

THE CONTRAST BY ROYALL TYLER

The Contrast, written in 1787 by Royall Tyler, is an American play in the tradition of the English Restoration comedies of the seventeenth century; it takes its cue from Sheridan's *The School for Scandal*, a British comedy of manners that had revived that tradition a decade before. Royall uses the form to satirize Americans who follow British fashions and indulge in 'British vices'. Thus, the play is often concerned with portraying the contrast between European and American culture.

Sociopolitical and Historical Contexts

"The Contrast" by Royall Tyler, written in 1787, is deeply rooted in its sociopolitical and historical contexts:

Sociopolitical Context :

1. **American vs. British Culture :** The primary contrast of "The Contrast" is its opposition of American vs. British-influenced characters. The play presents a series of contrasts or oppositions, pitting the virtuous patriotic New England gentleman-farmer and militia officer against the anglicized New York City seducer and fop. This reflects the cultural dualities inherent in the early American experience.
2. **Post-Revolutionary America :** The play is set in the turbulent years following the American Revolution, a time when Americans were actively debating the moral behavior, economic liberties, and standards of education appropriate for citizens of the new United States. The play becomes a canvas where the simplicity of American life contends with the affectations of European sophistication.

Historical Context :

1. **First American Play :** "The Contrast" is the first comedy written by an American citizen that was professionally produced. It premiered at New York City's John Street Theatre in April 1787. This reflects the development of American theatre during this period.
2. **English Restoration Comedies :** The play is in the tradition of the English Restoration comedies of the seventeenth century. It takes its cue from Sheridan's "*The School for Scandal*", a British comedy of manners that had revived that tradition a decade before.

In summary, "The Contrast" is deeply rooted in its sociopolitical and historical contexts, which add depth to the narrative and provide a richer understanding of the play.

Plot Overview

The Contrast is the first comedy written by an American citizen that was professionally produced. The play begins with a prologue written in heroic couplets. The play itself, a comedy of manners, evaluates home-made versus foreign goods and ideas. Its leading character, Jonathan, introduces to the theatre the "Yankee" stock character represented by Jonathan, with his rough-hewn and plain-spoken manners.

Key Characters :

- **Charlotte** : Colonel Manly's sister, a coquettish woman, lives with her uncle in New York, has friends and good social standing, friend of Letitia.
- **Letitia** : friend of Charlotte and ward of Charlotte's uncle; possesses monetary wealth, which makes her attractive to Dimple.
- **Mr. Billy Dimple** : the villain, a dandy, attempts to manage relationships with Charlotte, Letitia, and Maria at once; in need of money, an Anglophile fop.
- **Maria Van Rough** : daughter of Van Rough, sentimental and virtuous.
- **Colonel Henry Manly** : Charlotte's brother, a contrasting character to Mr. Dimple, a persona of America; a gentleman, patriot, and hero.
- **Van Rough** : Maria's father, urges his daughter Maria to marry the rich Billy Dimple out of interest (Money).
- **Jessamy** : Dimple's waiter/servant, as snobbish as his master, a persona of Europe.
- **Jonathan** : Manly's waiter/servant, represents the New England Yankee, an unsophisticated country bumpkin, honest and patriotic.
- **Jenny** : Maria's waiter/servant, Jessamy's friend.
- **Servants**

FULL SUMMARY OF THE PLAY

The play begins with the coquettish Charlotte and Letitia talking about the forthcoming marriage and Maria's distress due to her father's marriage plans for her. Billy Dimple's father was Van Rough's business partner. Before the death of Dimple's father, a marriage between Van Rough's Daughter, Maria, and Dimple was settled. While Dimple becomes snobbish in England, Maria betakes herself to books that "improve her taste": "The contrast was so striking betwixt the good sense of her books, and the flimsiness of her love-letters, that she discovered that she had unthinkingly engaged her hand without her heart."

