

# Reception of Penelope's Character in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Poetry: *Female Modernism* and Latvian Writer Aspazija

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**Abstract.** Penelope, the wife of Odysseus, has held a prominent position in literature since the time of Homer. Throughout the ages, numerous authors have engaged with Penelope and incorporated her into various contexts, contributing to her enduring recognition in the modern world. She serves as a muse for authors who delve into contemporary issues and address the pertinent challenges of their time. This article explores the development of the reception of Penelope's character in the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century, tracing its origins from the texts of Homer and Ovid. It specifically examines the utilisation of Penelope in the poetry of modernist poets, particularly those associated with the category of *Female Modernism* (as proposed by Jane Dowson in her work "Women, Modernism and British Poetry, 1910–1939: Resisting Femininity" (2002)), with a particular focus on the works of the Latvian author Aspazija.  
**Keywords:** reception, Penelope, feminism, Female Modernism, Aspazija.

## Penelopės įvaizdžio recepcija XX amžiaus literatūroje: moteriškasis modernizmas ir latvių rašytoja Aspazija

**Santrauka.** Odisejo žmonos Penelopės vaizdavimas užima svarbią vietą literatūroje nuo pat Homero laikmečio. Bėgant amžiams daugybė autorių rašė apie Penelopę ir įtraukė ją į įvairius kontekstus, taip prisidėdami prie jos žinomumo šiuolaikiniame pasaulyje. Ji yra tapusi mūzos atitikmeniu autoriams, kurie gilinasi į šiuolaikines problemas ir sprendžia aktualius savo laikmečio iššūkius. Šiame straipsnyje nagrinėjama Penelopės personažo recepcijos raida XX a. pradžioje, atsekant jos ištakas Homero ir Ovidijaus tekstuose. Jame koncentruojamasi į Penelopės įvaizdžio naudojimą modernistų poezijoje, ypač tų autorių, kurie siejami su vadinamuoju *moteriškuoju modernizmu* (terminas, siūlomas Jane Dowson knygoje „Women, Modernism and British Poetry, 1910–1939: Resisting Femininity“ (2002)), ypač daug dėmesio skiriant latvių autorės Aspazijos kūrybai.

**Reikšminiai žodžiai:** recepcija, Penelopė, feminizmas, *moteriškasis modernizmas*, Aspazija.

## Introduction

References to ancient mythology and the utilisation of its imagery can be found in texts spanning different centuries and literary movements. If we look back, for example, to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, we see that Penelope was not considered a compelling figure for textual appropriation and rewriting (Philippou, 2017, p.76). However, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, par-

Received: 14/07/2023. Accepted: 03/10/2023.

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ticularly in relation to the rise of the feminist movement, the image of Penelope assumes special significance.

In the first decades of 20<sup>th</sup> century, female authors initially turned to Penelope's character to examine the role of women in society and marriage. They raised issues of emancipation and constructed their own perspectives on the mythical portrayal of Penelope: the faithful wife who patiently awaits her husband's return from the Trojan War and his subsequent wanderings. This waiting period spans 20 years, roughly the length of a generation. These early 20<sup>th</sup> century endeavours, which are explored in this article, played a significant role in paving the way for the development of the second wave of feminism as well as shaping the broader reception of the character of Penelope. This reception gained momentum in the 1960s and 1970s with authors primarily focusing on myth re-visioning and rewriting (Rich, 1972, pp.18-30; Ostriker, 1982, pp.68-90; Doherty, 2017, pp.153-164). This trend remains popular even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, demonstrating the enduring fascination with reinterpreting and reimagining myths. Penelope in reception has also been extensively studied from a theoretical perspective. Notable works, among others, include the comprehensive studies by Clayton 2004, Hall 2012, Lefteratou 2017, Hauser 2018.

### **The Construction of the Character of Penelope — Homer**

Every story has a beginning. The myth of Penelope and Odysseus existed before the time of Homer, but it is Homer's epic poem "Odyssey" that established the foundational narrative we are familiar with today.<sup>1</sup> By taking tradition into account, we can look at the Homeric epic as already an early form of the reception – as a story that transcends the text (Edmunds, 2014, p.46). Homer's work has had a profound influence on literature throughout the centuries, solidifying his omnipresence in the literary world.

