

## Supernatural Machinery: A Special Poetic Device in Alexander Pope's 'The Rape of the Lock'

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### Abstract:

Alexander Pope, doubtlessly, is the supreme poet of Neo- classical era. His imagination, mastery over the poetic forms and devices and diction and the language are of the highest kind. In his celebrated masterpiece 'The Rape of the Lock', Pope has incorporated the supernatural elements, in its second edition, which is termed as the supernatural machinery. Machinery in The Rape of the Lock is based on the Rosicrucian Doctrine of spirits. According to this doctrine, the four elements are inhabited by Sylphs, Nymphs, Gnomes and Salamanders. The Sylphs whose habitation is in the air are supposed to be the best conditioned creatures. Pope has used the myth of sylphs to symbolise the polite conventions which govern the conduct of the maidens. The sylphs are not merely supernatural machinery in the poem, through them Pope tries to justify the intricacies of the feminine mind. The sylphs are added to the poem not simply for decorative purpose. Their presence improves the literary mockery as well as the human mockery. The use of this machinery serves various other purposes in the poem. By introducing this poetic device Pope has recovered something of Homer's vision of a human drama played in relation to a divine order.

**Keywords:** Alexander Pope, The Rape of the Lock, Supernatural Machinery

Alexander Pope, doubtlessly, is the supreme poet of Neo- classical era. His imagination, mastery over the poetic forms and devices and diction and the language are of the highest kind. In his celebrated masterpiece 'The Rape of the Lock', Pope has incorporated the supernatural elements, in its second edition, which is termed as the supernatural machinery. 'One reason of the success of the poem is the use of supernatural machinery by Pope.' (Mahida, 2011)

In the dedication of this mock epic poem, Pope himself explains that machinery is a term signifying the role or part which the deities, angels or demons play in a poem.

The Machinery, Madam, is a term invented by the Critics, to signify that part which the Deities, Angels, or Dæmons are made to act in a Poem: For the ancient Poets are in one respect like many modern Ladies: let an action be never so trivial in itself, they always make it appear of the utmost importance. These Machines I determined to raise on a very new and odd foundation, the Rosicrucian doctrine of Spirits. (Pope, 2011)

Machinery in The Rape of the Lock is based on the Rosicrucian Doctrine of spirits. According to this doctrine, the four elements are inhabited by Sylphs, Nymphs, Gnomes and Salamanders. The Sylphs whose habitation is in the air are supposed to be the best conditioned creatures.

Pope tells us in the poem that beautiful woman return after their death to the elements from which they were derived. Hot tempered women become Salamanders or the spirits of the fire, women of gentle and pleasing nature pass into Nymphs or water spirits, prudish women become Gnome or earth spirit and light hearted coquettes are changed into Sylphs or the spirits of the air. Pope attributes the mischievous influence of the Gnomes to many unguarded follies of the female sex which he holds up to ridicule.

For when the Fair in all their pride expire,

To their first Elements their Souls retire:  
The Sprites of fiery Termagants in Flame  
Mount up, and take a Salamander's name.  
Soft yielding minds to Water glide away,  
And sip, with Nymphs, their elemental Tea.  
The graver Prude sinks downward to a Gnome,  
In search of mischief still on Earth to roam.  
The light Coquettes in Sylphs aloft repair,  
And sport and flutter in the fields of Air. (Pope, 2011)

The foremost occupation of the Sylphs is the protection of fair and chaste ladies who reject the male sex. They guard and save the chastity of maidens who are on the point of yielding to their lovers or dashing young men whose music softens their minds and dancing inflames their passions.

