

Pope's *The Dunciad*: An Allegory of Intellectual Decay and Satirical Excellence

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Abstract – “The Dunciad” is Alexander Pope’s most ambitious and compelling poem. It expresses its deep dismay concerning the feared loss of Britain’s literary, cultural, and ethical inheritance. The poem celebrates the goddess Dulness and the progress of her chosen agents as they bring decay and tastelessness to the kingdom of Great Britain. Pope takes the idea of personified goddess of Dulness, being at war with reason, darkness at war with light, and extends it to a full Aeneid parody. Thus, this poem celebrates a war than a mere victory. The poem has a satirical undertone, though in its epic form, it parodies the rise of bad writers and shallow intellectuals. In the poem, Pope imagines a “Dunciad” or a kingdom of dullness, where the worst writers, critics, and thinkers are celebrated. Pope uses exaggerated and comedic language to make fun of the people he saw as contributing to a decline in literary and intellectual standards, especially in the world of publishing and criticism. By turning an epic form into a mockery, Pope is essentially saying that the world of letters has become so full of nonsense that it deserves to be treated as a mock-heroic adventure.

Keywords – satirical undertone, war with reason, kingdom of dullness, mock-heroic adventure

“The Dunciad” is Alexander Pope’s most ambitious and compelling poem. It expresses its deep dismay concerning the feared loss of Britain’s literary, cultural, and ethical inheritance. The poem celebrates the goddess Dulness and the progress of her chosen agents as they bring decay and tastelessness to the kingdom of Great Britain. Pope takes the idea of personified goddess of Dulness, being at war with reason, darkness at war with light, and extends it to a full Aeneid parody. Thus, this poem celebrates a war than a mere victory.

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The first version in three books was published in 1728 and the “New Dunciad” in four books and with a different hero appeared in 1743. The poem opens with the goddess Dulness noting that –

“Stull Dunce the second rules like Dunce the first,” (Line 6, Book I, The Dunciad)

Which is an exceptionally daring reference to George II, who had come to the throne earlier in the year. However, the cultural attack is broader than the political one and is evident when Pope attacks over and over again, those who write for pay. He attacks hired pens, the authors who perform poetry or religious writing for the greatest pay alone, and who do not believe in what they are doing. He thus describes them as:

“He (a patron) chinks his purse,
and takes his seat of state....
And (among the poets) instant
Fancy feels the imputed sense” (Lines 197-
200, Book II, The Dunciad)

Among the most prominent objects of his satire were Lewis Theobald, Colley Cibber, John Dennis, and many others. In the earlier editions of “Duncaid” the place of hero had been occupied by Lewis Theobald,

who had ventured to criticize Pope's "Shakespeare Restored." In the later edition of 1742, Pope was dethroned in favour of Colley Cibber, who had just written his 'Letter from Mr. Cibber to Mr. Pope,' inquiring into the motives that might induce him in his satirical writings to be so frequently fond of Mr. Cibber's name. In the prefatory materials, Pope explains his reluctance at spelling out the names; as he did not want innocents to be mistaken for the targets. Pope also apologizes for the parody of the classics, in particular an imitation of both Virgil and Homer, by pointing out that the ancients also used parody to belittle unworthy poets. Thus, the mock-epic structure of "The Dunciad" seems to have come from Dryden's "Mac Flecknoe." Dryden in this work had targeted the poet Thomas Shadwell, whom Dryden considered as his poetic rival. Here, Shadwell is portrayed as the heir to the throne of dullness, destined to follow the fictional king, Mac Flecknoe, in his reign over the kingdom of nonsense and mediocrity.

Mock-epic or mock-heroic works are typically satires or parodies that mock common stereotypes of heroes and heroic literature. Both the mock-epic poems by Pope; "The Rape of the Lock" and "The Dunciad" employ the language of heroic poetry to describe trivial subjects. In the former case, a minor spat over a snipped lock of hair receives the treatment of a heroic battle. In the latter case, the progress of Dulness over the face of the earth, the coming of stupidity and tastelessness, is treated in the same way as the coming of civilization is in the "Aenied."

The mock-epic begins with a request of the Muses to help with creativity, which is common in epics. In "The Dunciad," the central character, Dulness (the goddess of chaos and night), chooses her unlikely hero Theobald out of the Grub street and crowns him as the King of Empire. Thus, the poem begins with an epic invocation as –

"Books and the Man I sing,
the first who brings
the Smithfield muses to the Ear of Kings" (Lines 1-2,
Book I, Opening invocation of the poem, The
Dunciad)

The Dulness notes that her power is so great that,

"Time himself stands still at her command
Realms shift their place
And ocean turns to land" (Lines 71-72, Book I, The
Dunciad)

And thus, claims credit for the routine violation of the Unities stated by Aristotle in poetry. However, her triumph is not complete and aspires to control dramatic poetry as well as political, and religious poetry. She therefore, decides that Theobald will be the new king. However, in a later episode, Theobald is seen debating in his library whether to return to being a lawyer or to become a political hack. He finally decides to give up poetry and become an entirely hired pen for Mist's journal. He therefore collects all the books of bad poetry in his library alongwith his own and makes a virgin sacrifice of them (virgin because no one ever has read them) by setting fire to the pile. This act highlights a sharp satirical theme of the self-destruction of true creativity under the reign of Dulness.

By burning his untouched ("virgin") poetry, Theobald symbolically abandons originality and learning, submitting himself completely to Dulness for fame and reward. This also exposes the corruption of literary values where authors willingly destroy merit and integrity to gain popularity, patronage, or commercial success. In view of anti-intellectualism and false authorship: Pope mocks scholars who pretend to be learned but sacrifice critical thought and creativity, turning literature into empty production.

In the concluding part, there is happy triumph of Dulness on the stage, but the lines take on a new parodic context –

"All sudden Gorgons hiss, and dragons glare,
...Hell rises, Heav'n descends, and
Dance on earth;
'Till one wide conflagration swallows all" (about 627–
656, Book IV, The Dunciad)

Dulness takes her throne and Pope describes the allegorical tableau of her throne room. Science is chained beneath her foot-stool, logic is gagged and bound. Wit has been exiled from her kingdom entirely. Rhetoric is stripped on the ground and tied by sophism. Morality is dressed in a gown that is bound by two chords who strangle her. The Muses are bound in

tenfold chains and guarded by Flattery and Envy. On the whole, Pope's "The Dunciad" proves to be a strong mock-epic or mock-heroic poem to enhance the satirical element of the time. Pope often used his sharp and witty tongue to ridicule those who have criticized his own work and this epic is evident of the same.

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