

from *The Rape of the Lock*

Poem by Alexander Pope



READING 3 Evaluate the changes in sound, form, figurative language, graphics, and dramatic structure in poetry across literary time periods. **RC-12(A)** Reflect on understanding to monitor comprehension.

DID YOU KNOW?

Alexander Pope . . .

- was run over by a wild cow when he was three years old.
- suffered from poor health and once said that his life had been a “long disease.”
- wrote the first two cantos of *The Rape of the Lock* in less than two weeks.

Meet the Author

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.

Author Online

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● 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.



Complete the activities in your **Reader/Writer Notebook**.

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

THE RAPE OF THE LOCK

Alexander Pope

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.

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.
5 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. **A**
Hither the heroes and the nymphs resort,
10 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;

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.

6 nymphs (nĭmfs): maidens; young women.

7 Anna . . . obey: Queen Anne, who rules over the three realms of England, Scotland, and Wales.

A HEROIC COUPLET

In Pope’s time, *tea* was pronounced “tay.” How does Pope use rhyme in lines 7–8 to mock pomposity?



15 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,

20 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.

25 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;

30 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.

35 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

40 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;

45 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

50 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. **B**

55 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,

60 The berries crackle, and the mill turns round;

17 snuff: powdered tobacco that is inhaled.

24 toilet: the process of dressing, fixing one's hair, and otherwise grooming oneself.

27 ombre (öm'bər): a popular card game of the day, similar to bridge.

30 King . . . face: the king of diamonds, the only king shown in profile in a deck of cards.

31 refulgent (rĭ-fŏl'jənt) **Queen:** resplendent or shining queen of diamonds. The Baron is leading his highest diamonds in an effort to win.

34 promiscuous (prə-mĭs'kyŏŏ-əs): unsorted; **level green:** the green cloth-covered card table.

36 Afric's sable sons: Africa's black soldiers.

41 Knave: jack.

43 the virgin's: Belinda's.

46 Codille (kŏ-dēl'): a losing hand of cards in ombre.

47 distempered: disordered.

48 nice: delicate; subtle; **trick:** a single round of cards played and won.

B ELEVATED LANGUAGE

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

60 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.
 65 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,
 70 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.
 75 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,
 80 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.
 85 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,
 90 A thousand wings, by turns, blow back the hair,
 And 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;
 95 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,
 100 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;
 105 Fate urged the shears, and cut the Sylph in twain

61 shining altars of Japan: small lacquered tables. In mock-epic style, Pope elevates the tables to altars.

64 China's earth . . . tide: China cups receive the hot coffee.

66 repast (rĭ-păst'): meal.

67 the fair: Belinda; **her airy band:** the Sylphs (sĭlfs), supernatural creatures attending Belinda. Epic heroes and heroines are generally aided by higher powers.

74 new stratagems (străt'ə-jəmz) . . . **gain:** new schemes for acquiring a lock of Belinda's hair.

76–78 Scylla's (sĭl'əz) **fate . . . Nisus'** (nĭ'səs) **injured hair:** In ancient Greek legend, Scylla was turned into a bird because she betrayed her father, King Nisus, by giving his enemy the purple lock of his hair on which his safety depended.

Language Coach

Figurative Language In lines 81–86, Pope refers to an everyday object through metaphors: *weapon*, *spear*, and *engine*. What do these metaphors refer to?

89 sprights (sprĭts): the Sylphs.

93 Ariel (âr'ĕ-əl): Belinda's special guardian among the Sylphs.

95 nosegay: a small bouquet of flowers.

101 the Peer: the Baron; **forfex:** a fancy term for scissors.



The Rape (1896), Aubrey Beardsley. From *The Rape of the Lock* by Alexander Pope. Line block print. CT46089. Victoria & Albert Museum, London.
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(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,
110 And screams of horror rend the affrighted skies. **C**
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!
115 “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,
120 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,

C HEROIC COUPLET

Reread lines 107–110. Which details in these couplets highlight the contrast between the actual incident that occurs and Belinda’s exaggerated reaction?

115 wreaths . . . twine: In epics, victors or champions traditionally wore laurel wreaths as a kind of crown.

118 coach and six: a coach drawn by six horses.

119 *Atalantis*: *The New Atalantis* by Mary Manley, a thinly disguised account of scandal among the rich.

- While nymphs take treats, or assignations give,
 So long my honor, name, and praise shall live!
- 125 “What 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,
 130 And hew triumphal arches to the ground.
 What wonder then, fair nymph! thy hairs should feel,
 The conquering force of unresisted steel?” **D**

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.
- 135 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,
 140 Like Gods they fight, nor dread a mortal wound. . . . **E**
 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.
- 145 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,
 150 The pungent grains of titillating dust.
 Sudden, with starting tears each eye o’erflows,
 And the high dome re-echoes to his nose.
 “Now meet thy fate,” incensed Belinda cried,
 And drew a deadly bodkin from her side.
- 155 (The same, his ancient personage to deck,
 Her great-great-grandsire 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-rä’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 (ĕn-dōōd’): 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’kĭn): 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,
 160 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.
 165 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
 170 "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!
 175 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,
 180 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. . . .
 185 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,
 190 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:
 195 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. **F**

159 Her infant grandame's
 (grăn'dāmz) . . . **grew:** It was
 next melted down and turned
 into a whistle used by Belinda's
 grandmother as a child. Pope
 is here making fun of family
 heirlooms.

168 burn in Cupid's flames: burn
 with passion.

170 rebound: echo.

171–172 Othello . . . pain: In
 Shakespeare's *Othello*, the deeply
 jealous Othello demands the
 handkerchief that he believes is
 a sign of his wife's infidelity.

179 mounted to the lunar sphere:
 climbed up to the moon.

182 beaux' (bōz): the wits of fops.

184 riband (rīb'ənd): ribbon.

185 Muse (myōōz): the goddess who
 inspires the writing of the poem. In
 typical epic fashion, the narrator
 opens the poem by addressing his
 Muse and continues to address her
 throughout the poem.

188 trail of hair: The word *comet*
 comes from a Greek word that
 means "long haired."

193 murders of your eye: men struck
 down by your glance.

F ELEVATED LANGUAGE

Reread lines 193–198 and
 the accompanying side note.
Paraphrase what the narrator
 says to comfort Belinda about
 the loss of her lock.

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?



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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?