In the second scene, Maria bemoans the "helpless situation of [her] sex": "Reputation is the life of a woman - and the only safe asylum a woman of delicacy can find, is in the arms of a man of honor." Even though Maria reveals to her father a lack of love towards Dimple, old Van Rough still wants her to marry Dimple, stressing that "money makes the mare go". For him his daughter's feelings are nonsense and money is the most important thing she should look out for. In a time when women usually were detained from enlightening their opinions by means of literature (biographies were acceptable, but no novels, since they were thought to produce a wrong world view), her father concludes that her sadness comes from "these vile books". Not wanting to disappoint her father, Maria consents.

In Act II, Charlotte discovers that her brother, the good and honorable Colonel Manly, is in town. Manly fought in the Revolutionary War and is dressed in a soldier's coat, which seems totally unfashionable to the city's high society. Without knowing from each other's affair, Letitia and Charlotte, secretly reveal to the audience that they are also courted by Dimple. Snobbish Jessamy meets simple Jonathan, who has never been to such a big town and almost kissed a "harlot" without realizing it. Jessamy convinces "almost married" Jonathan to pursue some maids in the city. Jessamy introduces Jonathan to Jenny, and after the former takes his leave, Manly's manservant tries to kiss the girl. Jenny refuses angrily, since she thinks Jonathan much too unfashionable for her.

In Act III, Dimple says he loves Charlotte for her lively character, but needs Letitia's money. He also wants Maria to decline the match. Then Dimple, the villain, meets Manly and finds out that the Colonel is Charlotte's brother - just in time to prevent himself from telling Manly about his detestable attitude towards women. Dimple has an extensive monologue where he declares his love for European culture, despite living in America.

In Act IV, Maria tells Charlotte that Dimple insults and disgusts her and that she met a lovely man full of honor (Manly) this morning. Charlotte, being interested in Dimple, unsuccessfully "endeavour[s] to excite her to discharge him." Manly and Dimple enter and the family relations are revealed to all characters. Van Rough meanwhile finds out about Dimple having lost seventeen-thousand pounds due to gambling and decides not to have his daughter been married to such a fool. In that moment he more or less accidentally overhears a conversation between Manly and Maria revealing their love and affections to each other.

In Act V, Jessamy fails to teach high society's rules of laughing to Jonathan, who just laughs too naturally. Dimple meets Letitia, telling her that he loves just her and that Charlotte is nothing else than a "trifling, gay, flighty coquette". Charlotte enters and Letitia pretends to leave. She observes the following happenings. After Letitia seemed to be gone, Dimple tells Charlotte that he is in love with her and that Letitia is an "ugly creature!" When Dimple forcefully tries to kiss her, Charlotte screams and Manly comes in to help her quarrelling Dimple. Old Van Rough prevents the men from stabbing each other and Letitia enters to reveal the happenings to everyone. After Dimple is gone dishonored, Van Rough agrees to Manly's marriage proposal and Maria ends up with Manly.

THEMES

American vs. British Culture : The primary contrast of "The Contrast" is its opposition of American vs. British-influenced characters. The play presents a series of contrasts or oppositions, pitting the virtuous patriotic New England gentleman-farmer and militia officer against the anglicized New York City seducer and fop. This reflects the cultural dualities inherent in the early American experience.

Honesty and Worth vs. Sham and Affectation : Tyler's play introduced a favorite theme of early American drama: the triumph of native honesty and worth over foreign sham and affectation. This theme is embodied in the characters of Jonathan, the "Yankee" stock character with his rough-hewn and plain-spoken manners, and Mr. Billy Dimple, the villain, a dandy, and an Anglophile fop.

Economics and Consumerism : The play uses a language of economics, with relationships and marriages described as "transactions". European consumerism is despised in favor of a more American "homespun" culture. This theme reflects the economic realities and debates of post-Revolutionary America.

Seduction : The seduction narrative is used throughout the play, adding a layer of intrigue and conflict. This theme is particularly evident in the character of Mr. Billy Dimple, who attempts to manage relationships with multiple women at once.

Love : The theme of love is central to the play, particularly in the relationship between Maria and Manly. Their love is portrayed as pure and virtuous, in contrast to the deceitful and manipulative relationships of other characters.

