

# Imagining France, Lecture 04, 2014-10-20

## Letters of a Peruvian Woman

What does Letters of a Peruvian Woman have in common with L'Ingénu? What differences does it have?

- Both stories are episodic — both characters move around their worlds.
- Epistolary novel vs. short story.
- Male vs. female protagonists.
- In both texts there exists criticisms of French culture and hypocrisy.
- Philosophical writing is used as a form of societal and cultural criticism.
- One is in a letter format, the other in the usual format of a short story. The letters don't immediately tell a story.

Which elements of French culture does Zilia criticise?

- The stereotype of marriage: at the end of the novel she chooses friendship as opposed to marrying either Aza or Déterville.
- The treatment of women, for example their sexualisation and materialism and the fact that they all act the same and conform to societal norms.
- Peru is full of colour — Zilia writes about light and sun and dark — all these themes are interwoven into her letters. She misses the sun when she is in France, as she tended to stay indoors.

How is pathos used for the purposes of social criticism in letters 13, 19 and 20?

Letter 13:

- Aristocratic family structures — lack of love between the mother and her own children.
- The maid is kinder to Zilia than the rich.
- In Peru, the King helps his people whereas in France he does not.

Letter 19:

- Uncertainty of Déterville's departure — Zilia has lost her bridge that connects her to Aza, and grief ensues.
- Déterville's mother does not want him to marry and wants to keep the family rich.

**Letter 20:**

- “I have told you nothing of the troubles in my mind, dearest Aza.”
- “Sorrows caused by the prevailing customs of this nation.”
- “The Government cannot fail to be imperfect.”

**In which ways is Zilia perceived as ‘other’ by the French characters she meets?**

- Her clothes are different. She eventually chooses to wear culturally acceptable clothes, but is exposed then to sexual interest.
- In the beginning, she writes in knots as it is all she knows
- She does not speak or understand any French until quite a way into the novel. Her early letters use very flowery, metaphorical French.
- When she does speak, she speaks very directly, unlike French women who think carefully about what they say.