The myth of Penelope and Odysseus as well as the epic are, at least initially, a masculine narrative — both from the point of view of the reflected world views as well as from the author's point of view (Simone, 2010, p.47; Foley, 2005, p.105). As for the audience of the epic, whether the audience is only men or women, opinions are also divided.<sup>2</sup> Though Penelope, the weaver and faithful wife who patiently awaits her husband's return from a 20-year war, has become a universally recognised and archetypal character in literature (Clayton, 2004, p.81).

In "Odyssey", Penelope is depicted as the epitome of an ideal wife and is often referred to as the *περίφρων* (wise) Penelope. The first instance of this epithet being attributed to Penelope occurs when the narrator describes her arrival at the gathering after hearing the bard's song about the return of the Achaeans from Troy (Hom. *Od.* 1.329). Subsequently, both the narrator and other characters use this epithet frequently to describe Penelope's

<sup>1</sup> Alongside the practice of myth rewriting, the 1970s marked a significant turning point in the field of Homer studies. Scholars directed their focus toward conducting thorough analyses of Penelope's depiction within Homer's texts, aiming to uncover new insights and perspectives. Notable contributions to this endeavour include the works by Foley 1978 and 1981, Katz 1991, Felson 1994, Doherty 1995, Cohen 1995, and Murnaghan 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Different approaches are demonstrated in Doherty, 1995.

character. However, most notably, the praise comes from the shade of Agamemnon (Hom. *Od.* 24.196-97) who speaks of the renown (*κλέος*<sup>3</sup>) that Penelope deserves for her chastity (Cohen, 1995, p.95).

In the epic, Penelope assumes several social roles: She is the wife of Odysseus, who also takes on the role of the ruler in her husband's absence; she is a daughter, mother, sister and daughter-in-law. However, in the eyes of the suitors, she is primarily seen as the widow of the renowned Odysseus, a desirable bride who would bring a substantial dowry to her new marriage whether from her father's or son's side — since marriage is a man's responsibility in Homeric society (Vernant, 1996, pp.55–79). In the epic, Penelope is offered the opportunity to choose one of the suitors as her husband. However, before Penelope makes her decision (Book 19), the examples of Helen and Clytemnestra have already been told and it is known what happens when a woman prefers another man in the absence of her husband (Cohen, 1995, p.97). Later, when Odysseus returns, kills all the suitors and the deceptive wedding music resonates from his house, the comments of the passers-by reflect society's expectation that Penelope should not marry again without waiting for Odysseus' return: "Aye, verily someone has married the queen wooed of many. Cruel she was, nor did she have the heart to keep the great house of her married husband to the end, even till he should come" (Hom. *Od.* 23.149-151).

Penelope has limited options to deal with the situation she finds herself in because her actions are limited to the solutions acceptable to a woman, thus far establishing Penelope as a role model of the ideal wife (Cohen, 1995, p.107; Foley, 1981, p.145). Already in the "Iliad" (Hom. *Il.* 6.490-93), Hector describes the ideal hero's wife — she should stay at home, do weaving, take care of the household and children (Foley, 2005, p.111) and Penelope in "Odyssey" embodies this role of idealistic hero's wife. Furthermore, she takes the role of a member of the audience and she is a victim of the conflict and heroic mourner of her absent husband (Foley, 2005, p.117). Her emotions can only be expressed within a private space, and this limitation is often emphasised by male characters (e. g., Hom. *Od.* 1.353; Hom. *Od.* 17.46-51). Penelope is mostly isolated in her chamber, except for the maids. She interacts episodically with other characters, and her movement to and from other rooms is frequently mentioned.

The separation of the male and female worlds and the movement back and forth without really getting anywhere is consistent with Penelope's characteristic weaving motif. Weaving and unweaving, which Penelope turns to in order to postpone marriage with one of the suitors and which is Penelope's greatest trick by which she gains renown (Foley, 2005, p.111), is associated with the private sphere of women. It serves as a means for her to cope with her suffering and to delay the impending changes. The motifs of weaving, women's domestic work and the contrast between the home and the outside world (the realm of men) are also recurring themes in the reception of Penelope.

