

2024-2025

Third Year

First Term



7 + 8



Literary

Texts

5.01.2025
3.02.2025

أ. ليلي العلي



25.01.2025

HELLO EVERYONE!

Epistle II: To a Lady on the Characters of Women
BY ALEXANDER POPE

Nothing so true as what you once let fall,
"Most Women have no Characters at all."
Matter too soft a lasting mark to bear,
And best distinguish'd by black, brown, or fair.

How many pictures of one nymph we view,
All how unlike each other, all how true!
Arcadia's Countess, here, in ermin'd pride,
Is, there, Pastora by a fountain side.
Here Fannia, leering on her own good man,
And there, a naked Leda with a Swan.
Let then the Fair one beautifully cry,
In Magdalen's loose hair and lifted eye,
Or dress'd in smiles of sweet Cecilia shine,
With simp'ring angels, palms, and harps divine;
Whether the charmer sinner it, or saint it,
If folly grows romantic, I must paint it.

Come then, the colours and the ground prepare!
Dip in the rainbow, trick her off in air;
Choose a firm cloud, before it fall, and in it
Catch, ere she change, the Cynthia of this minute.

Alexander Pope is a master of satire. He's the father of English satire.

What is satire? It is when a poet criticizes someone or something.

The poem offers a satirical critique of women frames within the context of 18th century gender norms.

Gender norms mean how a man and a woman are expected to behave in a certain society. At that time, women were confined to domestic roles. Their primary societal expectations revolved around marriage, beauty and virtue. A woman was not expected to pursue a career or to have an education. Women's individuality was often suppressed or dismissed. Their value was typically judged by external appearance, charm, and adherence to societal norms.

The poem explores the instability and perceives the inconsistency a woman's character shaped by external appearance, social roles, and moral expectations. It is argued in the poem that women are inconsistent and fickle.

Although the addressee, who is Martha Blount, is unnamed, the quotation at the beginning of the poem was said by her. Pope here is quoting Martha and arguing with her idea.

Analysis:

- **Nothing so true as what you once let fall,**
- **"Most Women have no Characters at all."**

Pope is addressing Martha saying that there is nothing as true and accurate as what you said. He opens the poem with a claim. The statement he quotes is very provocative. The provocative statement that most women have no character at all suggests that all women lack fixed substantial identities implying the societal belief in their inconsistency or superficiality. Martha is contrasting women with men. She is giving essential attributes to men and no substantial identity to women.

By opening his poem with such a statement, Pope is criticizing this societal perception of women.

- **Matter too soft a lasting mark to bear,**
- **And best distinguish'd by black, brown, or fair.**

The matter of the character of women is so trivial and you wouldn't think about it that much. You can only distinguish women by their hair or skin color. The matter of the character of a

woman is given a trivial value.

Martha is reducing women only to their appearances. The value of a woman is only reduced to her skin color and skin color.

- How many pictures of one nymph we view,
- All how unlike each other, all how true!

Nymph: حورية

A nymph is associated with beauty and seduction. It is associated with changing her agenda all the time.

By the word pictures, Pope is referring to paintings and art. He is referring to the way women were painted or perceived through art. Art here implies that women are expected to perform a role and are to be judged by external appearances.

The poet is saying: regardless of the pictures and paintings we view in museums or houses and although these pictures have different and paradoxical characteristics, these views of women are all true.

The poet is saying: although this woman has different personalities and paradoxical characteristics, these characteristics are all true.

The paradoxical phrase "all how unlike each other, all how true" suggests that women adopt various and contradictory roles, all of which are seen as valid representations of their characters. The acceptance of the paradoxical representations of women and the adoptions of various contradictory roles are all true and can all be found in one single woman according to the poet.

Pope now will start to enlist figures of women:

- Arcadia's Countess, here, in ermin'd pride,

- Is, there, Pastora by a fountain side.

