



THE IMAGE OF WOMAN IN ENGLISH ENLIGHTENMENT PERIOD

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ABSTRACT

The text analyzes the image of women in English Enlightenment literature through the works of Samuel Richardson, Henry Fielding and Daniel Defoe. It shows how female characters reflect ideas of reason, morality, social responsibility and the rethinking of traditional gender roles.

Enlightenment in literature refers to a literary movement of the late 17th and 18th centuries that emphasized reason, logic, education and scientific thinking. Writers of the Enlightenment believed that literature should teach, improve society and promote moral and intellectual progress. They criticized superstition, ignorance and blind tradition, supporting ideas of freedom, equality and human rights. Enlightenment literature often used clear, simple language, realism and satire to reach a wide audience. Common genres included essays, philosophical novels and social satire. Enlightenment literature aimed to shape a rational, educated and ethical individual.

One of its main features was the belief in human rationality. Enlightenment thinkers argued that people could understand natural and social laws by using logic rather than relying on tradition, superstition or blind faith. Closely connected to this idea was the promotion of science and empiricism, which emphasized observation, experimentation and the scientific method as reliable ways of gaining knowledge. Another feature of the Enlightenment was the focus on individual rights and freedoms. Philosophers supported freedom of speech, freedom of religion and equality before the law. They strongly criticized absolute monarchy and promoted political ideas such as constitutional government, separation of powers and popular sovereignty. The Enlightenment also encouraged religious tolerance and secularism, arguing that religion should not control political life or limit free thought.

The image of woman was important in the English Enlightenment because it reflected the movement's key ideas about reason, education, morality and social reform. Enlightenment thinkers believed that society could progress only if all its members were educated and morally developed and women were seen as essential to this process, especially in the family and home. During this period, women were often presented as moral guides and educators, particularly as mothers responsible for raising rational and virtuous children. Writers argued that if women were better educated, they would raise more enlightened citizens. This idea

connected women directly to the Enlightenment goal of social improvement. Education for women, although still limited, became an important topic of debate. The image of woman was also used to question traditional gender roles. Some philosophers and writers criticized the belief that women were naturally inferior and argued that their apparent weakness was the result of poor education and social restrictions. Early feminist thinkers, such as Mary Wollstonecraft, emphasized that women were rational beings deserving of equal intellectual development.

The image of woman in the Enlightenment period played an important role in English literature, as it reflected the era's interest in reason, morality, education and social reform. Writers of this time used female characters to explore women's position in society and to question traditional attitudes toward gender roles. Women were no longer shown only as passive figures instead, they became central to moral and philosophical debates. One of the most important writers who portrayed the image of woman was Samuel Richardson. In novels such as *Pamela* and *Clarissa*, Richardson presented women as morally strong and virtuous individuals. His heroines are intelligent, emotionally sensitive and capable of ethical judgment. Through their suffering and resistance to injustice, Richardson emphasized women's moral authority and the importance of inner virtue, which reflected Enlightenment values. Another significant writer was Henry Fielding, who offered a more realistic and balanced depiction of women. In *Tom Jones*, female characters like Sophia Western are independent, rational and confident in making their own choices. Fielding rejected idealization and hypocrisy, showing women as active participants in life who possess both reason and emotion. Daniel Defoe also made a major contribution to the portrayal of women in Enlightenment literature. In *Moll Flanders*, Defoe created a complex female character shaped by social and economic conditions. Moll is practical, resourceful and independent, highlighting how limited opportunities influenced women's lives.

Samuel Richardson is best known for his epistolary novels *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* (1740) and *Clarissa, or the History of a Young Lady* (1748), in which he carefully develops the image of woman as a moral and rational being. In *Pamela*, the heroine is a young servant girl who faces constant pressure and unwanted advances from her master. Despite her low social position, Pamela shows strong moral purity, intelligence and self-discipline. Through letters and diary entries, the reader sees her inner thoughts, fears and ethical reasoning. Richardson presents Pamela as a symbol of virtue and moral strength, showing that true worth depends on character rather than class. Her resistance reflects Enlightenment ideas about personal dignity and moral responsibility. In *Clarissa*, Richardson creates a more complex and tragic female character. Clarissa Harlowe is highly educated, thoughtful and morally principled. However, she becomes a victim of family control, social expectations and male domination. Unlike Pamela, Clarissa does not achieve a happy ending. Through her suffering, Richardson exposes the cruelty of rigid social structures and the injustice faced by women. Overall, Richardson uses Pamela and Clarissa to criticize social inequality and to emphasize that true virtue lies in inner character, moral choice and reason, not in wealth or social status.

