

DR. MD. NAUSHAD A. KHAN
 ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR
 DEPT. OF ENGLISH
 SOGHRA COLLEGE, BIHARSHARIF

ON HIS BLINDNESS

—JOHN MILTON [English Subsidiary-
Degree-Part-I, Paper-1]

John Milton is undoubtedly one of the greatest poets in English Literature. He is second only to Shakespeare in poetic achievement. His greatness is easily established by a threefold test. First, by the magical appeal of his verse in which every single word touches a chord in our hearts. Secondly, by the strength and sublimity of his poetic imagination, sensibilities and experiences fused the whole body of materials gathered into a sublime conception of life and its significance. Thirdly, by the intensity and sincerity of his inspiration, the loftiness of his tone, the power of his verse to kindle, raise and inspire. No English poet can compare with Milton in majesty or completeness. Whatever he has written has the mark of dignity and stateliness.

The present sonnet On His Blindness is one of the most noble and dignified piece in English Language. William Wordsworth has rightly observed that "in Milton hand the sonnet became a trumpet whence he blew soul-animating strains—alas! to few". Milton was a Puritan poet of the 17th century. He had a feeling that a poet is a dedicated spirit. He considered the poet's task to be very responsible, elevating and purposeful. He always wanted to sing the glories of God. Hence he had a high mission in life. But unfortunately in 1652 at the age of forty-four, he became blind. His first reaction was private sorrow. Nobody likes blindness. He feels very sad and miserable at heart. This sonnet records the

feelings that had arisen in his mind after his blindness.

Milton was always a devoted servant of the Lord. But when he was rendered unable to serve God, the poet felt sick at heart. He thought that perhaps God would be angry with him. He was not utilising His gift properly. But his conscience consoled him by saying that God does not want service from anybody. Rather He wants complete faith in Him. Man must surrender himself totally in the hands of the Almighty. Thus this sonnet gives us a valuable lesson. It shows how one can best serve God. "They also serve who only stand and wait," is the key-note which the poem strikes. The poet is grieved at heart not because of his blindness, but because of his likely failure to serve God with his poetic talent.

Milton's intensely religious temperament calls forth a flood of Biblical images. He is reminded of the Parable of Talents in the Holy Bible and also the Day of Judgement. In spite of his blindness the poet had a firm faith in God. His devotion was steadfast. The sonnet is written in the Italian or Petrarchan model. The beauty of this sonnet is that it is written with the Biblical simplicity though the thought is lofty and sublime.

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Soghrar College, Bihar Sharif

B. A. English Hons

Part-I

Alexander Pope and "The Rape of the Lock".

During the age of Pope manners were coarse, politics scandalously corrupt, and the general tone of society brutal, the England of the early eighteenth century witnessed a resolute attempt in the direction of moral regeneration. As the reception accorded to Collier's Short View clearly proved, people were fast growing sick of the outrageous licence which in fashionable circles had followed the return of the Stuarts and had begun once more to insist upon those elementary decencies of life and conduct which the preceding generation had treated with open contempt. The desire for improvement is, as we shall presently see a marked feature of not a little of the literature of this half century and especially of the literature which emanated from middle class writers, who were ~~not~~ of course not influenced by moral considerations. But ~~was~~ while revolting in this way against Restoration profligacy, the men of Pope's era were quite as hostile as their fathers had been to everything that savoured of Puritan fanaticism and religious zeal, and thus, though England now began to regain lost ground morality, it did not recover the high passion or the spiritual fervour

of the Elizabethan age. Good sense became the idol of the time; and good sense meant a love of the reasonable and the useful and a hatred of the extravagant, the mystical and the visionary. This is shown in the field of religion in which the prevailing principles were rationalism and utility.

The age of Pope is sometimes called the Classical Age and sometimes the Augustan Age of English literature. Neither of these terms can be recommended but are so current that it may be well to explain the senses in which they should be understood. The epithet 'classic' may be taken to denote first that the poets and critics of this age believed that the works of the classical antiquity (really of the Latin writers) presented the best of the models and the ultimate standards of literary taste and secondly, in a more general way that like these Latin writers they had little faith in promptings and guidance of individual genius and much in law and rules imposed by the authority of the past. When in

1706 Walsh wrote to Pope "The best of the modern poets in all languages are those that have nearest copied the ancients? he expressed concisely the principles of classicism.

The other epithet, Augustan, was applied in the first instance of a term of high praise, because those who used it really believed that as the Age of Augustus was the golden age of Latin literature, so the age of Pope was the golden age of English literature. As this is now our view, the original meaning of the word has disappeared. But we may still employ as a ~~convenient~~ convenient catchword, because it serves to bring out the analogy between the English literature of the half of the eighteenth century and the Latin literature of the days of Virgil and Horace. In both cases men of letters were largely dependent upon powerful patrons. In both cases a critical spirit prevailed. In both cases the literature produced by thoroughly artificial society was a literature not of free creative effort and inspiration but of self-conscious and deliberate art.

The Rape of the Lock which may safely be called Pope's masterpiece. This was founded upon an incident which occurred in the Roman Catholic society in which

he had many friends. A certain Lord Petre cut a lock of hair from the head of a young beauty named Arabella Fermor. This practical joke led to a quarrel between the two families and Pope was appealed to by a common friend, John Cowley, to throw oil on troubled waters by turning the whole thing into a jest. The Rape of the Lock was the result. Pope defines the poem as a 'heroic-comical'. It is better to call it a Mock epic. In Butler's Hudibras humorous matter had found appropriate setting in rough doggerel verse. Here on the contrary trivial occurrences are handled with all the dignity and seriousness which properly belong to the epic. This calculated and sustained discrepancy between theme and treatment is of the essence of this particular kind of parody and the effect is further supported by the arrangement of the plot upon the regular epic plan. The employment of the supernatural machinery, which every epic was supposed to require, and the many passages in which scenes and phrases from the great epics are directly imitated and burlesqued. So admirably is all this managed that the Rape of Lock is the most perfect kind of literature.