Arcadia's Countess is known for her elegance, pride, and luxury. She is a figure of aristocratic elegance and pride dressed in ermine which is a symbol of nobility. She is representative of aristocratic class and she has the characteristics of elegance, pride, nobility,

and formality.

Pastora is a pastoral romantic figure who represents simplicity, nature, and innocence.

Pope is contrasting and juxtaposing Pastora the rural figure and Arcadia's Countess the aristocratic figure. This duality reflects how women are idealized in literature and society both sophisticated (in the Countess case) and natural (in Pastora's case) depending on the observer's preference. A woman is asked to perform a specific role depending on the preference of the society: she should either be sophisticated or simple.

- **Here Fannia, leering on her own good man,**
- **And there, a naked Leda with a Swan.**

Leering: flirting

There is a pun in the word "leering" because to leer is to flirt but it also means to have a cunning agenda.

Fannia is a domestic figure flirtatiously engaging with her husband. She's a domestic wife who flirts with her husband a lot.

Zeus is the god of gods. He seduced Leda by turning himself into a Swan to have a physical connection with her according to the Greek mythology. As a result of this connection, Leda has four children one of them was Helen who caused the Trojan War.

Pope is contrasting Fannia who is virtuous with the naked Leda who was depicted in a sensual and controversial scene with Zeus.

Pope is contrasting the mundane domestic and the mythical eroticism emphasizing the exaggerated depiction of women in art and life. In life, Fannia is depicted as domestic, flirtatious, and having a cunning relationship with her husband. This is all contrasted and juxtaposed with Leda in the Greek mythology. Fannia and Leda are opposites. They are extremes as well.

- **Let then the Fair one beautifully cry,**
- **In Magdalen's loose hair and lifted eye,**

Magdalen is a repentant sinner who was a prostitute. Jesus

Christ made her repent and brought her back to virtue according to the Bible. Later she became a saint.

Here we have the image of Mary Magdalen who is a biblical figure portrayed as a repentant sinner. However, she is described as having loose hair and lifted eyes. She is seeking forgiveness. She is praying. The image of loose hair and lifted eye shows both asking for forgiveness and sensuality. She has repented but she will always remain in the minds of people as a prostitute. She will always be the prostitute who repented. There will always be two paradoxical images of one woman.

Here we are talking about the Madonna/whore dichotomy which means a woman is either a whore or a mother; she can't cross the boundaries of these two labels. This is not a fair portrayal of a woman of course.

- Or dress'd in smiles of sweet Cecilia shine,
- With simp'ring angels, palms, and harps divine;

Simpering: smiling with coyness, smiling with shyness

Harp: a musical instrument

Sweet Cecilia is Saint Cecilia who is the patron Saint of music. She embodies beauty and divine inspiration. In poetry, Cecilia is always depicted as the source of inspiration and connected to music and purity.

The word "dressed" suggests that there is presence in the way she is smiling. Although she is pure and divine and although she is the source of inspiration for poets and people, she smiles in presence.

The word "simpering" means smiling with shyness and it also means mocking, so there is a pun here. Although these angels are smiling, they are mocking. Their smiles are smiles of mockery.

Cecilia is surrounded by angels that are smiling and mocking at the same time.

The line contrasts with the previous depiction of Mary Magdalen

highlighting yet another archetype of femininity: the saintly and the virtuous woman adorned with heavenly symbols. So Cecilia is contrasted with Mary Magdalen. There are two different archetypes of femininity: the saintly and the sinner.

- **Whether the charmer sinner it, or saint it,**
- **If folly grows romantic, I must paint it.**

Romantic: exaggerated, idealized

Folly: foolishness

There is a duality of the sinner and the saint implying that women are often confined to these two extremes. The charmer sinner is Magdalen.

The poet is saying that women's behavior, whether a sinner or a saint, is foolish and exaggerated. Because of this exaggeration, he must paint it (write about it). To paint something means you only focus on the external level.

