

‘Both *The Rape of the Lock* and *Vanity Fair* are coruscating social criticisms that expose the folly and disingenuity of human behaviour.’ Explore this view in relation to Pope and Thackeray’s texts.

Condemning and revealing, mocking and veristic, *The Rape of the Lock* and *Vanity Fair* unmask the deception and fraudulence of society. Pope’s use of the mock-epic genre, as a poet inspired by classical literature, is central to the observations he offers about the self-absorption of society, where ‘the heart’ of humanity is a ‘toy shop’. As an outsider to his world - a Catholic man disfigured by disease - Pope’s observations are sharpened by the juxtaposition of the world of the court and the heroic lives within the world of the epic. As an example of Augustan literature, the reader observes how Pope follows the conventions of addressing contemporary philosophy and political events, bringing light to real issues, educating society. Thackeray’s characterisation, both naturalistic and hyperbolic, is revealing of the paradox of human behaviour: that we can be both admirable and yet entirely self-serving. It takes inspiration from Napoleon’s rampage through Europe, with these events directly impacting the character’s lives, whilst on the backdrop of Britain’s burgeoning colonial empire. As such, both texts reveal the Sisyphean task of trying to find sincerity within a humanity characterised by absurdity and corrupted by moral myopia.

Pope and Thackeray disclose and condemn the disparity between appearance and reality in worlds that are meretricious and artificial. Belinda is vital to this central observation, apparent when she is introduced to us via her toilet in Canto One: the placing of this scene within the poem’s narrative suggests the importance of this ritual and the idea that her appearance is assembled. The metre and exact couplets of ‘Yet graceful ease, and sweetness void of pride / might hide her faults, if Belles had faults to hide: / If to her share some female errors fall, / look on her face, and you’ll forget ‘em all’ comprise a glibness that points to Belinda’s assumption that her appearance is unquestionable - which it is, Pope suggests, in a world merely concerned with the external, yet inherently solipsistic. In this moment Pope’s poem arguably takes on renewed relevance to a contemporary reader considering Butler’s notion of gender as socially constructed and therefore performed; social media has encouraged women in particular to enact what society conceives as femininity. Pope’s sly reference to the ‘faults’ of women is couched in colloquial terms: the idiomatic ‘em’ intimates the unthinking nonchalance of those who do not look beyond the apparent and who he mockingly exposes in his coy dedication to Mrs Arabella Fermor.

In *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray also illuminates the myopia of a society preoccupied with façades. Clothes emerge as a motif of the latter, as does personal conduct, seen in the demeanour of Becky. As Nancy Marck Cantwell notes, ‘From ball gowns to uniforms, dress serves as a public discourse through which identity is performed and national

image formulated and disseminated' where the characters 'make deliberate use of dress as a tool to promote their goals.' As she finds a foothold in society, that her modest birthright denies, Becky's performance becomes increasingly convincing; she deceives a world that often cannot see beyond the ostensible. Indeed, 'Mrs. Rawdon Crawley was quite killing in the part...Becky laughed, gay and saucy looking, and swept the prettiest little curtsey ever seen.' This moment highlights how, as Thackeray suggests in the novel's preface, life can be a performance, duplicitous and false in a world where people are unable to distinguish between affectation and authenticity. In the same way that Post-Structuralism rejects the idea of texts having a single mode of understanding, the characters, particularly Becky, do not exist within a single state either; assuming different versions of herself, she draws on the latter to advance her own interests. This is also seen in the fluidity of the use of different names for one character – diaphora – showing how Becky can easily switch between various aspects of her character. When staying with the Sedleys for the first time, Thackeray notes, with humour, her capacity to play the earnest and humble friend, a performance that wins hearts and minds: 'She interested Mrs. Blenkinsop...she persisted in calling Sambo "Sir," and "Mr. Sambo,"...and she apologised to the lady's maid for giving her trouble...'. The use of isocolon suggests the formulaic and disingenuous nature of Becky's interactions which she executes for her own benefit, allowing the reader to observe the duplicitous and performative nature of society.

Both worlds are therefore built upon deceit and falsehoods. Pope's nomenclature amplifies his lampooning of a society that promotes falsehoods such as the accepted view that men are the intellectual and moral superiors to women. Yet, Pope's use of names reveals the absurdity of this notion. Indeed, Lord Plume's name signifies a decorative feather, and when coupled with the details of his fancy 'Snuff-box justly vain' and cane, forms a parodic portrait of a vain male courtier, a counterpart to the narcissistic ladies of the court. Men present themselves as principled and gallant, yet their names, such as Sir Dapperwit and Sir Fopling, reveal the opposite. The rhyme scheme is also a significant indicator of this idea: Pope's rhymes – heroic couplets – are mainly monosyllabic ('fled/dead', 'cast/last'), elevating the action to an epic level – as suggested by the poem's title and enacted during the game of ombre. By rendering a direct comparison between courtly activities and the struggles depicted in epic poetry, Pope emphasises the superficial world of the court: 'Where wigs with wigs, with sword-knots sword-knots strive, beaux banish beaux, and coaches coaches drive' is a conscious nod to Pope's own translation of the Iliad. The use of epizeuxis, along with the diacope and paroemion, further highlights this absurdity via syntax: instead of the violent clash of weapons, the court is filled with decorative, and somewhat useless items like wigs, signifiers of the cosmetic and artificial. The elevation of the action to tragic proportions is undercut via polysyllabic rhymes ('brocade/masquerade') which create a lighter tone, echoing the superficial concerns and preoccupations of Belinda and her milieu.

