

Research Paper

The Use of Supernatural Machinery in "The Rape of the Lock"

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Dr. Johnson remarked about Alexander Pope that "If Pope be not found, where is poetry to be found?" Pope is a satirist poet of 18th Century. His "The Rape of the Lock" is Pope first satire. It is a social satire as well as a mock-heroic epic. Here, pope mocks at the "little unguarded follies" of the fair sex, and at the artificial social life of 18th Century London as a whole. The fashion, the artificiality, the vanity, and frivolity of the age is exposed. In order to satire, Pope uses different means of mock-epic conventions. He uses supernatural machineries like Sylphs, Nymphs, Gnomes and evil spirits.

The Rape of the Lock is Pope's best expression of poetic and satirical genius. The 1st version of The Rape of the Lock was in two cantos, in which pope tried to reconcile two families about a quarrel. But the immense popularity of the poem inspired Pope to enlarge it in five cantos, in which he used supernatural machinery extensively.

The supernatural machinery of the poem is derived from the Rosicrucian doctrine as formulated by Le Comte in Germany in the 17th Century. According to this theory, four elements- fire, water, earth and air, were inhabited by four kinds of spirits- Salamanders, Nymphs, Gnomes and sylphs. In this poem Pope does not put all these spirits to function but simply Sylphs and an evil spirit Umbrid are put in action. The sylphs are presented as tiny good spirit with wings. They can change their shape and sex, can see the future can inspect the heart of the human being. They are airy and invisible to the human eyes. These good spirits try to protect Belinda. Their head sylph is Ariel.

In the 1st canto the sylph causes a dream to Belinda, the heroine of the poem. The sylph appears in the form of a handsome young man in her dream at the noon time. The guardian sylph addresses Belinda as 'Fairest of mortals' and she is told that she is protected by thousands of spirits who wanders in airy regions.

The sylph has caused sleep and dream to Belinda with a special purpose as he wants to convey certain secret truths. The sylph says the Belinda should not consider herself as a common girl but she is someone special. Certain secrets are not revealed to them who are intellectual and skeptics. The secret truths are revealed to women and children who by nature are very innocent. Thousands of sylphs are protecting Belinda so she should feel proud.

The first truth the sylph reveals is about the next birth of women. All sylphs before their present existence were beautiful women. When a woman dies, it is only her physical death. Her vanities interest, taste remain the same. Even after their death the interest to play the game of card, to move in decorated chariot, survive as they accompany the beautiful lady for the purpose of protecting her. The sylph further says that basically there are four kinds of women.

1. The women who are quarrelsome after their death, their soul goes to fire and such women become Salamander.
2. Those women who are polite submissive, after their death their soul returns to water and they become Nymphs.
3. Those women who are proud, serious minded, their soul go to Earth and they become Gnome.
4. Those women who are flirt and coquette, after their death, their soul go to air and they become Sylphs.

The second truth is that a woman should not reject the proposal of a man because a time comes when she falls in love with the sylph as the sylph can assume any shape. The third secret truth which the sylph reveals is that women are tempted on some occasions to part with their chastity. When they go to the club for ball dance, masquerades, theatre with some treacherous friend on such occasions her virginity is protected by the guidance of the Sylphs but a woman thinks that her sense of honour protects her from parting with virtue. The fourth secret is that some beautiful girls reject the proposal of men and dreams of lords and noblemen imagines themselves as duchess. These women corrupt their minds and heart.

The fifth secret revealed to Belinda is that when women go astray, they are guided by the Sylphs from falling the follies by introducing new temptations to them.

The Sylph introduces himself that he is also one such Sylph and he has come to warn her, protect her. The name of this Sylph is Ariel. The Sylph reveals his purpose by saying that while wandering in the air he saw governing star of Belinda, which shows the shadow of some dreadful event which will take place on that day before sunset. It has not been revealed what will happen or where will happen. As a guardian Sylph of Belinda, he gives one warning to her and vanishes from her dream.

One reason of the success of the poem is the use of supernatural machinery by Pope. The speech of the sylph echoes Satan's speeches in Paradise Lost, and the heroes speech in the classical epics. The name of the Sylph- Ariel reminds the mischievous airy spirit of Shakespeare's The Tempest. Through the speech of the Sylph Pope satirizes the fashionable women of 18th century, whose virtue seems

easily assailable and the Sylph must protect them. Ariel is not simply satisfied with this. The major function of the sylph is their meeting. The head sylph Ariel calls all sylphs from different earthly regions and first describes their original function. Then he says that they have to do a special function on that day because the virtue of one lady is in danger. To each Sylph he assigns a special job. Brillante, is asked to take care of Belinda's hair and Ariel himself will take care of her lap-dog. Through this Pope passes satire that being the head Sylph he should think of protecting her virtue but he decides to protect her lap-dog. The presence of the Sylphs also serve the purpose of comic effect. Their attempt to create a mild blow of wind with the help of their wings sounds comic. One Sylph who is overenthusiastic comes in between when Baron is cutting the lock of hair. It gets cut into two but being an airy spirit it is reunited. They also sit on the cards of Ombre so that Belinda may win. Pope has successfully utilized supernatural machinery not simply by incorporating good spirit but also by incorporating an evil spirit like Umbrid. If good spirit try to protect Belinda, evil spirit harm Belinda. If Belinda is in melancholy, half of the world is in melancholy so to cause despair and melancholy to Belinda, Umbrid goes to the Cave of Spleen. Umbrid's visit to the under world serves the purpose of one important epic convention. An ideal epic should display some characters visiting either heaven or underworld. This convention is observed by Pope through this supernatural element. His visit also serves the purpose of mock element. In that cave he finds tea-pots walking and talking which is comic. His collecting sighs, sorrows, sobs, tears, and then showering all on Belinda also add to the mock-effect of the poem. The way the Sylphs sit on the cards of Belinda, Umbrid and other evil spirits sit on the weapons of women so that they can use those weapons effectively. The presence of the Sylphs and Umbrid make the reading of the poem interesting. Though they are supernatural, they appear as if they are human beings with flesh and blood.

References: