**The Dunciad: The Paradox of the Satirist as a Judge of Culture**

Scholarly opinions about satire and the satirists are contradictory in nature. In his essay "Northrop Frye and the Problem of Satire" (2011), Duncan McFarlane writes that Northrop Frye describes satire as "a universal negation that cheapens and belittles everything". George A. Test in his book *Satire: Spirit and Art* (1991) describes satire as "aggression waiting for a target [...]" (27). Additionally, Gregory G. Colomb states in his book *Designs on Truth: The Poetics of the Augustan Mock-epic* (1992), that most of the eighteenth century satire is "immoderate, unrefined, ill-manned, and particular" (58). Meanwhile, the editors of *The New Princeton Literary Encyclopedia* explain that the satirists claim themselves as judges of "morals and manners [...]" (1114). They further add that the satirists have the right to execute verbal sentences on their satiric targets (1114). Meanwhile, Ashley Marshall in her book *The Practice of Satire in England (1658-1770)* (2013) mentions that Pope the artist in his moral and political satires, positions himself as a judge who renders a verdict on society because he considers himself the custodian of culture (211).

Piercy Bysshe Shelley in his "A Defense of Poetry" (1821) writes that "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world" (qtd. Colomb 61). Furthermore, Dr. Johnson believes that the poet must be the legislator of mankind. Colomb further adds that Pope positions himself in "Essay on Criticism" (1711) as the legislator who "restored wit's fundamental laws" (61). Wit means in this context satire. Similarly, Richard Terry in his book *Mock-Heroic from Butler to Cowper* (2005), and Pat Rogers in *The Cambridge Companion to Alexander Pope* (2007) agree that Pope wrote *The Dunciad* due to "moral outrage", as Terry argues (4), to criticize and comment on the deterioration of culture. Pope in this case is promoting himself as a judge of the "tribe of so-called dunces", as Rogers explains (7). On the contrary to both Terry and Rogers, *The Dunciad* as a mock epic attaches the grandeur style of the classical epic to trivial themes to produce a satiric effect. Such satiric effect cheapens and belittles, as Frye puts it, the classical culture represented by the epic. *The Dunciad*, represents Pope’s participation in the deteriorating classical culture that he positions himself as its custodian. Thus, Pope is making a paradox of the satirist as a judge of culture in *The Dunciad*.

*The Dunciad Variorum* (1729) will be the main text of analysis because of the crowning scene in Book II which does not exist in *The Dunciad* published in (1728). Firstly, the essay will briefly define the epic and the mock epic. Secondly, it will briefly explain the context of the *The Dunciad*. Thirdly, it will analyze how Pope uses four features of the epic for a satiric effect that belittles the classical culture that he, ironically, laments its deterioration.

A.M Abraham defines the epic in *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (1999) as:
[...]it is a long verse narrative on a serious subject, told in a formal and elevated style, and centered on a heroic or quasi-divine figure on whose actions depends the fate of a tribe, a nation, or (in the instance of John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* the human race (76).

Abraham further adds that Aristotle places the epic only second to tragedy (77). This rank shows the significance of the epic for the classics. Among the features that characterize the epic that Abraham lists in his glossary is, firstly, the hero has a national or a cosmic significance (77). Secondly, the epic is a celebratory act and thus it is narrated in a celebratory style to describe heroic deeds. Thirdly, the setting of the epic could be the heaven, the whole earth and even the underworld (77). Fourthly, the narration of the epic usually starts with an invocation of a muse to help the narrator achieve his task of narrating the heroic story (77).

On the other hand, the mock epic or the mock-heroic are defined by *The New Princeton Literary Encyclopedia* (1993) as:

> Terms used in the broad sense to describe a satiric method in poetry and prose and, more specifically, a distinct subgenre [...] which seeks a derisive effect by combining formal and elevated language with a trivial subject. The mock heroic poem consciously imitates the epic style, follows a classical structure and heroic action for deflationary purposes, [...] (791).

It is apparent that the mock epic debilitates the grandeur and heroism depicted in the epic by imitating its formal structure. Moreover, the mock epic through its usage of the elevated features of the epic and applying them to handle a paltry theme, constitutes a subversion of the elated literary position the epic is placed in. The following section of the essay will briefly explain the context of *The Dunciad*.

The quarrels of the advocates of the classical education and the advocates of modernity was a personal issue for Pope as Valerie Rumbold explains in her book *The Dunciad in Four Books* (1999). Rumbold further adds that Pope sided with the advocates of the classical education such as the statesman William Temple and his secretary at this time Johnathan Swift. In his argument about the same quarrel, Richard Terry writes that the mock-epic is probably the representative genre in the Augustan era (3). He further adds that the mock epic is a method which the advocates of the classical education and culture can use as a nostalgic form to express their indignation towards the advocates of modernity (4). On the contrary to Terry's statement, Pope, in fact, criticized the classics. Howard D. Weinbrot writes *Eighteenth-Century Satire* (1988), that Pope criticized Homer, Virgil, and Horace "each of whom he [...] faulted on moral and political grounds" (108). Furthermore, Pope believed that the plot of *The Iliad* is a "confused
heap of Beauties", and that Homer's love for "slaughter is offensive", and he adds that Homer's use of "some metaphors is indecent" (qtd. Weinbrot 108).