Thackeray's world is equivalent in terms of self-deception. The picaresque narrative of *Vanity Fair* enables Thackeray to expose a world of sophistry and subterfuge, seen via Jos' stories of the war. Jos is a foil to George, Dobbin, and Rawdon, who risk their lives, whilst bystanders like Jos taste the excitement almost vicariously. Thackeray wryly notes, 'That period of Jos's life which now ensued was so full of incident, that it served him for conversation many years after, and even the tiger-hunt story was put aside for more stirring narratives which he had to tell about the great campaign of Waterloo.' The long and drawn-out sentence – hypotaxis – sustained by various clauses, reflects the sustenance that this *experience* has provided for Jos and the curation of his reputation. His stories are exaggerated and somewhat fictitious, revealing the vanity and superficiality with which so many characters approach many facets of life, even serious ones like war.

As such, society in both texts is revealed to lack discernment. Through the use of bathos – wherein the exalted and the banal coalesce – the serious and the inconsequential, business and pleasure are conflated. The setting of the poem – London – seemingly the epicentre of the civilised world – lays bare this idea. In Canto Three, when Pope's roving eye momentarily takes in the court, he notes that political discourse is no more significant to the monarch than gossip; here, the internal and external engage in a hermeneutical process, the jarring pararhyme drawing attention to this insight: thus 'great Anna! whom three realms obey, / dost sometimes counsel take – and sometimes tea'. This sudden shift from important state business to trifling and petty matters mirrors the moral discordance within society underscored by the use of zeugma: advice and a cup of tea are both proper objects of the verb 'to take' but contain entirely different meanings. Here the unexpectedness of this conjunction reveals Pope's puncturing of the Queen's inflated sense of self. Likewise, the use of syntax earlier in the poem reveals Belinda to be careless and indiscriminate as suggested by the litany of objects on her dressing table: 'Puffs, Powders, Patches, Bibles, Billet-doux...' Here, the Bible abuts cosmetic artefacts and love letters which suggests that she views and considers them equivalently, mirroring the moral blindness and nescience of society.

In *Vanity Fair* we note society's inability to discern the difference between unimportant as well as crucial moments, which is why the domestic scenes are as revealing as any other. Becky's ingratiating behaviour when she first meets the Sedleys reveals the costume she wears, prohibiting clear judgement. When at dinner, Jos encourages her to try a chilli, which she does, without knowing what it is, to impress him. Becky 'thought a chilli was something cool, as its name imported...', emphasising how her only concern is for appearances and as such is unable to judge the reality of life. In reality, 'It was hotter than the curry; flesh and blood could bear it no longer.' On a macroscopic level, this is representative of how on the exterior people may seem genuine or sincere but have different and impure motivations on the inside. She then demands 'Water, for Heaven's sake, water!' The use of epanadiplosis creates a cyclical sense, mirroring how one cannot

escape their reality, and society cannot escape from the disingenuous as it envelops them. Indeed, the absence of a hero in the novel reflects the absence of sincerity: as Becky insists - she would rather look virtuous than actually be virtuous. Similarly, we see that Becky admired Mr. Cawley's 'speech at the Quashimaboo-Aid Society; took an interest in his pamphlet on malt: was often affected, even to tears, by his discourses of an evening, and would say—"Oh, thank you, sir," with a sigh, and a look up to heaven...' Through the use of hypotaxis, seemingly disparate events are subordinated, allowing the reader to witness the juxtaposition and transition within society, in a bathetic way similar to Queen Anna.

Both texts also illustrate the dangers of a society built on consumerism and the desire to acquire. As post-colonial narratives, *The Rape of the Lock* and *Vanity Fair* explore our fascination and preoccupation with the material, whether that be tangible or intangible, human or inanimate. The setting of Pope's poem reveals the spoils of empire which we note in the expensive items assembled on Belinda's dressing table and the taking of coffee at court, attesting to Said's notion of the West's attraction to the exoticism of the Other. Contextually, it is important to note that in the early stages of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, industrialisation gathered pace and British colonial power intensified across the globe. Pope mimics the plundering of such artefacts in his own humorous pillaging of classical literature which serves to enable the humour of the narrative. Pope's use of hypercatalexis in 'The various off'rings of the world appear; / From each she nicely culls with curious toil,' reflects society's inherent insatiability to acquire. The hypercatalexis is crucial here: by extending the pentameter via the additional syllable, Pope enacts the idea of excess. Moreover, the feminine ending which concludes the line seemingly mimics society's fall into avarice.

