Portrait d'une Femme

POEM TEXT

Your mind and you are our Sargasso Sea,
London has swept about you this score years
And bright ships left you this or that in fee:
Ideas, old gossip, oddments of all things,
Strange spars of knowledge and dimmed wares of price.
Great minds have sought you—lacking someone else.
You have been second always. Tragical?
No. You preferred it to the usual thing:
One dull man, dulling and uxorious,
One average mind—with one thought less, each year.
Oh, you are patient, I have seen you sit
Hours, where something might have floated up.
And now you pay one. Yes, you richly pay.
You are a person of some interest, one comes to you
And takes strange gain away:
Trophies fished up; some curious suggestion;
Fact that leads nowhere; and a tale for two,
Pregnant with mandrakes, or with something else
That might prove useful and yet never proves,
That never fits a corner or shows use,
Or finds its hour upon the loom of days:
The tarnished, gaudy, wonderful old work;
Idols and ambergris and rare inlays,
These are your riches, your great store; and yet
For all this sea-hoard of deciduous things,
Strange woods half sodden, and new brighter stuff:
In the slow float of differing light and deep,
No! there is nothing! In the whole and all,
Nothing that's quite your own.
Yet this is you.

SUMMARY

To us, the London elites, you and your mind are like the Sargasso Sea. London's upper-class social scene has rushed around you for the last 20 years, and smart, promising people have paid you in trinkets. They gave you ideas, outdated rumors, all kinds of odds and ends; they gave you peculiar fragments of expertise, and worn-out goods that were once expensive. Important, intelligent people have sought you out—when no one else was available. You have always been the second choice. Is that tragic? No, because you preferred this life to the typical married life: getting stuck with one boring man, who only becomes more boring and fawning, and with one ordinary mind that grows less active over time. You are so patient! I have watched you sit around for hours, just waiting for some intriguing tidbit to surface. And now you share all those tidbits. Yes, you share them generously. You've become a somewhat interesting person. People visit you and take curious rewards back with them. You dole out dredged-up memories of achievement; strange, vague ideas; meaningless facts; and tales full of potential, mystery, and scandal—tales that seem like they could be useful, but never are. Your stories never quite fit into place, come in handy, or play a part in the wider world. All of these discolored, garish, magnificent old items—sacred objects, perfumes, and decorations—are your wealth, your magnificent stockpile. And still, in spite of your fading treasures, all these soaked bits of flotsam and newer, shinier fragments—there isn't anything in the whole, entire collection that is fully and truly your own. Yet this is what you are.

THEMES

STATUS, IDENTITY, AND FULFILLMENT

"Portrait d'Une Femme" describes an upper-class woman who has spent decades cultivating relationships with interesting people. This socialite never formed any close bonds, preferring to collect gossip and enhance her social standing. Now, the speaker says, this woman has little to show for her years of flighty, status-oriented hobnobbing: none of her ideas are truly useful or her own, and no one loves her best. In other words, the poem suggests that worshiping prestige can mean sacrificing an identity of one's own to a shallow idea of an exciting life.

In her efforts to avoid "the usual thing"—being married to one familiar, "dull" person—the "Femme" (or lady) of the poem's title has pursued a sparkling life among London's upper crust. But according to the speaker, she's never been able to get as close to these figures as she'd like; mistaking status and stimulation for meaning, the lady forms only shallow connections. She has spent 20 years courting intelligent, important people, collecting "ideas, old gossip, oddments of all things" as "trophies" of impressive relationships and special knowledge.

This lady has even come to play a role in London society—as the "Sargasso Sea" through which the artistic and intellectual elites sail. She's known as a reliable hostess, a source of gossip and other tidbits. But there's no indication that she's truly valued as

a person! Among the important people she courts, the woman is "second always," never anyone's first choice of confidant or companion. Moreover, according to the speaker, she never forms deep bonds (or thinks deep thoughts) because she is always waiting for something new to "float up," especially if it might advance her social standing.

Ironically, then, the lady's life ends up "dull" anyway, lacking true meaning or value. While the lady has collected plenty of metaphorical treasure from her noteworthy acquaintances—"idols" and "rare inlays" of wit and gossip—these spoils are never "quite [her] own," and "lead nowhere." The speaker implies that this lady lacks a real inner life that could make something of her experiences, so all of her knowledge feels hollow—briefly interesting, but not really useful or meaningful.

Her "collection" thus ends up "tarnish[ed]" and worn-out; she's sacrificed her own identity for a handful of useless tokens. Even worse: this emptiness *becomes* her identity. "Yet this is you," the speaker concludes, suggesting that the lady has become a permanent half-person, lacking depth and personality through her shallow pursuit of prestige and excitement.

A preoccupation with social status, the speaker warns, can prevent people from forming close relationships or individual identities. This poem suggests that it's not enough to merely accumulate interesting people or facts for one's collection—and the misguided effort to do so can get in the way of living a complete and meaningful life.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-30

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

Your mind and you are our Sargasso Sea,
London has swept about you this score years
And bright ships left you this or that in fee:
Ideas, old gossip, oddments of all things,
Strange spars of knowledge and dimmed wares of price.

Before "Portrait d'une Femme" even begins, its title sets the stage by referencing another well-known poem. "Portrait d'une Femme" translates from French as "Portrait of a Lady," which is also the title of a T. S. Eliot poem published in the year before Pound's "Portrait" first appeared in print:

- Eliot's "Portrait of a Lady" describes various encounters between a young man and an older, upper-class lady who seeks companionship as she ages, finding herself surrounded by empty relationships and meaningless cultural activities.

Both of these poems also allude to Henry James's 1881 novel "The Portrait of a Lady," which follows a young woman named Isabel Archer:

- Determined to maintain her independence and freedom as she travels, Archer denies marriage proposals that offer her wealth and status because she does not want to be held back. However, Archer is tricked into marrying a man who wants only her new inheritance (having been blinded to his true nature by his sophistication and taste), and she ultimately ends up in a restrictive and unhappy marriage.

Like both of these works, "Portrait d'une Femme" describes an unmarried upper-class lady who values her own status, independence, and cultural experiences above all else. These allusions, however, suggest that the lady will suffer a fate like Eliot and James's own "ladies," thus creating a subtly ominous atmosphere as the poem begins.

The poem itself opens with a metaphor comparing the lady—and particularly her mind—to the Sargasso Sea. The Sargasso is known for the seaweed (and other ocean debris), which can be found floating about this portion of the Atlantic in massive piles.

- Note how the sibilance of these opening lines (as in "Sargasso Sea" and "swept [...] this score years") evokes that ocean scenery, calling to mind the hiss of crashing waves or wind blowing off of the surface of debris heaps.

The speaker explains that, like ships sailing through the Sargasso, members of London's upper-class social scene visit with (or "sweep about") the lady, leaving her with all sorts of curious scraps (some of which might be physical objects, but most of which are less tangible—interesting bits of knowledge and "old gossip").

- The speaker's language when describing these discarded items (e.g., "strange spars", "dimmed wares") feels exciting and romantic. But her acquaintances clearly no longer want or need these items, as they are given "in fee," now totally under her ownership.
- Moreover, while her visitors are "bright," suggesting intensity and potential, the items they leave behind are now "dimmed," having lost luster and value.