Pope's critique extends to society's unrealistic depiction of women. This depiction is a black-or-white depiction where the woman is either a mother or a whore with no place in between.

- **Come then, the colours and the ground prepare!**

Ground: canvas

The poet is addressing Martha again saying to her: come bring your colors and prepare the canvas for painting.

- **Dip in the rainbow, trick her off in air;**

Trick off: to deceive, to draw a sketch (pun)

The rainbow suggests changeability and variety. It can be also a reference to the colors. It is a metaphor to the characters. The rainbow is also a reference to a fleeing character because it has a short span of time.

The air here refers to the changeability of women and to the fleeting quality of their characters. You cannot fully grasp the character of a woman because she changes her mind quickly.

The phrase "trick her off" implies creating an illusion further

underscoring the fabricated nature of women's societal representations.

- Choose a firm cloud, before it fall, and in it
- Catch, ere she change, the Cynthia of this minute.

Do all these things in preparation of painting this woman before she changes.

Cynthia is the moon goddess that is associated with changeability and femininity. There is a constant change in a woman's identity and character.

Pope here addresses Martha and adopts the role of the artist preparing to create an image of women. The rainbows emphasize the pride and the fleeting quality. The way society represents a woman shows both the way people perceive her and how she puts on a mask to perform in society. It's a critique of both the social perception of women and the role women take on in order to fit in in such a society.

The expression "firm cloud" is an irony because a cloud is always changeable and is never firm.

The poet wants to catch the identity of Cynthia although she is associated with changeability so there is irony here.

In this poem, Pope is critiquing the societal representations of women suggesting that their identities are defined not by themselves but by how others perceive and portray them. A woman is given certain characteristics and perceived in such a way like the way she is portrayed in art and literature.

The tone of the poem is satirical targeting both women's inconsistency and the cultural forces that romanticizes and caricatures women.

The poem lends humor, criticism, and artifice to highlight the tension between reality and representation.

Thank You

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LECTURE NO. 8

08.02.2025

HELLO EVERYONE!

Epistle II: To a Lady on the Characters of Women
BY ALEXANDER POPE

Pope begins with a satirical observation of women. Women according to him lack the consistent character. He suggests that their personalities are too soft. He is also giving us the opinion of the society of that era which perceived women as being too soft and shallow to the extent that they can be judged by external appearances. Then he is offering his own perception of women and showing how society through literature and art contributes to these characteristics that women have.

The noble woman dressed in luxurious ermine might pose as a simple shepherdess in a pastoral scene. Similarly, a woman can be both a faithful wife who flirts with her own husband and elsewhere a seductive figure like Leda. Leda was the seducer of Zeus. Pope then continues to describe how women can take on the roles of both sinners and saints: a woman might adopt the repentant pose of Mary Magdalen with loose hair and lifted eye or she might appear as Saint Cecilia smiling among heavenly angels. Regardless of whether a woman plays the saint or the sinner, her foolishness becomes dramatic or exaggerated, and Pope as a satirical poet feels compelled to capture it.

Pope compares women's changing identities to the moon Cynthia which always changes its shape as women do. Pope portrays women in the poem as inconsistent and ever-changing making it impossible to define them with a single stable character.

FIGURES OF SPEECH:

☞ **Hyperbole** is an exaggeration. It is a figure of speech in which an overstatement of exaggeration occurs. The book offers an example of Shakespeare's play Macbeth. In this scene, Macbeth has murdered King

Duncan. Horrified at the blood on his hands, he asks:

**Will all great Neptune's ocean wash his blood
Clean from my hand? No. This my hand will rather
The multitudinous swap incarnadine
Making the green one red.**

Literally, it does not require an ocean to wash blood from one's hand, nor can the blood on one hand turn the green ocean red. The hyperbole works to illustrate the guilt Macbeth feels at the brutal murder of his king and Kingsman.

Example of hyperbole: I am so hungry that I can eat a horse.