In feminist literature (in particular starting from 2nd wave feminism), the exploration of faithfulness and unfaithfulness is a recurring theme, particularly within the context of gender

<sup>3</sup> The problem of the concept and its double aspect in connection with the character of Penelope are discussed in detail in Katz, 1991.

roles as depicted in epic. The epic portrays Penelope in contrast to two other characters from the Trojan cycle: the unfaithful and murderous Clytemnestra and the beautiful but unfaithful Helen who is the daughter of Zeus. Penelope's enduring wait and unwavering devotion to her husband are consistently celebrated against the backdrop of these two unfaithful wives. Thus, later in reception, her loyalty and sobriety became defining qualities of her character, making her the paradigm of a virtuous wife (Cohen, 1995, p.101). It is noteworthy that the evaluation of trustworthiness differs between genders within the epic (Cohen, 1995, p.96). The distinction between the realms of men and women is evident in the contrasting judgements of male and female infidelity. The theme of female infidelity, prevalent throughout the epic, is used to praise Penelope's faithfulness through juxtaposition, presenting it as the only acceptable behaviour for women. In contrast, male infidelity is not addressed, highlighting the existence of double standards based on gender. This underscores the presence of different expectations and norms for men and women.

### Reception in Antiquity — Ovid

Paraphrasing Homer has been known since ancient times — it happened both in schools, practising and learning rhetoric as well as a creative reworking by various authors who looked for new means of expression and developed various ideas that were not fully presented in Homer's epics but only sketched or guessed in the context (Hunter, 2018, pp.166–180). Paraphrasing and revisioning also allowed authors to question the established order and virtues (Doherty, 2017, p.153). Thereby, already in ancient times, authors turned to the reception of the character of Penelope. One significant example is Penelope's letter to Ulysses in Ovid's "Heroides" which supplements Homer's text and resonates with it in a contextual manner. While Penelope maintains her status as a faithful wife awaiting her husband's return, Ovid focuses on depicting Penelope's inner world of emotions and the contradictions that exist within it.

Ovid draws inspiration from existing literary texts and the female characters found within them, but he also takes a step further by constructing his own artistic vision. "Heroides" refers to specific texts, creating intersections with them and reformulating their traditional narratives (La Bua, 2018, p.245). Ovid's perspective in constructing characters surpasses the traditional poet-lover form of elegy by assigning the authorship of fictitious letters to literary characters, presenting events from a woman's point of view — an uncommon approach in Ovid's time. As a male author, Ovid creates psychologically complex female characters who, guided by the poet's hand, write the primary texts of his letters during the most intricate and troubled moments of the plot (Van Zyl Smit, 2008, p.395).

Ovid's portrayal of Penelope adopts a different perspective — the epic distance is replaced by a close-up, and the realistic construction of the character supersedes the idealistic role model of the faithful wife. Ovid's Penelope is emotional and doubtful in her judgements. Through the form of the letter, an individual portrait of Penelope emerges as the character speaks about herself and exposes her emotions. Adjectives like *frigida* (cold, Ov. *Ep.* 1.7) and *relicta* (abandoned, Ov. *Ep.* 1.8) convey Penelope's sense of loneliness,

not only as a wife burdened with household duties but also as a sexual being whose partner is absent for an extended period of time (Van Zyl Smit, 2008, p.396).

Ovid's Penelope also expresses her concerns about the reasons behind Ulysses' absence, questioning him in the letter about his whereabouts or the company he keeps (*Ov. Ep.* 1.66). The contrasting and not always noble emotions and thoughts of Penelope's character strip away the sublimity created in the epic, replacing it with psychological depth and a more realistic portrayal compared to the one in "Odyssey". Penelope's voice sometimes adopts an ironic or even grotesque tone, which is atypical of the character as depicted by Homer. Ovid's representation of Penelope's emotional world through the letter format provides insight into Penelope's private space, which is a realm that is only hinted at in Homer's "Odyssey".

Although Homer's "Odyssey" and Ovid's "Heroides" are the most important texts in which the character of Penelope is extensively developed in antiquity, they are by no means the only ones. References to the character of Penelope can be found in a broad range of texts, including historical and mythographic texts, moral-philosophical works, ancient comedies, satirical texts and epigrams. All these texts serve as the foundation for the further reception and interpretation of the character of Penelope.