Sympathy for the lady builds as the speaker directly addresses her, an example of apostrophe. The second-person point of view ("you," "your") creates the impression of familiarity between the speaker and the lady, heightening the emotional

impact of the poem as the audience seems to witness an intimate conversation. Apostrophe also puts the reader in the lady's position as the speaker repeatedly addresses "you," encouraging the audience to empathize with her.

The speaker also uses parallelism to repeatedly put the lady in a *passive* position, suggesting that she has little control over her fate: "London has swept about you [...] And bright ships left you" (and in the next passage, "Great minds have sought you"). What's more, she has held this passive, powerless role for a great while—some 20 ("score") years.

Finally, strong meter and sound play throughout these opening lines draw the audience's interest and reinforce the epic seafaring imagery. The poem uses iambic pentameter, lines of five iambs (poetic feet with an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern). The meter's regular rises and falls recall the steady lapping of the ocean. Here's a look at line 1, for instance:

> Your mind and you are our Sargasso Sea,

Occasional deviations (as in: "London has swept about you") suggest a chaotic and temperamental environment.

LINES 6-10

> *Great minds have sought you—lacking someone else.*
> *You have been second always. Tragical?*
> *No. You preferred it to the usual thing:*
> *One dull man, dulling and uxorious,*
> *One average mind—with one thought less, each year.*

The speaker continues to describe the lady's social interactions, explaining that the notable people who visit with her never quite see her as their equal. Instead, she has always been their second choice, called upon when no one else is available.

The caesura that splits line 6 makes this revelation all the more dramatic:

> Great minds have sought you—lacking someone else.

The dash creates a clear division within the line, heightening the sense of surprise (and therefore impact) when the speaker's statement transforms from a compliment into an insult. The full stop caesura that falls after "always" then emphasizes that the lady is consistently treated this way:

> You have been second always. Tragical?

The speaker then poses a rhetorical question—"Tragical?"—that implicitly asks the audience to consider how difficult her life might be. Given the information revealed up until this point, the audience might see the lady's treatment as sad and unfair. However, the speaker immediately answers the question: "No." That is, this situation is *not* tragic, in the speaker's estimation. The caesura that follows (that firm full stop after "No") makes the speaker's answer appear all the more abrupt and decisive.

The speaker goes on to explain that this lady's life should *not* be seen as tragic because she has chosen it for herself. Or, as the speaker puts it, she "preferred [her second-rate treatment] to the usual thing," meaning marriage.

To that end, the speaker's tone becomes dramatically less sympathetic here. The speaker suggests that she would rather have empty social relationships with interesting people than an unhappy marriage, positioning these as her only two options and as mutually exclusive. Indeed, (early 20th-century) Western gender roles prescribed that a woman could have marriage and a family or personal advancement and opportunity, but never both.

- Interestingly, the speaker shifts away from the passive parallel sentence structure that the poem has featured so far ("swept about you [...] left you [...] sought you").
- Now, the lady is active: "You have been second [...] You preferred it." The lady's shift from a passive object to an active subject reflects the speaker's view that she is responsible for her position in life.

Also note how the speaker breaks from the present perfect tense ("have left [...] have sought [...] have been") to place this choice firmly in the past: "you preferred." This shift suggests changed preferences and therefore a tinge of regret. Still, the speaker does not believe the audience should feel sorry for her (or, it is implied, that she should feel sorry for herself) since she "went her own way."

LINES 11-12

> *Oh, you are patient, I have seen you sit*
> *Hours, where something might have floated up.*

The lady's aversion to a dull, monotonous marriage might lead the audience to believe that she is very active, even restless. However, the speaker goes on to describe her as "patient": the speaker has seen her sit around for hours, just waiting for an exciting bit of information to be revealed.

More specifically, the speaker says that the lady waits "where something might have floated up," leaving the outcome ambiguous and implying that often nothing surfaces. The phrase "floated up" brings to mind an object surfacing in a body of water, extending the Sargasso Sea metaphor introduced in the opening lines. Here, the knowledge that the lady waits so patiently for is likened to unwanted sea refuse, suggesting that it has little inherent value.

The interjection that begins this passage ("Oh") has a casual feel to it, as if the speaker is trying to fill gaps in conversation. In this way, it adds to the authenticity of the poem—the feeling that the audience is witnessing a real interaction. The interjection might be seen as an attempt at sympathy and

praise (as in, "Wow, you are *so* patient"). However, given the speaker's harsh judgments in the preceding lines, it comes across as condescending above all.

LINES 13-15

And now you pay one. Yes, you richly pay.
You are a person of some interest, one comes to you
And takes strange gain away:

The speaker explains that the lady must now pay some (quite high) fee—a metaphor for suffering the consequences of her decisions. In other words, the speaker suggests that she must "pay" for pursuing status and independence over deep personal relationships. The phrase "Yes, you" has an accusatory tone to it, as if the speaker is pointing a finger at the lady. This phrase is also alliterative (as it features repeating /y/ sounds), which heightens the force and insistence behind the call-out.

The speaker next describes how the woman pays, using financial terms that indicate a bad investment of sorts—that her prioritization of status and independence has backfired, as she is now in debt and must trade whatever she's acquired. Basically, in the absence of deep relationships, the lady has to offer something to people in order to get them to hang out with her:

- First, the speaker says that the lady has accumulated "some interest." This might indicate that she is somewhat *interesting*, but "interest" is also a financial term for money that accumulates on a loan or investment before it's paid back.
    - The phrase thus suggests that the lady has acquired "some interest" on all the bits and bobs left to her (the "ideas, old gossip, oddments of all things" from line 4).
- Next, the speaker says that when people visit the lady they take various curiosities away with them. The speaker describes the items her guests take as "gain," another financial term for something acquired (a net positive).
    - The phrase "take [...] away," meanwhile, suggests loss; whatever spoils the lady has acquired are gradually given over to her visitors. She's giving away all her treasured gossip and ideas in exchange for momentary companionship.

The assonance of long /ay/ sounds in line 15 adds emphasis to this statement:

> And takes strange gain away:

The brevity of this line (which is noticeably shorter than the one that comes before it) also reinforces the atmosphere of loss and emptiness as the speaker's visitors carry her life's work away with them.

Also note that the figures that the speaker describes visiting the lady are referred to as "one" ("and now you pay one [...] one comes to you"). This echoes the previous section of the poem, wherein the lady tries to avoid ending up with "one" boring man:

- The reappearance of "one" might indicate that now she must entice such average men to spend time with her by offering them the tidbits she has accumulated.
- This is an example of situational irony, as roles have apparently been reversed; whereas "bright" figures once sought out the lady and gave her items, she now must entice them and they take things from her.

This passage contains a great deal of apostrophe; the speaker's tone is accusatory, focusing all attention and criticism of the lady through the insistant repetition of the word "you." Plosive sounds (which release air from the mouth when pronounced) fill these lines as well. For example, the speaker says, "you richly pay. / You are a person of some interest, one comes to you." Such harsh sounds increase the derisive feel of the speaker's address—almost as if the speaker is spitting criticisms at the lady.