The statement "most women have no character at all" emphasizes the fact that women are too changeable and too shallow to be defined. This is *hyperbole*.

There is *hyperbole* in the next two lines:

**How many pictures of one nymph we view,
All how unlike each other, all how true!**

The idea that the same woman can be painted in vastly different ways yet all are true is an exaggerated way of saying that women are endlessly adaptable almost paradoxically.

There is *hyperbole* in the next two lines:

**Whether the charmer sinner it, or saint it,
If folly grows romantic, I must paint it.**

Pope exaggerates how women can be both sinners and saints suggesting that their behavior shifts dramatically between two extremes. He implies that even their foolishness can become theatrical or romantic (exaggerated) enough to be worth immortalizing in poetry.

There is *hyperbole* in the next four lines:

**Come then, the colours and the ground prepare!
Dip in the rainbow, trick her off in air;
Choose a firm cloud, before it fall, and in it
Catch, ere she change, the Cynthia of this minute.**

Pope is exaggerating how fleeting and changeable women's nature is to the extent that it is impossible to capture them in any concrete way.

☞ **Metaphor:** a figure of speech wherein a comparison is made between two entities in order to create a sense of memorable novelty. The metaphor "She is a rose" means that she is beautiful. In "his face was an iceberg" the poet may want to convey the stiffness, lack of emotion, or the heartlessness of the character described.

Metaphor is a comparison between two things without the use of like or as.

☞ **Irony:** In irony of situation, the result of an action is the reverse of what the actor expected.

Example of irony: he escaped the war just to die in the sea.

In dramatic irony, the audience knows something that the characters in the drama do not.

In verbal irony, the contrast is between the literal meaning of what is said and what is meant. There is a double meaning here. A character may refer to a plan as brilliant while actually he means that the plan is foolish. Sarcasm is a form of verbal irony.

Example: if you attended a performance that was bad on all levels and a friend asked you how the performance was, you answered: oh it was brilliant and fantastic.

Matter too soft a lasting mark to bear: metaphor. The poet is suggesting that women's characters are like a soft matter that cannot be captured.

Dressed in smiles: hyperbole

Dip in the rainbow: metaphor (the rainbow is a metaphor for the changeable characteristics a woman has)

Choose a firm cloud: metaphor comparing the canvas of the painter to the cloud

Choose a firm cloud before it fall: personification

The Cynthia of this minute: allusion

☞ **Allusion is a reference to an element of another literary work.**

We have many allusions in the poem.

Arcadia's Countess and Pastora: classical allusions. These references to classical and pastoral archetypes allude to literary traditions where women were idealized in special roles.

Magdalen: biblical allusion
Sweet Cecilia: biblical allusion
Cynthia: classical allusion

☞ **Paradox**: a situation or a statement that seems absurd or self-contradictory but which turns out to have a rational meaning, usually unexpectedly. Paradox is an extreme contrast.

Firm cloud: paradox

All how unlike each other, all how true: paradox

☞ **Juxtaposition** is when you put something vis-a-vis something else.

Arcadia's Countess is juxtaposed with Pastora. This juxtaposition highlights the shifting roles and expectations of women.

Fannia is juxtaposed with naked Leda.

Magdalen is juxtaposed with Cecilia.

☞ **Alliteration** is the repetition of the initial sounds of several words in a group.

Saint, sinner: alliteration

Black, brown: alliteration

Sweet, smile, Cecilia: alliteration

☞ **Pun**: a play on words wherein a word is used to convey two meanings at the same time. It is the playful uses of words with double meanings or ambiguity. Pun enhances the poem's wit and satirical tone.

Trick her off in air: pun (trick means to deceive someone and it means to sketch or draw someone)

The poet is saying that when a woman's character is being drawn is being limited to one image. The double meaning underscores the superficial and the constructive nature of women's societal roles which Pope critiques as both illusory and performative.

Pictures: pun (here it means women's characteristics and it means paintings)

Thank You



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