### **Reception in the First Half of 20<sup>th</sup> Century — *Female Modernism***

In the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the era of modernism, binary oppositions were prevalent. The masculine was often associated with objectivity, while the feminine was linked to subjectivity. Critics were often reserved towards female writers, and even authors, particularly those in the avant-garde movement, concealed their female identity in their works to avoid having their poetry categorised solely as women's poetry (Dowson, 2002, p.6). Despite these challenges, there were female authors who made significant contributions to the future of literature, both within the realm of feminist literature and in the reception of the character of Penelope.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was a gradually growing interest in the character of Penelope within feminist literature,<sup>4</sup> particularly in the Anglophone literary sphere, however, in the first half of the century, there was no specific large-scale reception movement associated with the image of Penelope, although there are vivid examples of reception at this time — certainly the most notable and popular of them is J. Joyce "Ulysses" and the controversial character of Molly Bloom.

Looking back to the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century from the gender perspective, it is notable that female writing in general was often considered a marginal phenomenon, although there were numerous female writers compared to the previous centuries. Jane Dowson, a scholar specialising in British modernist literature, has examined modernist writers in both a British and wider Anglo-American context. Dowson distinguishes the

<sup>4</sup> Feminist thought about Homer's "Odyssey" and its development in theoretical literature from the perspective of a gender approach are discussed in detail in Clayton, 2004.

category of “Female Modernism”, representing women poets of the modernist era who did not deny their gender and directed their poetry towards women (Dowson, 2002). Within this category, feminist issues were explored, and various gender stereotypes were satirically examined, revised and parodied, gradually moving towards greater aesthetic freedom (Dowson, 2002, p.12). The authors focused on depicting and analysing women’s experiences, delving into women’s psychology and portraying social and gender issues, particularly within the context of marriage.

Penelope proves to be a fitting character within this framework, as she is associated with the idealised image of a woman in a patriarchal society. By utilising this image, authors not only had the opportunity to address contemporary topics but also to challenge and reshape the previous perception and narrative surrounding this archetypal image in future receptions.

An example from “Female Modernism” of a poet focusing on the character of Penelope is Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892–1950). Millay explores the character of Penelope in her poem “An Ancient Gesture” which was published posthumously in 1954 as part of a collection of poems she created in the last decade of her life. In this poem, Millay constructs the lyrical subject or lyrical self of a woman from her own time, gradually merging it with Penelope, thereby connecting the experiences of both women.

The central motif in the poem is the gesture, which symbolically distinguishes Ulysses from Penelope. For Ulysses, the gesture is external, directed at the audience, while for Penelope, it is an inward and sincere expression, contrasting the masculine tears of emotion with the feminine tears of despair. Millay maintains the typical separation of space, emphasising that while Ulysses is absent in the external world, Penelope is left alone with her emotions and actions at home (Eiduka, 2022).

In “An Ancient Gesture”, Edna St. Vincent Millay reflects on the psychological loneliness experienced by women and explores her characteristic theme of the psychological alienation of women (Dowson, 2002, p.199). The poem constructs empathy for the wife who is compelled to remain at home, highlighting the limitations imposed on a woman’s freedom.

Dorothy Parker (1893–1967) also addresses the character of Penelope in her poem titled “Penelope” (1928). Structurally, the poem consists of two parts. In the first part, Penelope addresses the external world, which is portrayed as boundless in time and space. This world is beyond Penelope’s reach and beyond her horizon. It belongs to him, presumably referring to Odysseus: “He shall ride the silver seas, / He shall cut the glittering wave” (Parker, 1928).

The first part of the poem creates a contrast with the second part, which represents Penelope’s world — a limited realm characterised by everyday duties and the confines of home. This space is depicted as static. The poem concludes with the line: “They will call him brave.” This concise ending, reminiscent of an epigram, succinctly captures the main idea of the poem. It suggests that, although both Penelope and Odysseus have their respective duties, only his duty will be regarded as brave and worthy of admiration (Eiduka, 2022).

