Alexander Pope 1688–1744

As a poet and satirist, Alexander Pope was unrivaled during the early 18th century. Revered for his masterful use of the heroic couplet, Pope influenced the literature of the first half of the 18th century so undeniably that the time period is sometimes called the Age of Pope.

**A Precocious Poet**  Pope was raised as a Roman Catholic during a period in England’s history when only Protestants could obtain a university education or hold public office. For this reason, he was largely self-taught. Pope was an exceptional youth; by the time he was 17, his poems were being read and admired by many of England’s best literary critics.

At the age of 12, Pope developed tuberculosis of the spine, possibly from drinking contaminated milk. The tuberculosis stunted his growth (he never grew taller than four feet six inches) and permanently deformed his spine. Pope’s illness limited the amount of physical activity he could engage in, which may have contributed to his early devotion to reading and writing.

**Fame and Fortune**  Pope’s most celebrated work, *The Rape of the Lock*, appeared in 1712, when he was only 24. Poetry, however, did not pay the bills. Pope was a neoclassicist, modeling his writing on the works of ancient Greece and Rome, which stressed balance, order, rationality, and sophisticated wit. As a great admirer of classical poetry, he took on the task of translating Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. It was an enormous amount of work, but the money he made on the project made him financially independent—a luxury most poets of his day did not enjoy.

**Good Friends and Cruel Enemies**  Pope was a member of the exclusive Scriblerus Club, a group of writers affiliated with the Tory political party who dedicated themselves to exposing the pretensions and affectations of literary society through satire. Other members of the club included his good friends John Gay and Jonathan Swift. Although Pope’s poetry was widely admired, he was often the object of criticism from less talented writers who attacked his religion, politics, and, most cruelly, his physical appearance.

Pope’s satire grew more biting as he aged, and he articulated his views on England’s political and literary leaders in many of his later works. Pope died shortly after his 56th birthday and was buried near his parents in Twickenham, the rural town where he had spent the latter half of his life.
POETIC FORM: MOCK EPIC

A mock epic uses the lofty style and conventions of epic poetry to satirize a trivial subject. In The Rape of the Lock, Pope makes fun of a silly quarrel by narrating it in a grandiose manner. As you read, look for epic characteristics such as formal language, boasting speeches, supernatural intervention in human affairs, and elaborate descriptions of weapons and battles.

LITERARY ANALYSIS: HEROIC COUPLET

A heroic couplet is a pair of rhymed lines written in iambic pentameter, a metrical pattern of five feet (units), each of which consists of two syllables, the first unstressed and the second stressed. Pope was a master of the heroic couplet, employing it for matters both witty and wise, as in the following example:

O thoughtless mortals! ever blind to fate,
Too soon dejected, and too soon elate:
As you read The Rape of the Lock, notice how Pope uses surprising rhymes to create humor.

READING SKILL: UNDERSTAND ELEVATED LANGUAGE

Pope often uses difficult words and unusual syntax, or word order, to mimic the style of epic poetry and to maintain the meter and rhyme scheme of heroic couplets. The following strategies can help you make sense of his elevated language:

• Use sidenotes to understand unfamiliar words and historical allusions in the text.
• Try to visualize the action and imagery in the poem.
• Paraphrase sentences, restating them in your own words. If sentences have unusual syntax, rearrange the words to form a more familiar sentence structure.

As you read, use a chart like the one shown to record and paraphrase examples of elevated language.

Example | Paraphrase
--- | ---
Hither the heroes and the nymphs resort . . . | The heroes and maidens often go to this place.

What are the signs of VANITY?

All of us are susceptible to occasional bouts of vanity. Some people find it difficult to resist a chance to gaze lovingly at themselves in a mirror or talk at length about their favorite subject—themselves. In The Rape of the Lock, Pope holds up a different kind of mirror, one that he hoped would prompt people to take a more critical look at themselves.

SURVEY How can you tell if someone is vain? Complete the following survey to help you distinguish between vanity and self-confidence. Then form a small group with three or four classmates and discuss how everyone answered each question.