LINES 16-17

Trophies fished up; some curious suggestion;
Fact that leads nowhere; and a tale for two,

The speaker goes on to detail the "strange gain" that the lady offers her guests—all that the scrap information that has "float[ed] up" during her conversations over the years:

- First, the speaker lists "trophies fished up," perhaps a reference to records of the lady's past relationships with prominent figures (maybe she takes out photographs with or letters from famous people, for example). The fact that these trophies are "fished up," dredged up from the bottom of the ocean, suggests that her celebrated achievements are old and irrelevant.
- Next comes "some curious suggestion," which could be interpreted as a strange, vague idea whose value is up for debate. Indeed, the speaker goes on to say that she offers inconsequential knowledge, or "Fact that leads nowhere."
- And, finally, she offers her guests romantic tales that are full of mystical potential but never lead anywhere.

In short, according to the speaker, the "strange gain[s]" that the

lady offers her guests are rather useless and inconsequential.

LINES 18-21

Pregnant with mandrakes, or with something else
That might prove useful and yet never proves,
That never fits a corner or shows use,
Or finds its hour upon the loom of days:

The speaker uses a series of metaphors to elaborate on the "tale for two" that the lady offers her visitors. The story is "pregnant with mandrakes," an intriguing phrase:

- "Pregnant" can simply mean "full," but the world naturally brings to mind reproduction.
- Mandrakes, used in traditional healing, are also associated with fertility.
- The speaker, then, is perhaps referencing the lady's failure to marry and reproduce.

Whatever the case, this image adds to the sense, present throughout the poem, of potential without *fulfillment*—of something that "might prove useful and yet never proves."

- The repetition in this phrase reinforces the speaker's point: that all the lady's "suggestion[s]," "facts," and "tale[s]" suggest a possible purpose or outcome that never actually arrives.

This "tale" can be taken as a metaphor for the lady's relationships. At the end of the day, they don't lead anywhere meaningful, and their true purpose—aside from shallow amusement, perhaps—is unclear. This is part of the situational irony that runs throughout this poem: the woman has tried to avoid an empty marriage but ends up with only meaningless, surface-level relationships that never develop or produce anything of value.

The speaker's dense, complex statements in these lines almost read like a riddle. Note how these lines are packed with repetition—parallelism, diacope, and polyptoton, to be specific:

> Pregnant with mandrakes, or with something else
> That might prove useful and yet never proves,
> That never fits a corner or shows use,

The strange, almost nonsensical, phrasing of these lines reflects the ridiculousness of the lady's interactions (as well as the impenetrability of their actual purpose).

The last line of this passage is particularly dense:

> Or finds its hour upon the loom of days:

The phrase "its hour upon" is lifted from Shakespeare's play *Macbeth*. In his soliloquy on his wife's suicide, Macbeth describes death as a "poor player / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage."

The allusion to this famous speech brings to mind some of the play's main themes, including a tragically doomed relationship and a woman's blind ambition resulting in her madness and downfall. Moreover, this speech in particular argues for the meaninglessness of life, thus subtly reinforcing the speaker's argument that the lady's life's work is without purpose.

LINES 22-26

The tarnished, gaudy, wonderful old work;
Idols and ambergris and rare inlays,
These are your riches, your great store; and yet
For all this sea-hoard of deciduous things,
Strange woods half sodden, and new brighter stuff:

The speaker continues to describe the lady's collection of odds and ends, now characterizing them as aged and ornate. The speaker lists some of the items that she owns:

- Sacred devotional objects ("idols");
- Decorative items with complex inlaid designs;
- And "ambergris" (waxy masses produced by sperm whales that are found floating in the sea, considered a wonder of the natural world since its exact biological function is unknown).

On the one hand, these items are rare and unique and thus showcase the woman's status. On the other hand, according to the speaker's previous statements, they go unused in her home, unable to fulfill whatever their purpose may be. The polysyndeton here makes the list feel unnecessarily long ("Idols and ambergris and rare inlays"), giving the impression that she has an endless inventory of fancy, pointless goods.

The speaker refers to these items as her "riches" and her "great store," driving home the point that this collection is the lady's greatest achievement and most valued possession. However, in this same line (line 24), the speaker begins to introduce a caveat; "and yet" suggests a drawback or limitation.

The speaker then refers to this supposedly magnificent collection in a less flattering light—as a "sea-hoard of deciduous things." This is another dense phrase that requires some slow parsing:

- "Hoard" commonly describes an unnecessary stockpile, giving this description a negative tone and suggesting that the lady is selfish.
- "Sea-hoard," meanwhile, brings to mind a shipwreck, reviving the metaphor that compares the lady to the Sargasso Sea and thus likening her belongings to random plant life and ocean debris.
- "Deciduous" refers to trees that lose their leaves each year and symbolizes impermanence here. In

other words, the speaker is saying that her items are always coming and going, or that they don't last.

The speaker goes on to compare the lady's treasures to "Strange woods half sodden," a phrase that brings to mind planks that are damaged from being tossed about the sea. The speaker is reminding the audience that the lady's objects have tarnished and lost value under her care.

The speaker does acknowledge that there is also "new brighter stuff" in the mix (recalling the "bright ships" of line 3). Still, at this point, the audience is well aware that these promising items and the relationships that they signify never lead anywhere, so there is little hope that they will remain shining with potential value.

LINES 27-30

In the slow float of differing light and deep,
No! there is nothing! In the whole and all,
Nothing that's quite your own.
Yet this is you.

As the poem comes to a close, the speaker lays out the limitations of the lady's collection—and of the lifestyle it represents. Among all of her delightful goods—the "sea-hoard" that the speaker has just detailed—there aren't any items that are truly the lady's own. In other words, none of these stories, items, or bits of knowledge that she has accumulated originated with her; they all initially belonged to others. What's more, these scraps do not stay with her, but constantly circulate among the people who visit.

The speaker ultimately claims that the lady's cache of scrap knowledge represents or defines her, remarking, "Yet this is you." The collection's impermanence and lack of originality thus suggest that she has no true personal identity. Instead, she is defined by her shallow relationships with others.

Before that scathing ending, however, the speaker refers to the lady's collection as "the slow float of differing light and deep":

- This continues the metaphor that compares the lady to the Sargasso Sea.
    - Here, the collection seems to have little substance and is instead made up of light and dark.
    - The items that "float up" for the lady's amusement are now "slow," indicating that the acquisition of new knowledge (and the opportunity to pass it along) is no longer fast-paced and exciting.
- Also note how assonant long /oh/ sounds draw out the phrase "slow float" itself, emphasizing the image of leisurely drifting (in contrast with an epic, swirling sea, for example).

Next, note the repetition (specifically diacope) in the speaker's impassioned outburst:

No! there is nothing! In the whole and all,
Nothing that's quite your own.

This repetition creates a strong, insistent tone as the speaker lays out the poem's final criticisms of the lady's lifestyle.

The speaker also juxtaposes "the whole and all" (the lady's vast collection) with "nothing" to exaggerate just how much junk she owns and how little personal meaning it carries—implicitly casting her as a wasteful over-consumer.

The poem's final line thus contains a key irony: the lady avoids marriage, fearing an unstimulating relationship that might restrict her personal freedoms and ambitions. However, she has ended up with only empty relationships that are now "slow" and cyclical (i.e., dull and repetitive). And according to the speaker, she is *defined* by these relationships, leaving her without an individual identity or personal fulfillment.