Henry Fielding offered a contrasting and more realistic approach to the portrayal of women in Enlightenment literature. In his novel "*The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling*" (1749), he presents female characters as natural, intelligent and emotionally balanced, avoiding excessive idealization. Fielding believed in common sense and realism, which is clearly reflected in his depiction of women. One of the most important female characters in the novel is Sophia Western. She is portrayed as an independent and morally strong young woman who is capable of making her own rational decisions. Sophia is guided not only by emotion but also by reason, which aligns with Enlightenment values. She refuses to submit blindly to her father's wishes and shows personal integrity and self-respect. Unlike the passive heroines of earlier literature, Sophia actively shapes her own destiny. Fielding also used satire as a literary tool to criticize social hypocrisy and false morality. Through humorous and ironic

situations, he exposes the double standards of society, especially in attitudes toward women. His female characters are not presented as perfect moral symbols but as real human beings with strengths and weaknesses. Fielding's portrayal of women reflects Enlightenment realism, emphasizing reason, moral judgment and active participation in social life. Women in his works are thinking individuals rather than passive victims of circumstance.

Daniel Defoe portrayed women from a practical and social perspective, focusing on real-life conditions rather than idealized morality. His novel *Moll Flanders* (1722) introduces one of the earliest complex female protagonists in English literature. Moll is not presented as a perfect moral example; instead, she is a survivor shaped by poverty, social inequality and the limited opportunities available to women. From an early age, Moll learns that survival depends on intelligence, adaptability and experience. She uses wit and practical reasoning to overcome hardship, even when her choices lead her into crime. Through Moll's life story, Defoe highlights how social and economic pressures influence moral decisions. Defoe continued this exploration of female independence in *Roxana* (1724). The heroine in this novel seeks financial independence, social status and personal freedom. Like Moll, Roxana is intelligent and resourceful, but her pursuit of wealth brings inner conflict and moral uncertainty. Defoe shows that independence comes with responsibility and consequences, especially in a society that offers women few legal or economic rights. Through these female characters, Defoe examines social injustice, economic inequality and individual responsibility. His women are active agents in their own lives, shaped by circumstances but also accountable for their choices. Defoe's portrayal reflects Enlightenment concerns with realism, experience and the complex relationship between society and morality.

Conclusion

The image of woman in the English Enlightenment period reveals an important transformation in the way women were viewed in literature and society. Enlightenment writers moved away from traditional portrayals of women as silent, weak, or purely emotional beings and instead presented them as rational, moral and socially aware individuals. Female characters became a means through which authors examined broader Enlightenment ideals such as reason, justice, personal freedom and social responsibility. Authors like Samuel Richardson, Henry Fielding and Daniel Defoe used different literary approaches to shape this new image. Richardson focused on women's moral authority and inner strength, emphasizing virtue, self-control and ethical reasoning. His heroines highlight the injustice of social and family systems that restrict women's freedom. Fielding, in contrast, offered a more natural and realistic depiction. His female characters possess common sense, emotional balance and independence and they actively engage in shaping their own lives. Through satire and realism, he challenged false morality and social hypocrisy. Defoe presented perhaps the most practical and socially grounded image of women. His heroines are shaped by economic hardship and limited opportunities, yet they remain intelligent and adaptable. By portraying women who struggle, make mistakes and learn from experience Defoe emphasized the impact of society on individual behavior while maintaining the importance of personal responsibility. Together, these portrayals show that women in English Enlightenment literature were no longer marginal figures. They became central to discussions about human dignity, moral choice and social reform. Although these works did not fully achieve gender equality, they played a crucial role in changing attitudes toward women and preparing the ground for later feminist thought.

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