1. You spend a lot of time choosing just the right outfit to wear.
   - VAIN □ SELF-CONFIDENT

2. You usually think you have the best solution to a problem.
   - VAIN □ SELF-CONFIDENT

3. You frequently check your appearance in mirrors, windows, etc.
   - VAIN □ SELF-CONFIDENT

4. What you have to say is almost always important.
   - VAIN □ SELF-CONFIDENT

5. People are sometimes envious of you.
   - VAIN □ SELF-CONFIDENT

Complete the activities in your Reader/Writer Notebook.
In the first of the poem’s five cantos, a Muse is evoked for inspiration (a tradition in epic poetry) and Belinda is warned of impending danger by Ariel, a spirit sent to protect Belinda. In Canto 2, Belinda rides up the Thames River to a Hampton Court party and is noticed by the scheming Baron, who resolves to possess one of the two curly locks spiraling down Belinda’s back.

from CANTO 3

Close by those meads, forever crowned with flowers,
Where Thames with pride surveys his rising towers,
There stands a structure of majestic frame,
Which from the neighboring Hampton takes its name.

Here Britain’s statesmen oft the fall foredoom
Of foreign tyrants and of nymphs at home;
Here thou, great Anna! whom three realms obey,
Dost sometimes counsel take—and sometimes tea.  

Hither the heroes and the nymphs resort,
To taste awhile the pleasures of a court;
In various talk the instructive hours they passed,
Who gave the ball, or paid the visit last;
One speaks the glory of the British Queen,
And one describes a charming Indian screen;

BACKGROUND  The Rape of the Lock was based on a real-life quarrel between two affluent Roman Catholic families, the Fermors and the Petres. The feud began when young Lord Petre (the “Baron” in the poem) snipped a lock of hair from Arabella Fermor (“Belinda”). The dispute escalated out of all proportion, and a friend of Pope’s asked him to intervene, hoping that he could “laugh them together again.” Pope rose to the occasion, mocking the folly of the dispute by portraying it as if it were a battle of epic scale.

1 meads: meadows.
2 Thames (tēmz): a river that flows through southern England.
3–4 structure . . . name: the royal palace of Hampton Court, about 15 miles from London.
5 nymphs (nǐmfz): maidens; young women.
6 Anna . . . obey: Queen Anne, who rules over the three realms of England, Scotland, and Wales.
7 HEROIC COUPLET
In Pope’s time, tea was pronounced “tay.” How does Pope use rhyme in lines 7–8 to mock pomposity?
A third interprets motions, looks, and eyes;
At every word a reputation dies.
Snuff, or the fan, supply each pause of chat,
With singing, laughing, ogling, and all that.
Meanwhile declining from the noon of day,
The sun obliquely shoots his burning ray;
The hungry judges soon the sentence sign,
And wretches hang that jurymen may dine;
The merchant from the Exchange returns in peace,
And the long labors of the toilet cease.
Belinda now, whom thirst of fame invites,
Burns to encounter two adventurous knights,
At ombre singly to decide their doom,
And swells her breast with conquests yet to come.

The Baron now his Diamonds pours apace;
The embroidered King who shows but half his face,
And his refulgent Queen, with powers combined,
Of broken troops an easy conquest find.
Clubs, Diamonds, Hearts, in wild disorder seen,
With throngs promiscuous strew the level green.
Thus when dispersed a routed army runs,
Of Asia’s troops, and Afric’s sable sons,
With like confusion different nations fly,
Of various habit, and of various dye,
The pierced battalions disunited fall
In heaps on heaps; one fate o’erwhelms them all.

The Knave of Diamonds tries his wily arts,
And wins (oh, shameful chance!) the Queen of Hearts.
At this, the blood the virgin’s cheek forsook,
A livid paleness spreads o’er all her look;
She sees, and trembles at the approaching ill,
Just in the jaws of ruin, and Codille.
And now (as oft in some distempered state)
On one nice trick depends the general fate.
An Ace of Hearts steps forth: The King unseen
Lurked in her hand, and mourned his captive Queen.
He springs to vengeance with an eager pace,
And falls like thunder on the prostrate Ace.
The nymph exulting fills with shouts the sky,
The walls, the woods, and long canals reply.

O thoughtless mortals! ever blind to fate,
Too soon dejected, and too soon elate:
Sudden these honors shall be snatched away,
And cursed forever this victorious day.
For lo! the board with cups and spoons is crowned,
The berries crackle, and the mill turns round;

snuff: powdered tobacco that is inhaled.

ombre (ōm’bər): a popular card game of the day, similar to bridge.

King . . . face: the king of diamonds, the only king shown in profile in a deck of cards.
refulgent (rī-fōl’jənt) Queen: resplendent or shining queen of diamonds. The Baron is leading his highest diamonds in an effort to win.

promiscuous (pra-mī’s’kyōū-as): unsorted; level green: the green cloth-covered card table.
afric’s sable sons: Africa’s black soldiers.

Knave: jack.

the virgin’s: Belinda’s.

codille (kō-dīl’): a losing hand of cards in ombre.
distempered: disordered.
nice: delicate; subtle; trick: a single round of cards played and won.