A note on the meter of these lines: while this poem generally follows iambic pentameter, the last two lines are written in trimeter and dimeter, respectively (they contain 3 and 2 feet, rather than the customary 5). They *could* have been combined to maintain a five-stress-per-line rhythm. Instead, the speaker chose to have the line lengths dwindle over the course of the poem's ending.

In this way, the words on the page enact the deterioration and absence that occurs as the lady's collection is taken away and her social life slows down. The shortening line lengths give the impression of increasing emptiness as the speaker describes the meaninglessness of the lifestyle that the lady has spent her entire life cultivating.

SYMBOLS

MONEY AND FINANCE

The speaker uses language related to money and finance throughout to symbolize the lady's relationships, quality of life, and value in the eyes of her social class.

At first, the lady inherits special knowledge from others—the "dimmed wares of price" that she fully owns, or attains "in fee." These are the various trinkets, ideas, and "gossip" that people metaphorically "pay" her with when visiting. These items are unique and moderately valuable, increasing the lady's worth to suggest that exchanging ideas with others increases her social standing and brings joy and excitement to her life.

At the same time, they suggest a certain shallow, transactional tinge to her relationships: she is interested not in people for who they are, but for what they can offer her. The repeated

references to currency and trading contribute to the overall impression that the lady is vapid—totally preoccupied with materiality and appearances.

However, after a period of time, the lady must herself "pay" for her decision to collect pointless items rather than investing in something intrinsically valuable (i.e., personal and romantic relationships). Indeed, the lady's collection (her "great store," another term suggesting a hoard of money) degrades and dwindles as she shows off these items and gives them away—in order to entice people to spend time with her, it is implied. The speaker likens this process to paying out the moderate "interest" that has accumulated as she borrows (or loans) knowledge from others.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "in fee"
- **Line 5:** "wares of price"
- **Line 13:** "you pay one," "you richly pay"
- **Line 14:** "some interest"
- **Line 15:** "gain"
- **Line 24:** "your riches, your great store"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLUSION

This poem is filled with allusions. For starters, the poem's title is translated from French as "Portrait of a Lady," which is also the title of a poem by T. S. Eliot, published the year before Pound's poem appeared in print:

- Eliot's "Portrait" also addresses an aging lady who has spent her life engaging in meaningless conversation and empty cultural activities.
- Eliot's speaker, too, dislikes and derides the lady (though more subtly), but with the lady's help, he realizes that he is headed for a similar fate.

Both Eliot's poem and this on also e allude to a novel by Henry James entitled "The Portrait of a Lady" (1881):

- James's novel follows a young woman who is also determined to maintain her independence and freedom, refusing marriage proposals as she travels and seeks fulfillment.
- However, she places much emphasis on high culture and sophistication, which leads her to marry an interesting but vile man. She ultimately ends up in just the sort of loveless and restrictive marriage that she hoped to avoid.

By referencing these stories, the speaker reduces the lady to a trope or "type," encouraging the audience to see the speaker's statements as a commentary on a wider trend (i.e., women pursuing independence over marriage). Invoking such a generalized trope also reinforces the speaker's argument that the lady has no fixed individual identity, but is defined by her relationship to others. Finally, the bleak fate of the other ladies suggests that the life of this "femme" will also end in tragedy and loneliness.

The speaker's mention of the "Sargasso Sea" might also be another subtle allusion, this time to Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*:

- This 1870 novel devotes a chapter to the Sargasso, which describes the region as a dense "carpet" of seaweed, among which all sorts of debris is found floating.
- Much like unmarried upper-class women, apparently, the Sargasso has been a popular muse for writers. It is typically imagined as a region of mystery and intrigue, so thick with refuse that it is difficult to navigate, possibly trapping ships for long periods. This is an inaccurate depiction of the sea, which is calm and easy to traverse, but the speaker's description of a dense and curious shipwreck calls on this tradition.
- References to the Sargasso suggest that the lady is bogged down by all of the discarded information that she collects. This allusion also reinforces the *uselessness* of the items that she has collected; they seem to gather with her when no one else wants them, akin to the debris that currents naturally dump in the Sargasso.

Finally, this poem contains several vague references to the Elizabethan Era (1558-1603), a period in the late Renaissance that is generally considered the "Golden Age" of English culture:

- The speaker references common imagery from the time, including a "loom," "mandrakes," and "ambergris."
- Pound also lifts the phrase "its hour upon" from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1606)—in particular, Macbeth's soliloquy on his wife's suicide.
- Even the use of blank iambic pentameter can be seen as invoking this celebrated age of English literature.

While perhaps not true *allusions*, these references align Pound with the greats of literary history, giving the poem added weight and significance. And as the lady constantly dredges up weathered "trophies" of her most impressive relationships, these references reinforce the curiosity and greatness of an earlier time—one that can never be recovered.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Sargasso Sea"
- **Line 18:** "mandrakes"
- **Line 21:** "loom"
- **Line 23:** "ambergris"

APOSTROPHE

The speaker directly addresses the lady throughout the poem, though she is unable to respond. This apostrophe allows the speaker to confront the lady—the source of the speaker's outrage—and thus makes the speaker's emotions and criticisms feel more authentic and immediate.

To that end, the speaker's use of personal pronouns ("you" and "I") and the frank address of the lady suggest that the two have a close relationship—or at least a sense of familiarity. As such, apostrophe heightens the impression that the speaker has special insight into the lady's goings-on.

And yet, at the same time, the lady's inability to respond limits the audience's understanding of her life to the speaker's perspective. In other words, readers only hear the speaker's side of things; the speaker's judgment is never called into question. Apostrophe enables the speaker's impassioned, highly critical tone and one-sided viewpoint, which might create the impression of bias. The speaker might not be all that reliable.

The lady's inability to respond might also be seen as reflecting a lack of power. Locked into her current role for years, she has little say in how her peers view and interact with her.

Finally, the use of the second-person perspective (i.e., the speaker talks to "you") puts the audience in the lady's position. As a result, the audience receives the speaker's attacks directly, increasing the emotional impact of the poem and encouraging the audience to sympathize with the lady.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Your," "you"
- **Line 2:** "you"
- **Line 3:** "you"
- **Line 6:** "you"
- **Line 7:** "You"
- **Line 8:** "You"
- **Line 11:** "you"
- **Line 13:** "you," "you"
- **Line 14:** "You," "you"
- **Line 24:** "your," "your"
- **Line 29:** "your"
- **Line 30:** "you"

ASSONANCE

Assonance appears throughout this poem, adding musicality and emphasizing certain words and ideas.

On one level, assonance simply helps to hold the audience's attention and keep them engaged in the poem. Sometimes the repeating sounds become so dense that the audience must in fact slow down. For instance, note how all the assonance of /oo/ and /eh/ sounds (plus consonance and repetition) turns lines 19-20 into a riddle-like tongue-twister:

> That might prove useful and yet never proves,
> That never fits a corner or shows use,

These lines—which describe the emptiness of the lady's interactions and the ideas she offers—are particularly metaphorical and dense with meaning. By encouraging the audience to linger on these lines (even drawing them out with exaggerated long vowel sounds), assonance pushes the audience to sit with the speaker's argument.