Jealousy : Jealousy is a significant theme in the play, particularly in the character of Dimple. Dimple's jealousy of Manly's virtues and his relationship with Maria drives much of the plot.

Betrayal : Betrayal is a recurring theme in the play. Dimple's attempts to deceive Maria and Manly represent a betrayal of friendship and love. This theme is also evident in the character of Charlotte, who betrays her friend Letitia by pursuing Colonel Manly.

Defended Values : The play defends certain values, particularly those associated with the American spirit. Manly, the play's hero, embodies virtues such as honesty, integrity, and patriotism. These values are contrasted with the deceit and affectation represented by characters like Dimple and Charlotte.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

Question

What is being "contrasted" in The Contrast ? What values and characteristics mark some characters as more authentically "American" than others ? What is "American-ness" being contrasted with in the play ?

Answer

In Royall Tyler's "The Contrast", the primary element being contrasted is the difference between American and European cultures and lifestyles . The title of the play itself refers to this central theme.

Authentically "American" Characters :

1. **Colonel Henry Manly :** Manly is portrayed as the ideal American patriot and gentleman. He embodies virtues such as honesty, integrity, and patriotism. His character is contrasted with that of Mr. Billy Dimple, who is depicted as a snobbish, anglicized fop.
2. **Jonathan :** Jonathan, Manly's waiter/servant, represents the New England Yankee. He is characterized by his rough-hewn and plain-spoken manners, honesty, and patriotism.

"American-ness" Contrasted :

The "American-ness" in the play is contrasted with the European-influenced characters and their values. This is particularly evident in the character of Mr. Billy Dimple, who indulges in European fashions and is in need of money. His

character is a critique of those who follow British fashions and indulge in 'British vices'.

In essence, the play uses the contrast between the American and European characters to satirize Americans who follow British fashions and to celebrate the virtues of being authentically American.

Question

To what extent does the characterization of colonel Manly contrasts with Billy Dimple's ?

Answer

The characters of Colonel Henry Manly and Mr. Billy Dimple in Royall Tyler's "The Contrast" are indeed starkly different, and their contrasting characteristics serve to highlight the play's central themes.

Colonel Henry Manly :

- Manly is portrayed as the ideal American patriot and gentleman. He embodies virtues such as honesty, integrity, and patriotism.
- He is a soldier who fought in the Revolutionary War and continues to wear his military jacket, which seems totally unfashionable to the city's high society.
- Manly represents the New England Yankee, an unsophisticated country bumpkin, honest and patriotic.

Mr. Billy Dimple :

- Dimple, on the other hand, is the villain of the play, a dandy, and an Anglophile fop.
- He attempts to manage relationships with Charlotte, Letitia, and Maria at once. He is in need of money and becomes snobbish in England.
- Dimple represents the European influence, indulging in European fashions and even stooping so low as to complain of his own country.

In essence, the characterization of Colonel Manly and Billy Dimple serves to contrast the values of post-Revolutionary America with those of Europe. Manly's character embodies the virtues of honesty, integrity, and patriotism, which are seen as authentically American. In contrast, Dimple's character, with his affectations and manipulations, represents the negative influence of European culture.

Question

Many literary critics have claimed that Colonel Manly is meant to be understood as a kind of George Washington figure. What characteristics relate him to George Washington ? Why does Charlotte tease and make fun of Manly ? What do you make of the fact that some of the humor of the play comes at Manly's expense ? Why do you think Tyler named this character "Manly" ?

Answer

Colonel Manly in "The Contrast" is indeed often compared to George Washington, and there are several reasons for this:

1. **Patriotism and Integrity :** Like Washington, Manly is depicted as a patriotic figure who fought in the Revolutionary War. He embodies virtues such as honesty, integrity, and patriotism, much like Washington, who was known for these qualities.
2. **Military Service :** Manly's military service is a significant aspect of his character. He continues to wear his military jacket, which seems totally unfashionable to the city's high society. This could be seen as a parallel to Washington's military leadership during the Revolutionary War.