Both authors depict the contrasting worlds of women and men, where the woman remains in her domestic sphere while the husband is absent. In contrast to Homer's portrayal of Penelope, a sense of resentment emerges in the character of Penelope in the poetry of D. Parker and E. Millay. This reveals the 20<sup>th</sup> century woman's distinct perspective on the situation depicted in "Odyssey". By revising the traditional image of Penelope, these poets bring the woman and her world of emotions to the forefront, emphasising the importance of exploring her experiences and feelings.

### Reception in Latvian Literature — Aspazija

The Latvian author Aspazija (real name Elza Rozenberga, 1865–1943), known widely as the spouse of Latvian writer and politician Rainis (Jānis Pliekšāns), adopted the pseudonym Aspazija while attending a girls' gymnasium (Cimdiņa, 2018, p.30). The choice of the ancient Greek name Aspazija reflects the future trajectory of the Latvian Aspazija, who dares to venture beyond the confines of women's private spaces into the public sphere, posing a challenge to the societal norms of her time. While Aspazija was often regarded as an outsider in the literature of her time in Latvia, a broader examination reveals that she aligns well with the cultural movements of the Western world that she sought to introduce into Latvian culture. This is evident in her works, which encompass women's emancipation and feminist themes. Aspazija bridges the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, marking the transition to modernism in Latvia (Kūle, 2016, pp.50-63).

Aspazija's connections to ancient heritage are well-known and have been subject to relatively extensive studies (for example, Rūmniece 2018; Rūmniece 2016; Gaižūns 2016; Miezīte 2008). This article emphasises the comparative aspect to explore how the reception of the character of Penelope aligns with the feminist framework of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It aims to shed light on the peripheral Penelope, who has not attained a central role in Aspazija's work, but she does hold significant relevance in understanding her poetry within a feminist context.

Two of Aspazija's poems "Little Penelope"<sup>5</sup> ("Mazā Pēnelope") and "Penelope's Shroud" ("Pēnelopes auds") contain references to the character of Penelope. These poems were written during Aspazija and Rainis' exile in Switzerland, where they had fled in 1905 and remained for 15 years until their eventual return to Latvia. Eleni Philippou (Philippou, 2017, p.6) notes that Penelope's ambiguous and powerless position, characterised by her anticipation of her husband's expected but uncertain return, can be juxtaposed with the conditions experienced by individuals living amidst political extremism. Waiting plays a significant role in notions of revolution, sociopolitical changes, and various ideologies and movements, where the present gains meaning solely through its connection to waiting. Aspazija, during her 15-year exile, endured a similar state of waiting alongside Rainis, as they fought for survival and held onto the hope of one day returning to Latvia. It is within

<sup>5</sup> In this article, all the titles of Aspazija's works and selected text fragments are provided in the author's translation. For the poetry texts, literary translations are included, but not the specific verse structure.

this context of prolonged waiting that Aspazija engages with the character of Penelope in her two poems.

The first poem called “Little Penelope” is included in the collection of poems titled “Sunny Corner” (“Saulains stūrītis”) which was published in 1910 in Riga. The collection comprises poems written over a span of approximately two years, beginning at the end of 1907. In this collection, Aspazija portrays childhood and youthful memories up until around the age of 16 (Aspazija, 1985, p.123).

In “Little Penelope”, the lyrical “I” or lyrical heroine positions herself in opposition to the character of Penelope. The author plays with the mythological situation, highlighting the imperfect weaving as the cause of unweaving: “At night, Penelope, unweaved you / What in a day you weaved crookedly” (Pa nakti, Penelope, ārdiji tu, / Ko dienu saaudi greizi) (Aspazija, 185, p.155). The lyrical heroine does not perceive the wisdom for which Penelope is praised in Homer’s works. Instead, through her categorical statements of *I will not do, I will not weave, I will send away*, she expresses the belief that she would have acted differently if she were in Penelope’s position (Eiduka, 2022). The poem does not mention Odysseus explicitly but playfully touches on the theme of the suitors: “And mine suitors? – Well! / When they come, I will know, / How I will send them all away” (Un savus preciniekus? – Nu! / Kad tādi sanāks, gan zināšu, / Kā visus aizraidīšu) (Aspazija, 185, p.155).