Assonance also places additional emphasis on syllables that receive metrical stress, accentuating the poem's rhythms, as in lines 27-28:

> In the slow float of differing light and deep,
> No! there is nothing! In the whole and all,

In this case, notice how those long /oh/ sounds fall on, and thus emphasize, deviations from the poem's overall iambic (da-DUM) meter, landing on stressed beats that, were the poem stricter in its meter, wouldn't be there:

> In the slow float of [...]
> No! there is nothing! In the whole [...]

Assonance thus reinforces the chaotic atmosphere as the speaker passionately denounces the lady's decisions.

Finally, repeating vowel sounds can shift the poem's mood. For example, the speaker's description of an undesirable marriage contains short /uh/ sounds:

> One dull man, dulling and uxorious,
> One average mind—with one thought less, each year.

The repeating /uh/ sounds are drab and clipped, creating a plodding effect that quickly becomes monotonous. They reappear a few lines later as the speaker describes the lady's life ("You are a person of some interest, one comes to you"). The resulting dull, repetitive mood suggests that the lady's life ultimately carries the same tedium and lack of variety that she tried to avoid.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "gossip," "oddments," "all"

- **Line 5:** "knowledge"
- **Line 8:** "to," "usual"
- **Line 9:** "One," "dull," "dulling," "uxorious"
- **Line 10:** "One," "one"
- **Line 14:** "of," "some," "one," "comes"
- **Line 15:** "takes," "strange," "gain," "away"
- **Line 16:** "up," "some," "curious," "suggestion"
- **Line 17:** "Fact," "that"
- **Line 19:** "prove," "useful," "yet," "never," "proves"
- **Line 20:** "never," "use"
- **Line 21:** "loom," "days"
- **Line 23:** "inlays"
- **Line 24:** "your," "your"
- **Line 25:** "For," "hoard"
- **Line 27:** "slow," "float"
- **Line 28:** "No," "whole"
- **Line 29:** "own"

ASYNDETON

The speaker constantly shifts from one image or idea to the next without any conjunctions to mark such transitions, a technique known as asyndeton. This device produces a more conversational tone, as the speaker seems to provide details and commentary directly upon thinking of them. That is, the poem sounds like it's spewing directly from the speaker's mind in real-time.

For example, lines 9-10 read:

> One dull man, dulling and uxorious,
> One average mind [...]

This phrasing comes across much more natural than something like, "One dull man, who is dulling and uxorious, and with one average mind."

Asyndeton also gives the impression of an impassioned and insistent speaker chomping at the bit to get the next thought out. For example, take lines 27-29, in which the speaker describes the woman's lack of personal identity:

> In the slow float of differing light and deep,
> No! there is nothing! In the whole and all,
> Nothing that's quite your own.

The speaker seemingly cannot wait to scold her, bursting in with an insult right in the middle of another train of thought. This device thus helps to convey the speaker's deep disapproval of the woman.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "Sea, / London"
- **Line 4:** "Ideas, old gossip, oddments of all things,"
- **Lines 9-10:** "One dull man, dulling and uxorious, / One average mind"
- **Line 11:** "patient, I"
- **Line 14:** "interest, one"
- **Lines 19-20:** "proves, / That"
- **Line 22:** "tarnished, gaudy, wonderful old work"
- **Lines 23-24:** "rare inlays, / These are your riches, your great store"
- **Lines 27-29:** "deep, / No! there is nothing! In the whole and all, / Nothing"

CAESURA

This poem contains plenty of caesurae, which help to keep the poem's meter from becoming too rigid and repetitive (something that would detract from the poem's conversational feel). For example, here's a look at the pauses in lines 11-12:

> Oh, || you are patient, || I have seen you sit
> Hours, || where something might have floated up.

As readers can see in the above lines, caesurae call attention to individual words and phrases by setting them apart both visually (via punctuation) and rhythmically (via pauses). In doing so, internal punctuation gives the speaker's criticisms even more force and emphasis, as in "No! there is nothing!"

In a couple of cases, this effect reinforces a contrast that the speaker has set up. Take a look at line 6, for instance:

> Great minds have sought you—lacking someone else.

Here, the dash creates a clear division between the speaker's *compliment* (that smart people want to visit the lady) and the *insult* that it abruptly becomes (that those smart people only visit the lady when no one else is free). The pause of the caesura heightens the audience's sense of surprise and therefore the impact of the speaker's jab. In this way, caesurae often contribute to the speaker's harsh tone and forceful critique of the lady.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** ",," ","
- **Line 6:** "—"
- **Line 8:** "."
- **Line 9:** ","
- **Line 10:** "—," ","
- **Line 11:** ",," ","
- **Line 12:** ","
- **Line 13:** "," ","
- **Line 14:** ","

- **Line 16:** ";"
- **Line 17:** ";"
- **Line 18:** ","
- **Line 22:** ",," ",,"
- **Line 24:** ",," ";"
- **Line 26:** ","
- **Line 28:** "!," "!"

CONSONANCE

Consonance appears throughout the poem, working much like assonance. On its most basic level, repeating sounds create musicality and sonic interest, which keeps the audience engaged.

This device is particularly dense throughout the speaker's descriptions of the items that the lady collects, her "Wonderful old work; / Idols and ambergris and rare inlays." The complex, interwoven groups of repeating sounds slow the audience down—perhaps even requiring rereading. The beauty, intricacy, and confusion that arise from such dense clusters of similar sounds might reflect the mysterious allure of the pieces that the lady collects.

Consonance also pops up on a smaller scale, as in "Yes, you richly pay." Such brief but punchy examples of consonance place extra force behind words with repeating sounds—especially when they coincide with alliteration, as is the case here. In turn, the speaker's criticisms of the lady come across as increasingly forceful and assured.

Like assonance, consonance shifts the atmosphere of the poem to reflect the speaker's claims. For instance, sibilance appears throughout the first several lines of the poem, where it creates a lyrical and dramatic feel, subtly mimicking the ocean that these lines describe:

> Your mind and you are our Sargasso Sea,
> London has swept about you this score years

The hiss of repeating /s/ sounds makes the seafaring scene all the more vivid for the audience, calling to mind the whirr of wind coming off the water or a steady spray of waves. Elsewhere, cacophonous sounds magnify a menacing tone as the speaker sharply criticizes the lady, as in, "yet never proves, / That never fits a corner or shows use."