The Gnomes fill the minds of proud maidens with foolish ideas which make them indulge in vain dreams of being married to lords and peers. They teach young coquettes to cast side amorous glances of the young men and pretend blushing at the sight of a fashionable young man who cause their hearts to flutter but the Sylphs are there who safely guide the maidens through all dangers. The way, the sylph do this is amusing. For example, when a maiden is about to yield to the lure of some young man, another, more attractive appears on the scene so that the maiden turns at once to that another man. This is perceived as fickleness in women by the common mortal but the sylphs arrange this to protect them and their chastity. Some Sylphs are in charge of national affairs and their chief guards the British throne. In the line of a great poetic beauty, Pope describes wittily the occupations and tasks of the sylphs in general. Their duties are described humorously and they include the duty of saving the powders from being blown off from the cheeks of the ladies, preventing scents from evaporating, preparing cosmetics, teaching the ladies to blush and suggesting new ideas about dress to look attractive. The Sylphs are in every detail, the poem's heroine, Belinda's intimates and advisors. They explain various complicated conventions and anxieties that make up Belinda's day. They feel scared when a crisis approaches her. Belinda is told in a dream that sylphs guide and protect her through the dangers of life.

Of these am I, who thy protection claim,  
A watchful sprite, and Ariel is my name. (Pope, 2011)

In most of the famous epics, including the Iliad, the Odyssey, the Aeneid, Paradise Lost, the supernatural machinery consists in supernatural beings like gods and angels who play a vital role in the action of the poems showing that the human world is not independent or even adequate and that the supernatural powers have an important bearing upon this world. Perhaps, Pope thought that his mock epic would be incomplete without a parody of the established practice of epic poets which was incorporation of the supernatural machinery. The machinery of this poem comprises the sylphs led by Ariel. Ariel tells that to him and his followers has been assigned the humble but pleasant duty of serving fashionable young ladies.

Ariel merrily goes on to warn Belinda in epic style about the danger that threatens her. The spirits are present at every crucial situation in the play. The Sylphs are present in the course of Belinda's journey by boat to the Hampton Court. They have been warned by Ariel to be alert and vigilant. They are always attentive and around Belinda. When she plays the game of ombre, sips

coffee they hover around her. They withdraw only when Ariel sees “an earthly lover lurking at her heart”.

A Gnome called Umbriel, brings from the cave of Spleen a bag full of sighs, sobs, screams and outbursts of anger and a phial filled with fainting feats, gentle sorrows, soft griefs, all of which are released over Belinda. The sylphs are present to witness the flight of Belinda, a lock of hair to the sky indicating that the machinery of the poem is constantly kept in the readers view to the very last.

Pope has used the myth of sylphs to symbolise the polite conventions which govern the conduct of the maidens. The sylphs are not merely supernatural machinery in the poem, through them Pope tries to justify the intricacies of the feminine mind. His treatment of the Sylphs allows him to develop his whole attitude towards Belinda and the special world which she graces.

The sylphs are added to the poem not simply for decorative purpose. Their presence improves the literary mockery as well as the human mockery. The machinery of sylphs is the principal symbol of the triviality of Belinda’s World. “... The light militia of the lower sky.” (Pope, 2011) In this sense the sylphs are travesty of both: Homeric deities and Miltonic guardian angels. Unlike the originals, they have an ambiguous status. They exist within and without. The sylphs who protect Belinda are also symbolic of her acceptance of the social conventions which suppose that a coquette’s life is a pure game.

The machinery of the sylphs in the poem is effective not only on account of its novelty but the oblique satire which results from it. They are the celestial agents. They look after Belinda. Thus they give an air of importance to the petty business and concerns of a fine lady. They heighten the mock epic effect. The myth of the sylphs in the poem is of utmost importance. It allows the poet to show his awareness to the absurdities of the contemporary society.

The use of this machinery serves various other purposes in the poem. ‘Pope’s technique of employing supernatural machinery allows him to critique the situation, it also helps to keep the satire light and to exonerate individual women from too severe a judgement.’ (Kaur, 2017) It imparts qualities of splendour and wonder to the actors and their actions in the story. Like Homer’s Gods, Pope’s Sylphs are more easily in and out of the lower world. This light militia of the lower sky increase the dramatic suspense. They are the spirits of the dead- acting as the guardian angels to the living. It is said that Addison had advised Pope against adding the supernatural machinery to the poem but Pope ignored the advice and succeeded limitlessly in his design. By introducing this poetic device Pope has recovered something of Homer’s vision of a human drama played in relation to a divine order.

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