As for Charlotte's teasing of Manly, it primarily stems from their contrasting views and lifestyles:

1. **Contrasting Values :** Charlotte, who is more influenced by European culture and fashion, finds Manly's patriotic and straightforward nature somewhat amusing. She teases him about his unfashionable military jacket and his serious demeanor.
2. **Humor at Manly's Expense :** The humor at Manly's expense serves to highlight the contrast between the American and European values in the play. His earnestness and lack of pretense are sources of amusement in the sophisticated city society.

Finally, the name "Manly" is likely a reflection of the character's virtues:

1. **Symbolism :** The name "Manly" symbolizes the character's virtues of honesty, integrity, and patriotism. It represents the ideal of a "manly" virtue, embodying the qualities that were admired in the post-Revolutionary American society.

In summary, Colonel Manly's character serves as a representation of American values and virtues, contrasting with the European-influenced characters in the play.

Question

The character of the rustic, dialect-speaking Jonathan started a vogue in American literature for homespun "Yankee" types. Plays and novels from the early nineteenth century often feature naïve rural characters inhabited to Tyler's portrait. Discuss the political significance of his representation.

Answer

The character of Jonathan in Royall Tyler's "The Contrast" is indeed a significant figure in American literature. He is one of the first examples of the homespun "Yankee" type, a character archetype that would become a staple in American literature.

Jonathan's representation carries considerable political significance:

1. **American Identity :** Jonathan, with his rustic manners and dialect, represents a distinctly American identity. His character contrasts with the European-influenced characters in the play, emphasizing the unique qualities of the American spirit.
2. **Democratic Values :** Jonathan embodies the democratic values of the newly formed United States. His honesty, straightforwardness, and lack of pretense contrast with the deceit and affectation of the more European-influenced characters.
3. **Critique of European Influence :** Jonathan's character serves as a critique of European influence on American society. His simplicity and authenticity are presented as more desirable than the sophisticated, affected manners of the city's high society.
4. **Nationalism :** Jonathan's character also promotes a sense of nationalism. His character is used to advocate for a stronger sense of national culture, suggesting that the playwright's talents were not as important as the playwright's nationality.

In summary, the character of Jonathan in "The Contrast" plays a significant role in defining American identity and values in the aftermath of the American Revolution.

Question

What ideals of womanhood and femininity do Maria and Charlotte represent ? Which of these women do you think best occupies the position of "heroine" in this play ? Why do you think Charlotte is a more appealing character ? What are her faults ? What are her virtues ? How does she change over the course of the play ?

Answer

In Royall Tyler's "The Contrast", the characters of Maria and Charlotte represent different ideals of womanhood and femininity:

1. **Maria** : Maria Van Rough is depicted as a sentimental and virtuous woman. She is known for being well-read and morally upright, focusing more on books and morality as opposed to fashion and men. Maria represents an ideal of womanhood that values intellect, virtue, and sincerity.
2. **Charlotte** : Charlotte, on the other hand, is portrayed as a coquette. She is socially adept, enjoys a good social standing, and is known for her calculating nature. Charlotte represents a more pragmatic and worldly ideal of womanhood.

As for the position of the "heroine" in the play, it could be argued that **Maria** best occupies this role. Despite being betrothed to Billy Dimple due to an agreement between their fathers, Maria remains true to her feelings and ultimately marries Colonel Manly, the man she truly loves. Her journey reflects the struggle for personal happiness and autonomy within the constraints of societal expectations.

Charlotte, despite her faults, is **a more appealing character due to her wit, charm, and social savvy**. However, her faults include her manipulative nature and her willingness to use others for her own gain. Despite these faults, Charlotte's virtues lie in her intelligence, her ability to navigate social situations, and her resilience.

As for how Charlotte changes over the course of the play, it's important to note that while she begins the play as a coquette, she ends up being abandoned by both Letitia and Dimple. This could be seen as a form of growth or change, as she experiences the consequences of her actions.

RELEVANT QUOTATIONS ALONG WITH THEIR EXPLANATIONS **FROM THE PLAY**

Here are some relevant quotations from the play, along with explanations of their significance :

1. Opening Prologue :

- **Quotation:** "Exult, each patriot heart! this night is shown / A piece, which we may fairly call our own; / Where the proud titles of 'My Lord! Your Grace!' / To humble Mr. and plain Sir give place."

