older aristocratic gentlemen were no better. The portraits of Sir Plume with his snuff-box and special cane, and Dapper-wit with his sentimental song are gently, amiably and satirically described.

Mainly, it is the aristocratic class which is the butt of Pope's satire. The lords and ladies of this class were superficial, petty-minded, dissimulating hypocrites who cared more for a show of morality in public than really living a life of reality in their private world. They lived in a state of moral vacuum and utter confusion of human values, and yet 'Pope is not bitter at them. The portraits are funny and humorous, absurd and provoking laughter.

References:

1. Lives of the poets. -- -- Samuel Johnson
2. History of English Literature - - Compton Rickett.
3. The Major Satires of Alexander Pope - - R.W. Rogers