In “Little Penelope”, Aspazija confronts Penelope and challenges the traditional values that this character represents. As the author points out in the preface of the subsequent collection “The Lap of Flowers” (“Ziedu klēpis”), it is not crucial whether “Sunny Corner” precisely reflects her personal experiences in life. What matters more is that she survives through her art, and that the art itself takes on a life of its own independent of her as an individual (Aspazija, 1985, p. 565).

The second poem, “Penelope’s Shroud”, is part of the collection “Spread Wings” (“Izplesti spārni”). Although the collection was published in 1920, the manuscript of the poem is dated 1909, thereby indicating that both poems were written around the same period (Aspazija 1986, p. 665, 668). However, “Penelope’s Shroud” differs significantly in tone from “Little Penelope”. The playful knots have transformed into knots, grids, pains, delusions, and crimes (Eiduka, 2022). The lyrical self does not directly identify with Penelope but rather draws parallels with her situation — being alone, in despair and unweaving the shroud during the nighttime: “In long and silent nights without sleep, / Gradually pulling out thread by thread, / I unravel my Penelope’s shroud!” (Garās un klušās naktīs bez miega, / Pamazām velkot ārā diegu pēc diega, / Es izārdū savu Penelopes audu!) (Aspazija, 1986, p.94).

Weaving, spinning and the creation of cloth often carry associations with death in Greek myths. The Moirai, who twist, divide and cut the threads of people’s lives, govern the destinies of individuals. In myths, such as Medea and Jason, Heracles and Deianeira as well as Tereus, Procne and Philomela, weaving and cloth play a significant role. For example, in the myth of Tereus, Philomela weaves Tereus’ crime into a tapestry, revealing the truth to Procne (Hernández, 2008, p.52).

The theme of death is also present in Penelope's case, as she weaves a shroud for her husband's father, Laertes. By weaving and unravelling Laertes' shroud, Penelope voluntarily places herself in a situation akin to that of Sisyphus and other great sinners in Hades — repeating the same action endlessly, without progress or results (Hernández, 2008, p.52).

Aspazija's lyrical "I" does not directly identify with Penelope, but instead selects her as a symbol and situates herself in a comparable circumstance — nighttime, loneliness and hopelessness.

In "Little Penelope", the lyrical self engages in a playful contrast with Homer's Penelope. However, in "Penelope's Shroud", reflecting on her life with a sense of disappointment, she contrasts her own situation with that of the Penelope depicted in Homer's epic. It is noteworthy that neither poem mentions Odysseus or Penelope's husband. In literary tradition, these characters are often intertwined in terms of plot, despite their physical separation. Aspazija's poetry, on the other hand, demonstrates an attempt to separate the character of Penelope from her relationship with Odysseus. The focus shifts to Penelope as an independent character rather than solely defining her through her connection to Odysseus as his wife.

## Conclusions

Although the poets mentioned here — Dorothy Parker, Edna St. Vincent Millay and Aspazija — come from different generations and continents, they all share a common desire to offer a fresh perspective on women that is relevant to their respective eras. Their poetry serves as a response to the momentous events that unfolded in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which brought about profound global and personal transformations. The image of Penelope serves as a powerful symbol through which they articulate their perspectives on women and their experiences.

Aspazija, in particular, aligns with this tradition of reception, although she does not reinterpret or transform the character of Penelope. Her innovation lies in the formation of her lyrical self or heroine's attitude towards Penelope. This demonstrates that such attitudes can significantly differ at different stages of life. Aspazija's poems reflect attempts to view Penelope as a distinct character capable of existing in the text independently, even without a direct connection to Odysseus, an approach that would have been unimaginable in Homer's time.

Aspazija's portrayal of Penelope embodies the spirit of the age and the author's own personality, defending the values that are significant to her and aligning with feminist ideas. She constructs the image of an independent young woman who represents the author's memories of her youth and possesses the agency to shape her own destiny ("The Little Penelope"). Furthermore, Aspazija's poems reflect the author's real-life experiences, expressing her struggles during years of exile, the sense of hopelessness and the existential futility of life ("Penelope's Shroud").

Aspazija does not rewrite the myth or transform the literary character of Penelope. Instead, she engages in a dialogue with the mythical situation by comparing or contrasting it with the thoughts expressed in her poems. The personality of the author is inseparable from these works, and her poetry serves as a reflection of her own reality and life experiences.

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