In short, consonance subtly manipulates the poem's atmosphere through sound to reinforce the ideas it presents.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "are," "our," "Sargasso," "Sea"
- **Line 2:** "has," "swept," "about," "this," "score," "years"
- **Line 3:** "bright," "ships," "left," "this," "that"
- **Line 4:** "Ideas," "old," "oddments," "things"
- **Line 5:** "Strange," "spars," "wares," "price"
- **Line 6:** "minds," "sought," "someone," "else"
- **Line 7:** "second," "always"
- **Line 8:** "thing"
- **Line 9:** "One," "man"
- **Line 10:** "One," "mind," "one"
- **Line 11:** "seen," "sit"
- **Line 12:** "Hours," "something," "up"
- **Line 13:** "you," "pay," "Yes," "you," "pay"
- **Line 14:** "person," "some," "interest," "comes," "to"
- **Line 15:** "takes," "strange"
- **Line 16:** "Trophies," "fished," "some," "curious," "suggestion"
- **Line 17:** "tale," "two"
- **Line 18:** "Pregnant," "mandrakes"
- **Line 19:** "prove," "never," "proves"
- **Line 20:** "never," "corner," "or," "shows," "use"
- **Line 21:** "Or," "finds," "hour"
- **Line 22:** "tarnished," "gaudy," "wonderful," "old," "work"
- **Line 23:** "Idols," "ambergris," "rare," "inlays"
- **Line 24:** "are," "your," "riches," "your," "great," "store"
- **Line 25:** "For," "hoard," "deciduous," "things"
- **Line 26:** "Strange," "woods," "sodden"
- **Line 28:** "No," "nothing"
- **Line 29:** "Nothing"
- **Line 30:** "Yet," "you"

IRONY

This poem contains an overarching situational irony: the speaker implies that the lady has attempted to avoid a dull life only to end up with one as a result of those very attempts.

Although she was never the first choice for a partner to the "great minds" who seek her out, the lady "preferred" this second-rate treatment to a monotonous marriage. She has avoided being stuck with "one dull man" who dotes on his wife without adding real substance or stimulation to the marriage, which would only grow more boring over time. Seeking independence and excitement, the lady focuses her attention on cultivating relationships with important people, advancing her status and collecting curious bits of knowledge.

However, 20 years down the line, the lady must now entice people to spend time with her by offering them the unique tidbits she has amassed. Or, as the speaker puts it, "one comes to you / And takes strange gain away." In turn, the lady is seen as little more than a junk shop for London's upper crust to buy, sell, and trade useless artifacts.

What's more, the speaker argues that none of the relationships the lady forms have any real depth; the "tale for two" she offers her guests never leads anywhere. In other words, the lady was determined to resist a monotonous marriage with empty

praise, but she is left with only shallow social relationships—and with people who don't truly value her, at that.

There is another dimension to this irony, too: the exciting trinkets that she collects grow "old" and "tarnished," "dulling" much like the husband she feared being stuck with. Moreover, the insights that she offers her guests were never hers to begin with, and they are slowly taken away from her.

The speaker claims that, out of her entire collection, there is "nothing that's quite your own." Still, according to the speaker, this fleeting and meaningless stockpile of information is her defining characteristic—all that she has ("Yet this is you").

The impermanence and unoriginality of the lady's ideas, experiences, and relationships suggest that she actually *hasn't* formed an identity of her own. Instead, she is defined by her relationships to others. Again, exactly the kind of dynamic she sought to avoid by remaining single.

Essentially, the irony that the speaker lays out presents the lady's life as a misguided attempt at freedom and independence. In doing so, this device strengthens the speaker's argument that prioritizing status and excitement is not a sure-fire way of attaining independence and fulfillment. In fact, holding such a value system might backfire tragically.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-10:** "Tragical? / No. You preferred it to the usual thing: / One dull man, dulling and uxorious, / One average mind—with one thought less, each year."
- **Line 13:** "now you pay one. Yes, you richly pay."
- **Lines 17-21:** " a tale for two, / Pregnant with mandrakes, or with something else / That might prove useful and yet never proves, / That never fits a corner or shows use, / Or finds its hour upon the loom of days"
- **Lines 28-30:** "No! there is nothing! In the whole and all, / Nothing that's quite your own. / Yet this is you."

REPETITION

This poem contains several forms of repetition, which call attention to important words and often mimic the ideas those words describe. In turn, this device allows the speaker to build a strong, persuasive argument against the lady's lifestyle and values.

Repetition is most concentrated in lines 9-14, which describe the dull, unfulfilling marriage that the lady avoids at all costs, as well as the price she must "pay" for seeking prestige and excitement in its stead. First, the speaker repeats "one" and "dull"/"dulling" to illustrate the lady's fear of being trapped with only a sole, boring conversational partner:

> One dull man, dulling and uxorious,
> One average mind—with one thought less, each year.

These examples of diacope/polyptoton call attention to the key attributes she detests: a lack of variety ("one") and intellectual stimulation ("dull"). The repetition also allows the text to enact the limitations it describes, taking on a restricted, repetitive vocabulary.

The speaker also repeats "you" throughout this passage. For instance, the speaker says:

> And now you pay one. Yes, you richly pay.
> You are a person of some interest, one comes to you

The barrage of "you" statements repeatedly casts the woman as the active subject in her own downfall, suggesting that she is to blame. To put it more simply, this use of repetition feels accusatory. The speaker's second-person point of view puts the reader in the lady's shoes, increasing the harshness of the statements as they feel directed at the audience.

This poem also features parallelism when the speaker introduces the lady's role in London's upper-class social scene:

> London has swept about you [...]
> And bright ships left you this or that [...]
> Great minds have sought you [...]

Here, parallel grammar reinforces the woman's passivity: various people and forces act *upon* her, things happen *to* her, and she has no control or personal voice. Given the speaker's commentary that follows, this device strengthens the argument that the woman has not chosen a productive lifestyle for herself.

Finally, this poem contains one example of polysyndeton, which appears in line 23: "Idols and ambergris and rare inlays." The addition of unnecessary conjunctions extends the list, exaggerating the quantity of beautiful and rare but ultimately meaningless items the lady owns.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "London has swept about you"
- **Line 3:** "bright ships left you"
- **Line 6:** "Great minds have sought you"
- **Line 9:** "One," "dull," "dulling"
- **Line 10:** "One," "one"
- **Line 11:** "you," "you"
- **Line 13:** "you," "you"
- **Line 14:** "You," "you"
- **Line 19:** "prove," "useful," "proves"
- **Line 20:** "use"
- **Line 23:** "and," "and"
- **Line 28:** "nothing"
- **Line 29:** "Nothing"

RHETORICAL QUESTION

"Portrait d'une Femme" features one rhetorical question, which appears at the end of line 7: "Tragical?"

Rhetorical questions naturally prompt readers to consider their answer—in this case, whether the woman's second-rate treatment is tragic. The line break that follows reinforces the pause indicated by the end of the question, therefore encouraging the audience to stop and mull it over.

The speaker has just explained that the lady is always a second-choice of companion for the people she admires and that her undesirable, powerless role in London society life is longstanding. Therefore, many audience members would naturally conclude that yes, it *is* tragic that the woman has been treated in this way—tossed about by important people in upper-class social circles and discarded.

However, in the following line, the speaker firmly responds, "No. You preferred it to the usual thing," and goes on to describe a boring marriage that the woman has tried to avoid. Therefore, according to the speaker, she does not deserve pity, as she chose this lifestyle over another, more traditional option.

The rhetorical question and the answer that follows thus reveal the speaker's waning sympathy for the woman as a result of her decision not to marry, which clearly troubles the speaker greatly. It also creates a sense of surprise, increasing the harshness of the speaker's reply, since the evidence revealed up until this point might lead audience members to sympathize with the lady.

The speaker is then able to guide the audience *away* from this view, firmly asserting that they should *not* see her life as a tragedy but as a series of bad decisions and misguided attempts at independence—her own poor choice.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "Tragical?"