- **Explanation:** This prologue sets the tone for the play by celebrating American independence and identity. It emphasizes the rejection of European aristocratic titles in favor of simpler, more egalitarian American forms of address, reflecting the new nation's democratic ideals.

2. Manly on Patriotism and Honor:

- **Quotation:** "When I consider the dignity of his profession, and the importance of the cause in which he is engaged, it fills me with reverence and awe."
- **Explanation:** Manly's statement underscores his respect for military service and the values of honor and duty. It contrasts with the more superficial concerns of other characters, highlighting the play's theme of true virtue versus pretentiousness.

3. Jonathan's Perspective on City Life:

- **Quotation:** "Father always told me the city was the devil's own workshop, and nobody but a knave or a fool would leave the country and go there."
- **Explanation:** Jonathan's rustic simplicity and suspicion of city life embody the contrast between rural virtue and urban vice. His character represents the honest, hardworking American farmer, in contrast to the corrupting influences of city life.

4. Jessamy on Fashion:

- **Quotation:** "A man should dress like a gentleman; a woman like a lady. This is the sum total of modern education."
- **Explanation:** Jessamy's comment satirizes the superficiality of social norms focused on appearance rather than substance. It criticizes a society that prioritizes fashion and outward appearances over true education and moral character.

5. Charlotte and Maria on Love and Marriage:

- **Quotation:**
 - Charlotte: "It is what you call a romantic beginning, and a certain sign of a pure attachment."
 - Maria: "Ah, Charlotte, marriage is a serious affair."
- **Explanation:** This exchange contrasts Charlotte's romanticized view of love with Maria's more pragmatic approach to marriage. It highlights differing

attitudes towards relationships and the importance of considering practical aspects in marriage decisions.

6. **Colonel Manly on American Virtue:**

- **Quotation:** "I see the falsehood, the art, the selfishness of what is called society, and my heart sickens at the view."
- **Explanation:** Colonel Manly expresses his disillusionment with the hypocrisy and deceit he observes in society. His preference for honesty and integrity reflects the play's endorsement of straightforward, virtuous American values over the corrupt practices he associates with European-influenced high society.

7. **Dimple's Hypocrisy:**

- **Quotation:** "I must set my face against those exotics; but in my heart, I believe I am as good a patriot as the best of them."
- **Explanation:** Dimple's statement reveals his duplicitous nature. While he outwardly condemns foreign influences, he inwardly admires them. This hypocrisy underscores the play's critique of those who feign patriotism for social approval while lacking genuine commitment to American ideals.

8. **Manly on True Love:**

- **Quotation:** "My love is founded on esteem—the esteem I have for the virtues and accomplishments of Maria."
- **Explanation:** Manly's declaration of love is based on respect and admiration for Maria's character, rather than superficial attraction. This contrasts with the more frivolous romantic pursuits of other characters, reinforcing the theme of genuine versus shallow relationships.

9. **Jonathan's Naivety:**

- **Quotation:** "Why, they told me it was so in Boston. They said there was nothing else for a gentleman to do but to lounge about in a powdered wig, and make good manners."
- **Explanation:** Jonathan's naivety and literal belief in the exaggerated descriptions of city life highlight his innocence and the play's comedic elements. It also serves to critique the idle, affectatious lifestyle that some urban dwellers aspire to.

10. **Maria's Inner Conflict:**

- **Quotation:** "Ah, how deceitful is the human heart! I have despised the idle, dissipated Dimple; I have despised his foppery, his affectation, his attempts to be a libertine—yet I fear I must pity him."

- **Explanation:** Maria's reflection on Dimple reveals her moral struggle and compassion. Despite her disdain for his behavior, she recognizes his flaws and feels a sense of pity. This complexity adds depth to her character and illustrates the play's exploration of human emotions and moral judgments.

These quotations and their explanations provide insight into the themes, character dynamics, and social commentary within "The Contrast."