ELEVATED LANGUAGE
Reread lines 53–54, imagining the sounds that Pope describes. Write a paraphrase of this couplet.

berries: coffee beans.
On shining altars of Japan they raise
The silver lamp; the fiery spirits blaze:
From silver spouts the grateful liquors glide,
While China’s earth receives the smoking tide.

At once they gratify their scent and taste,
And frequent cups prolong the rich repast.
Straight hover round the fair her airy band;
Some, as she sipped, the fuming liquor fanned,
Some o’er her lap their careful plumes displayed,
Trembling, and conscious of the rich brocade.

Coffee (which makes the politician wise,
And see through all things with his half-shut eyes)
Sent up in vapors to the Baron’s brain
New stratagems, the radiant Lock to gain.

Ah, cease, rash youth! desist ere ‘tis too late,
Fear the just Gods, and think of Scylla’s fate!
Changed to a bird, and sent to flit in air,
She dearly pays for Nisus’ injured hair!

But when to mischief mortals bend their will,
How soon they find fit instruments of ill!
Just then, Clarissa drew with tempting grace
A two-edged weapon from her shining case:
So ladies in romance assist their knight,
Present the spear, and arm him for the fight.

He takes the gift with reverence, and extends
The little engine on his fingers’ ends;
This just behind Belinda’s neck he spread,
As o’er the fragrant steams she bends her head.
Swift to the Lock a thousand sprights repair,
A thousand wings, by turns, blow back the hair,
Thrice they twitched the diamond in her ear,
Thrice she looked back, and thrice the foe drew near.

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.

The Peer now spreads the glittering forfex wide,
To enclose the Lock; now joins it, to divide.
Even then, before the fatal engine closed,
A wretched Sylph too fondly interposed;
Fate urged the shears, and cut the Sylph in twain.
(But airy substance soon unites again):
The meeting points the sacred hair dissever
From the fair head, forever and forever!

Then flashed the living lightning from her eyes,
And screams of horror rend the affrighted skies.
Not louder shrieks to pitying heaven are cast,
When husbands, or when lapdogs breathe their last;
Or when rich china vessels fallen from high,
In glittering dust and painted fragments lie!

“Let wreaths of triumph now my temples twine,”
The victor cried, “the glorious prize is mine!
While fish in streams, or birds delight in air,
Or in a coach and six the British fair,
As long as Atalantis shall be read,
Or the small pillow grace a lady’s bed,
While visits shall be paid on solemn days,
When numerous wax-lights in bright order blaze,
While nymphs take treats, or assignations give,
So long my honor, name, and praise shall live!

“While time would spare, from steel receives its date,
And monuments, like men, submit to fate!
Steel could the labor of the Gods destroy,
And strike to dust the imperial towers of Troy;
Steel could the works of mortal pride confound,
And hew triumphal arches to the ground.
What wonder then, fair nymph! thy hairs should feel,
The conquering force of unresisted steel?”

In Canto 4, following an epic tradition, a melancholy sprite
descends to the Underworld—which Pope calls the “Cave of
Spleen”—and returns to the party with a vial of grief and
flowing tears and a bag of “sobs, sighs, and passions,” which
are emptied over Belinda’s head, fanning her fury even further.

from CANTO 5

“To arms, to arms!” the fierce virago cries,
And swift as lightning to the combat flies.
All side in parties, and begin the attack;
Fans clap, silks rustle, and tough whalebones crack;
Heroes’ and heroines’ shouts confusedly rise,
And bass and treble voices strike the skies.
No common weapons in their hands are found,
Like Gods they fight, nor dread a mortal wound. . . .

See, fierce Belinda on the Baron flies,
With more than usual lightning in her eyes;
Nor feared the chief the unequal fight to try,
Who sought no more than on his foe to die.

But this bold lord with manly strength endued,
She with one finger and a thumb subdued:
Just where the breath of life his nostrils drew,
A charge of snuff the wily virgin threw;
The Gnomes direct, to every atom just,
The pungent grains of titillating dust.
Suddenly, with starting tears each eye overflows,
And the high dome re-echoes to his nose.
“Now meet thy fate,” incensed Belinda cried,
And drew a deadly bodkin from her side.
(The same, his ancient personage to deck,
Her great-great-grand sire wore about his neck,
In three seal rings; which after, melted down,
Formed a vast buckle for his widow’s gown:

125 date: end.

127–128 the labor of the Gods . . .
towers of Troy: Troy, an ancient city
famous for its towers, whose walls
were said to have been built by the
Greek gods Apollo and Poseidon.