METAPHOR

"Portrait d'une Femme" is a highly metaphorical poem. In fact, many of the speaker's descriptions can be interpreted as having a secondary, figurative meaning. The earliest metaphor that appears in this poem, however, is explicit, directly comparing the lady to an ocean:

> Your mind and you are our Sargasso Sea,

The speaker goes on to explain that many important people have visited ("swept about") the lady and left her various scraps ("this or that"). The Sargasso has been a popular image in literature, especially after Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1881). Creative writers most often describe it as a mystical area that's so bogged down with kelp and other debris that it's nearly impossible to traverse (though this isn't really the case).

The speaker's comparison of the lady to the Sargasso Sea evokes beauty, mystery, and wonder. But it also suggests that her mind is a sort of wasteland for the unneeded gossip, off-hand comments, and half-baked ideas of important people.

In general, metaphors give readers a concrete reference point for abstract concepts. For instance, the speaker likens the lady's decision to pursue status over marriage to a poor investment when she must "pay" for her choices—she owes "some interest" and visitors take her "gain."

In many cases, these comparisons put vivid images in the audience's mind, creating a more exciting reading experience. For instance, the speaker describes her collection of unique but useless knowledge and relationships as "this sea-hoard of deciduous things, / Strange woods half sodden, and new brighter stuff." For most readers, a weathered ship with curious spoils is more engaging to read about than a lady waiting around for an intellectual to share irrelevant information.

Finally, the poem's highly metaphorical style allows the speaker to criticize the lady indirectly. In other words, the speaker doesn't have to explicitly say certain things, as openly insulting an acquaintance (especially to the degree that is implied here) would be considered very rude and unacceptable in the upper-class social circles that the speaker and the lady belong to. For instance, instead of explicitly saying that her relationships are shallow and she wastes their potential for meaning, the speaker says that the lady offers her companions "a tale for two" that never goes anywhere.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-3:** "Your mind and you are our Sargasso Sea, / London has swept about you this score years / And bright ships left you this or that in fee"
- **Line 12:** "where something might have floated up"
- **Lines 13-15:** "now you pay one. Yes, you richly pay. / You are a person of some interest, one comes to you / And takes strange gain away:"
- **Lines 17-21:** "a tale for two, / Pregnant with mandrakes, or with something else / That might prove useful and yet never proves, / That never fits a corner or shows use, / Or finds its hour upon the loom of days"
- **Line 24:** "These are your riches, your great store"
- **Lines 25-27:** "this sea-hoard of deciduous things, / Strange woods half sodden, and new brighter stuff: / In the slow float of differing light and deep"

VOCABULARY

Sargasso Sea (Line 1) - A portion of the North Atlantic Ocean between the Azores and Caribbean, bounded by four currents

that fill it with both plant life and assorted flotsam. The Sea is named after the sargassum seaweed that grows abundantly there.

Score (Line 2) - Twenty.

In fee (Line 3) - In payment.

Oddments (Line 4) - Scraps or remnants (especially the leftover pieces of a larger item or set).

Spars (Line 5) - The poles used as the masts of ships. Here, the word is used metaphorically to suggest that the lady has collected fragments of knowledge like the Sargasso Sea collects bits of shipwrecks.

Dimmed (Line 5) - Having lost their brightness and luster. On a figurative level, this term suggests that the lady's worn-out odds and ends of gossip have lost the initial "sparkle" that made them exciting.

Wares (Line 5) - Goods, things for sale.

Of price (Line 5) - Expensive, pricy.

Dulling (Line 9) - Growing duller, or making someone else feel duller!

Uxorious (Line 9) - Excessively doting and attentive towards one's wife.

Gain (Line 15) - An acquisition. Here, the word suggests that the lady's visitors come away with bizarre and not-very-valuable scraps of information.

Curious suggestion (Line 16) - An unusual, quaint idea or hint.

Pregnant with mandrakes (Line 18) - In folklore, mandrakes—a kind of root that often grows in the shape of a little person—had strange, magical powers, and were sometimes associated with illicit sex (see John Donne's "Go and catch a falling star" for one famous example). The speaker's allusion here suggests that the lady might offer some juicy-but-sinister gossip, or just fantastical tales that don't amount to much.

Tarnished (Line 22) - Having lost its shine and luster; declining in respectability.

Idols (Line 23) - A sacred depiction or representation of a god, used in ritual/worship. "Idols" are also people and objects that are deeply loved and respected. The lady's "idols" are likely not literal objects, but the important friends she "adds to her collection" but has no real relationship with.

Ambergris (Line 23) - A hard, waxy substance naturally produced by sperm whales during digestion. Used in traditional medicine and perfume manufacturing, ambergris was very expensive and rare. Here, the word suggests the lady's rich "treasure-house" of knowledge and acquaintances.

Inlays (Line 23) - A decorative technique in which a material is embedded into the surface of an object in a particular pattern (or an object with such a pattern).

Sea-hoard (Line 25) - A hoard is a stockpile of something—usually money, valuable artifacts, or prized information. The speaker refers to the woman's collection of useless knowledge and acquaintances as a "sea-hoard," calling to mind a shipwreck with plenty of spoils.

Deciduous (Line 25) - Shedding its leaves each year. On a figurative level, the term suggests impermanence: the lady's knowledge and friendships are ever-changing and don't last.

Sodden (Line 26) - Water-logged; soaked.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Portrait d'une Femme" is a blank verse poem, meaning that it follows a consistent meter but has no set rhyme scheme. Blank verse allows the speaker's address to the lady to more closely resemble natural speech—and perhaps aligns the poem with great works of literature from the Elizabethan Era, which frequently used this form.

The poem is one long stanza of 30 lines. The lack of stanza breaks makes the speaker's critical remarks feel like an endless tirade. What's more, the vast majority of the poem's lines are end-stopped, giving the speaker's insults weight.

- Occasionally, though, enjambment creates anticipation or emphasizes an important idea, such as when the speaker describes watching the lady "sit / Hours" waiting to snap up a bit of gossip: the extension of this clause over the line break evokes her tragic "patien[ce]."

There are also several lines that are noticeably shorter than the others: lines 15, 29, and 30. The blank space and shortened rhythms here give the impression of absence and loss as the lady's stockpile of special knowledge—and the identity that it stands in for—deteriorates.

The poem's structure thus reinforces the speaker's charges that the lady's life experiences, ideas, and sense of self are shallow.

METER

"Portrait d'une Femme" is written in iambic pentameter, meaning that each line uses five iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm. This is one of the most common meters in English-language poetry.

Iambic rhythms are known for mimicking the natural rises and falls of speech. Take line 1 as an example:

Your mind | and you | are our | Sargas- | so Sea,

This makes the speaker's voice sound elegant and poetic, but

also natural and real, as if readers were in the room, listening to the speaker person archly insulting this lady.

Breaks from the meter add to this conversational effect and draw attention to important moments. For example, as the poem draws to a close, the speaker exclaims:

> No! there | is no- | thing! In | the whole | and all,
> Nothing | that's quite | your own

Both of these lines start, not with an iamb, but its opposite: a trochee, a foot with a DUM-da rhythm. These initial stresses emphasize the words "no" and "nothing," terms that underline the lady's lack of purpose, fulfillment, and identity.