On the other hand, Valerie Rumbold in her book The Poems of Alexander Pope (2007) is skeptical about stating that defending the classics was Pope’s intention for writing The Dunciad (10). Rumbold explains that although Pope criticized the milieu of the Grub Street commercial writers and patrons who produced excessively for the market of ephemera and for the literature of mere entertainment, he resorted to the same market for the success of his writings. Rumbold then adds that Pope was a Roman Catholic. Such religious affiliation deprived him of a fully-fledged classical education (10). Brean Hammond sees the vogue of mock-heroic as “a way of dumbing down the epic to suit the needs of a hungry but semi-educated reading public” (qtd. Terry 32). Hence, Pope ironically contributes to entertaining the same semi-educated public whose hack writers he condemns as the dunces. The following section of the essay will analyze how the four features of the heroic epic are used for a satiric effect in The Dunciad Variorum.

Dryden believes that “[We] have no moral right on the reputation of other men” (qtd. Colomb 63). Dryden may mean poets by “we”. He, however, exempted critics from this rule. He actually allows them to do what they please with his works. But Pope did not have Dryden’s tolerance for criticism. Lewis Theobald, an author, a critic and an editor, published Shakespeare Restored (1725). The book criticizes Pope’s edition of Shakespeare's works that he published in 1725. Pope’s vindictiveness was quick because he appointed Theobald as the king of the dunces in the three first editions of The Dunciad. The hero of the heroic epic, as mentioned above, should have a national or even a cosmic significance. The satiric effect that Pope intends for Theobald is derived from the heroic celebratory manner in which he describes Theobald’s crowning as the king of the dunces, "All-bounteous, fragrant grains, and golden showers, Great Tibbald sate:" (Rambold 211. II. 4-5).

The crowds of the dunces are celebrating their king with rotten eggs and wet barely which should be discarded after brewing as Rumbold explains (211). Pope, furthermore, derogates Theobald by spelling his name incorrectly in line four. The a fore mentioned lines not only explain Pope’s deflating of the celebratory style of the epic for a satiric effect, it also sheds light on Pope as "executing a verbal sentence" on his satiric target as mentioned above.

Another feature of the epic is the invocation of a muse to aid the poet in his narration of the heroic story. Pope applies this feature in The Dunciad Variorum but with an effect of deflation “Books and the man I sing. The first who brings/ The Smithfield muses to the ears of kings.” (Rumbold.19. I.1-2). Valerie Rumbold explains that Pope in the first line is alluding to the first line in Virgil’s Aeneid “Arms and the man I sing, who first exiled by fate/ came to Italy
and the Lavinian coast” (Rumbold 19). Pope further deflates the grandeur setting of the classical Virgilian Italy in *The Aeniad* with the allusion of Smithfield; a meat market where popular fairs were set up.

The setting of the epic could be the whole earth, as mentioned above. During the coronation of Theobald as the king of the dunces in Book II, the setting is alluded to as the whole world. In Book II the queen of the dunces, Dulness, summons all her sons for the heroic Olympic competitions “She summons all her sons: An endless band/ Pours forth, and leaves unpeopled half the land;” (Rumbold. 212. I.15-16). In *The Iliad*, for instance, there were Olympic games, but the participants of *The Dunciad’s* Olympic games are not heroic competitors. They are instead dunces who have come from all over the world.

While Virgil celebrates the arrival of the Trojan prince Aeneid in Italy, Pope celebrates the arrival of the popular culture of Smithfield to the king’s court (Rumbold 19), “The muses that Pope is calling here are the aristocrats who through being patrons for the Grub Street writers participate in the extensive spread of the popular culture, and thus contribute to the deteriorating state of the classical culture (Rumbold 19). To this end, Pope belittles the highly elated style and themes of the classical heroic epic by attaching it to trivial themes for a satiric effect that appeals, according to Hammond, to the semi-educated reading public. Paradoxically, Pope satirizes the semi-educated public’s culture by attaching it to Smithfield Street.

The essay has shown that, while some scholars place the satirist as aggressors, others place them as judges of culture and morality. Pope the poet and the satirist positions himself as a judge of culture. The essay has also referred to the context of the *The Dunciad*, where there was a quarrel among the advocates of the classical culture and education, including Pope, and the moderns. The essay has further argued that *The Dunciad* as a mock epic uses the structure of the classical epic but attaches it to paltry themes to create a satiric mood and an effect of deflation. *The Dunciad’s* grandeur setting was alluded to at one occasion as Smithfield Street; the meat market. And at another occasion as the whole world which is half peopled by the dunces. Also the muses that Pope invokes are the patrons who support the hack writers in Grub Street. Finally, Pope describes his epic hero Lewis Theobald in a heroic celebratory manner as sitting on the throne and being thrown by wet barely and rotten eggs. This subversion of the heroic epic structure belittles the classical culture that Pope appoints himself as its custodian. And hence, Pope creates in *The Dunciad* a paradox of the satirist as a judge of culture. The essay, however, has not discussed Pope’s vindictiveness and antagonism in *The Dunciad Variorum*. His intolerance to criticism propelled him to attack Theobald and appoint him as the king of the dunces. In what sense does Pope’s satiric vindictiveness verify Test’s opinion that satire is “aggression waiting for a target”?
Bibliography:


The Dunciad was first published in three books anonymously, with the authorship finally acknowledged in 1735. The entire work was initiated by the poet laureate Lewis Theobald's reaction to Pope's edition of Shakespeare. The poem attacks Dulness in general, making Theobald its first hero. Eventually, all the authors of the day whom Pope disliked received attention. The general scheme of the poem shows Pope's reliance upon John Dryden's Mac Flecknoe (1682) and upon classical models. It begins, in fact, with a parody of the Aeneid (c. 29-19 b.c.e.; English translation, 1553) in its invocation, directed to the patrons whose purses inspire the dull writing that will be attacked in (The entire section is 595 words.) Unlock This Study Guide Now.