D MOCK EPIC
In lines 125–132, what humorous
effect does Pope create by using
lofty language and allusions to
Greek mythology?

133 virago (və-rā’gō): a woman who
engages in warfare or other fighting.
She has come to Belinda’s aid at
Ariel’s request.

136 whalebones: elastic material
from whales’ mouths, used in corsets
or support undergarments.

E MOCK EPIC
What characteristics of a mock
epic do you find in lines 133–140?

145 endued (in-dōod’): endowed;
provided with.

149 Gnomes (nōmz): supernatural
creatures bent on causing mischief.

152 And the high . . . nose: In other
words, he sneezes.

154 bodkin (bōd’kın): a long,
ornamental hairpin.

157 seal rings: signet rings bearing a
person’s family crest or initials.
Her infant grandame’s whistle next it grew,
The bells she jingled, and the whistle blew;
Then in a bodkin graced her mother’s hairs,
Which long she wore, and now Belinda wears.

“Boast not my fall,” he cried, “insulting foe!
Thou by some other shalt be laid as low.
Nor think to die dejects my lofty mind:
All that I dread is leaving you behind!
Rather than so, ah, let me still survive,
And burn in Cupid’s flames—but burn alive.”

“Restore the Lock!” she cries; and all around
“Restore the Lock!” the vaulted roofs rebound.
Not fierce Othello in so loud a strain
Roared for the handkerchief that caused his pain.
But see how oft ambitious aims are crossed,
And chiefs contend till all the prize is lost!
The lock, obtained with guilt, and kept with pain,
In every place is sought, but sought in vain:
With such a prize no mortal must be blessed,
So Heaven decrees! with Heaven who can contest?

Some thought it mounted to the lunar sphere,
Since all things lost on earth are treasured there.
There heroes’ wits are kept in ponderous vases,
And beaux’ in snuffboxes and tweezer cases.
There broken vows and death-bed alms are found,
And lovers’ hearts with ends of riband bound.

But trust the Muse—she saw it upward rise,
Though marked by none but quick, poetic eyes.
A sudden star, it shot through liquid air,
And drew behind a radiant trail of hair.

Then cease, bright nymph! to mourn thy ravished hair,
Which adds new glory to the shining sphere!
Not all the tresses that fair head can boast
Shall draw such envy as the Lock you lost.
For, after all the murders of your eye,
When, after millions slain, yourself shall die:
When those fair suns shall set, as set they must,
And all those tresses shall be laid in dust,
This Lock the Muse shall consecrate to fame,
And ’midst the stars inscribe Belinda’s name.
Comprehension

1. Summarize  What happens in the card game in lines 29–54?

2. Recall  How does the Baron obtain the lock of Belinda’s hair?

3. Clarify  At the end of the poem, what happens to the lock of Belinda’s hair?

Literary Analysis

4. Identify Irony  A contrast between expectations and actual outcomes is referred to as situational irony. Where is the irony in The Rape of the Lock?

5. Interpret Satire  In addition to satirizing a quarrel, Pope used The Rape of the Lock to point out flaws in British society and upper-class behavior. For each of the following passages, describe the flaw that Pope is criticizing:
   - lines 15–16 (“A third interprets . . . dies.”)
   - lines 21–22 (“The hungry judges . . . dine;”)
   - lines 111–114 (“Not louder shrieks . . . lie!”)

6. Examine Heroic Couplet  One of the drawbacks of heroic couplets is that they can begin to sound monotonous in a long poem. Reread lines 167–168. How does Pope vary the rhythm in this couplet? What does the variation in the rhythm suggest about the Baron?

7. Analyze Mock Epic  The Rape of the Lock parodies the epic form by treating a trivial subject in a grand, lofty style. Citing specific examples from the text, describe how Pope makes fun of these elements of traditional epic poetry:
   - elaborate descriptions of weapons and battles
   - plot affected by supernatural intervention
   - boasting speeches

8. Draw Conclusions About Elevated Language  Review the chart you filled in as you read, comparing your paraphrases with the original lines. In what ways does Pope’s use of elevated language enhance the poem?

Literary Criticism

9. Different Perspectives  Pope’s friend Jonathan Swift once wrote, “Satire is a sort of glass, wherein beholders do generally discover everybody’s face but their own.” While the mock epic The Rape of the Lock was written nearly 300 years ago to poke fun at vanity, beauty, and pride, in what ways does the satire reflect today’s society?

What are the signs of VANITY?

Judging from the excerpts you read from The Rape of the Lock, how do think Pope felt about vanity? Do you share his opinion?