Overall, the poem's meter helps the speaker's voice to sound compelling and elegant, but also natural and authentic.

RHYME SCHEME

"Portrait d'une Femme" is written in blank verse, so it doesn't follow a particular rhyme scheme. However, the poem does contain occasional end rhymes, which give the poem some subtle music and draw attention to important moments.

For instance, check out lines 13-15:

> And now you pay one. Yes, you richly pay.
> You are a person of some interest, one comes to you
> And takes strange gain away:

Here, the speaker hints that, while the lady may "pay" her visitors in "strange gains," those people always go "away" and leave her alone in the end.

More and more of these rhyme pairs appear toward the end of the poem: "comes to you" and "tale for two" in lines 14 and 17, "loom of days" and "rare inlays" in lines 21 and 23. These rhymes give the speaker's last lines a riddling, musical tone that heightens the poem's drama: it's as if the speaker is singing a (rather cruel) lament for this poor woman's wasted life.

SPEAKER

The speaker of this poem is cutting, highly critical, and insistent, occasionally interrupting a train of thought with impassioned outbursts. But despite this distinctive tone, readers don't learn much about the speaker directly.

In one reading, the speaker is a version of Ezra Pound himself. Pound openly criticized the women of the London arts scene, feeling they were overtaking and degrading "high culture." And the lady the speaker describes bears some resemblance to Florence Farr, a literary friend (or perhaps frenemy) Pound made in London.

One thing is clear: the speaker is a member of London's intelligentsia, someone who can identify expensive, specialized objects like "ambergris and rare inlays," and who's been hanging around with the upper crust for long enough to closely observe this lady's behavior.

The speaker gets increasingly worked up while describing the lady's lifestyle—and especially her decision to pursue prestige and excitement over personal relationships. The speaker sees no meaning and fulfillment in her life, arguing that her ideas are unoriginal and she lacks individual identity. Still, the speaker, too, seems to spend time hobnobbing with socialites and gossiping. In other words, based on what the audience knows of the speaker, this person and the lady actually have rather a lot in common. The intensity of the speaker's attack here might suggest sexism (if one reads the speaker as a man), but also a degree of projected self-hatred.

SETTING

This poem takes place in upper-crust London, perhaps around the turn of the 20th century (when Pound was writing). While there's no setting more specific than that, the speaker's descriptions of all the lady's metaphorical trinkets—bits of gossip or wit imagined as "idols and ambergris and rich inlays"—might also invite readers to imagine her literal home. If the lady's house is anything like her mind, it's a glittering, well-appointed, but ultimately "dull" place. The lady's vast collection of "tarnished, gaudy, wonderful old work" evokes a cluttered, wealthy, artsy house—but also an inner life mostly built from the faded fragments of other people's experiences.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Having innovated and championed (and abandoned) many new techniques and styles, Ezra Pound is widely considered "the father of Modernism." Modernism describes an explosion of radical artistic movements throughout the early 20th century. Its cynical speaker, manipulation of traditional iambic pentameter, ample allusions, and blend of formal and informal tones make "Portrait" a Modernist work.

"Portrait d'Une Femme," published in Pound's 1912 collection *Ripostes*, is also packed with symbolic images and metaphors. Dense, symbolic descriptions are a key feature of Imagism, a movement spearheaded by Pound shortly after this poem was written. Imagists argue that meaning is most effectively conveyed through strong, precise images communicated in simple terms. Though much too complex and emotive to be considered a true imagist work, "Portrait d'une Femme" showcases Pound's mastery of imagist techniques leading up to the movement's founding.

Gertrude Stein, E.E. Cummings, T.S. Eliot, and William Carlos

Williams are often credited alongside Pound for ushering in this radical new wave of poetics, while fiction writers like Virginia Woolf and Henry James experimented with related techniques in their stories and novels.

In fact, this poem's title alludes to James's 1881 novel *The Portrait of a Lady* as well as Eliot's 1912 poem "Portrait of a Lady." However, these works also acknowledge *male* superficiality and criticize wider social trends that encourage the ladies' unfulfilling lives of leisure. Pound's work, on the other hand, functions as a kind of addendum to these stories, arguing that they are not "tragical" since these women chose such lives for themselves.

Williams wrote his own "Portrait of a Lady" in 1920, though this poem focuses mostly on the difficulty of pure expression and connection when sophisticated references enter the mix. Therefore, "Portrait d'une Femme" might be seen as the most hash and decisive condemnation of this "lady"—and certainly the most un-self-conscious.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Portrait d'une Femme" was published shortly after the turn of the 20th century, when women's roles in society were rapidly changing. Throughout the 19th century, Victorian gender roles prescribed that a woman's chief responsibility was to bear children and look after her family. However, as national movements for women's suffrage gained momentum in the UK and the U.S., more women resisted marriage, believing that it would limit their freedom and opportunities. As such, a growing number of young women traveled, sought education, built careers, and prioritized expanding their own horizons over caring for a (patriarchal) family.

In the literary world, this meant more women rose to positions of power and saw their work published—though, to be sure, they still faced heavy discrimination. Pound and many of his male contemporaries were overtly hostile towards this challenge to the status quo. In personal letters and public writings, Pound expressed the belief that women were taking over and degrading literary institutions (and the art world in general) with their poor taste and lack of skill.

Pound wrote "Portrait d'une Femme" during his years in London (1908-1914), where he hobnobbed with the cultural elite. Pound befriended Florence Farr, a pillar of this social scene whom many critics identify as the inspiration behind this poem.

Farr was an actor, director, producer, and activist who wrote a book outlining her feminist views (*Modern Woman*, 1910). Plenty of Farr's biography and writings are well-documented, and they offer an entirely different perspective on her life and identity (from that of the poem's speaker towards its subject).

For example, this poem mocks the emptiness of the lady's spirituality and relationships, which were, indeed, important to Farr. In 1912, Farr sold all of her possessions and moved to Ceylon (contemporary Sri Lanka) to teach at (and ultimately run) a girls' school, fulfilling a commitment she had made to a spiritual leader to support the education of young women in his home country. In short, this poem should not be taken as a purely factual account of her (or any woman's) life!

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Imagist Poetry — Browse the first official anthology of Imagist poetry, edited by Pound and published in 1914. (https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/des-imagistes-an-anthology)
- A Biography of the Poet — Learn more about Ezra Pound's life and works via the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/ezra-pound)
- A Modern Woman's Perspective — Browse "Modern Woman: Her Intentions," a book written by Florence Farr (Pound's possible muse) that outlines her view of female oppression and liberation in the early 20th century. (https://openlibrary.org/books/OL7103350M/Modern_woman)
- Imagining the Sargasso — Read the famous fictionalization of the Sargasso Sea from Jules Verne's "Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea." Note that this is the original (partial) translation from the French that would have been available to English speakers at the time of this poem's publication. (https://www.google.com/books/edition/Twenty_Thousand_Leagues_Under_the_Sea/470XAAAAYAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=Twenty%20Thousand%2
- The New Woman — Read up on how the feminist ideal of "The New Woman" was received in turn-of-the-century literature. (https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/daughters-of-decadence-the-new-woman-in-the-victorian-fin-de-siecle)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER EZRA POUND POEMS

- In a Station of the Metro

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