The notion of acquisition is also seen through the Baron's conquest of Belinda. As Ellen Pollack notes of her: 'As a vessel "carrying all the glitt'ring spoil" of the world, she herself is identified with that world and like nature, is to be conquered, ransacked, and possessed by commercial man...'. Indeed, the Baron's commodification and colonisation of Belinda reinforces society's preoccupation with acquisition whereby 'He saw, he wish'd, and to the prize aspir'd.' The use of the definite article in 'the prize', coupled with the metre and asyndeton makes clear his unswerving, dark intent. Pope also underlines this idea by the absence of a gendered pronoun, and via metonymy: 'Th' advent'rous Baron the bright locks admir'd'. The inexorable heroic couplets also imply that Belinda's fate is sealed, that she is trapped. Pope's use of periphrase – the standard epic formula of a noun accompanied by an adjective which is elevated and inexact in meaning, such as 'secret passions' and 'dire offense' – underscores the threat of the Baron: what is intended by these adjectives is uncertain and cryptic and as such moves the narrative from a comedy of manners to something more disquieting, alerting the reader to the dangers of iniquitous acquisition.

Unlike Belinda, Becky is arguably not a victim of a society that commodifies women: rather, she plays the system to gain advantage in a world bound by class. In her pursuit of wealth and place in the upper echelons, she views and treats others as expendable in the business of marriage; the 'fair' of the title suggests relationships are essentially commercial. She states that 'I think I could be a good woman if I had five thousand a year.' The mercantile lexicon reveals her enduring fixation on money, and what that will bring her – reputation, social standing, physical goods, and people. Elsewhere in the novel we see through Mr. Osborne's disapproval of Amelia and George's marriage that money and status govern all social relations and partnerships. He states that 'There shall be no beggar-marriages in my family', demonstrating that Mr Osborne is so preoccupied with money that he is willing to have his son marry someone like Miss Swartz, whom he sees as racially inferior, rather than the newly bankrupt Amelia.

The question of moral redemption is also central to both texts. In *The Rape of the Lock*, Pope suggests that Belinda's vanity has brought about a downfall that is arguably distinct from the Baron's conquest of her. The poem reveals how the consumption of ourselves – through vanity - brings about a narcissism suggested (literally) by Belinda's 'glass' or mirror in which she sees her own 'heav'nly image'. He intimates that she genuflects at the image: 'to that she bend, to that her eyes she rears'. Pope's witty critique of Belinda's conceit is founded on religious discourse: the adjective 'heav'nly' suggests the sublimity of her beauty, as if she is literally engaging in self-worship. Indeed, her cross and Bible are reduced to trinkets and purely ornamental accessories. This lack of religious conviction implies that Belinda views herself as her own *God* and legislator, revealing her hubris. This self-regarding action is rendered using isocolon and anaphora which create a palindromic and cyclical sense reflective of the way Belinda is within her own circle and enveloped and determined by her own sense of self, relating to Heidegger's notion that we are self-interpretive beings. Thus, redemption does not seem possible; caught by and within her own reflection (Pope suggests that the moment of self-worship is daily), Belinda is entirely self-serving, a being existing in her own world only, the fabric of her own existence. As such, she embodies Thackeray's observation that 'The world is a looking-glass, and gives back to every man the reflection of his own face.'

As a type of Bildungsroman, we might expect that the narrative of *Vanity Fair* will comprise the moral development of Becky. Yet, what she learns is to dupe and manipulate to win. Her ruthless capacity is hinted at early in the novel when Thackeray's description of her suggests she mimics Clytemnestra, known in Greek legend for the act of killing her husband. In this moment Thackeray hints at the possibility that Becky will metaphorically or literally kill Rawdon. The extent of her deception is seen through the various people who deem her trustworthy, who she has been able to win: 'The destitute orange-girl, the neglected washerwoman, the distressed muffin-man find in her a fast and generous friend.' Using tricolon Thackeray relays the mimetic nature of Becky as she constructs these interactions even to the end of the novel. As such, Becky is undoubtedly an

ambivalent heroine; Thackeray notes in a moment when he directs our sympathy, 'A system of hypocrisy, which lasts through whole years, is one seldom satisfactorily practised by a person of one-and-twenty; however, our readers will recollect, that, though young in years, our heroine was old in life and experience, and we have written to no purpose if they have not discovered that she was a very clever woman.'

In conclusion, the reader is able to observe how both texts are mirrors held up to deeply flawed worlds. In his dedication Pope states his hope that those reading his poem will 'laugh' not only at 'unguarded follies, but at their own.' Thus, the humour in both belies disturbing insights in terms of human thought and action characterised by cupidity and mercenariness. It is this that Thackeray finds, 'more melancholy than mirthful.'

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