

Nikolai Karamzin's 1792 sentimentalist story "Poor Liza" aims to portray the inescapable conquering of nature by civilization, an ongoing process inherent in every society since the beginning of the human race. Every facet of the tale, in its outer structure, character development and personalities, plot and setting, from the largest scale to delicate details, paint a conflict between Nature and Civilization with the embodiment of Nature as Liza vs. the embodiment of civilization as Erast.

Karamzin's introduction describing the state of the decrepit and abandoned Simonov monastery immediately sets the stage of the conflict between Nature Vs. Civilization. In a mere two sentences, Karamzin completely summarizes the tension between Nature and Civilization:

"Standing on this hill, you see almost all of Moscow to the right, the terrible mass of houses and churches, which appear before our eyes in the form of a majestic amphitheater: a magnificent picture, especially when the sun is shining on it, when the evening rays burn upon the countless golden cupolas, upon the countless golden crosses rising to the sky! Below, the fertile, dark green, blossoming meadows stretch out, and beyond them, over the yellow sands, the clear river flows, billowing from the light oars of the fishing boats or roaring under the rudders of the massive ships that sail from the fruitful lands of the Russian Empire and provide greedy Moscow with bread." Karamzin illustrates civilization with the words magnificent, terrible and containing countless gold. He paints, nature, however, as the force responsible for civilization's luxury and superfluous, greedy acquiring of material ("mass of houses," "countless golden cupolas," "majestic amphitheater"). Karamzin's depiction indicates the emphasis on the exterior, i.e. material qualities in civilization, (apparent later in Erast's exterior, material actions in giving Liza money to make up for his lack of returned love). The nature, with its blossoming, stretched out meadows however, don't attempt to be anything beyond what they naturally are;

thus is the case with Liza. She can't help being her vulnerable, unsullied self (before Erast's contamination, that is); thus, Karamzin's description parallels and is analogous to Erast and Liza as conflicting characters.

Nature's humble responsibility and ultimate goodness is shown by Karamzin's description of the free-roaming, still stretching out of meadows, and the description of the natural flow of the river, which enables the massive ships to sail from "the fruitful lands of the Russian Empire" to provide "greedy" Moscow with the bread produced by the very peasants unselfishly working the land of the natural meadows and fields. Later in the description reads, "...young shepherds sitting in the shade of the trees sing simple, melancholy songs, thereby shortening the summer days so monotonous for them." The fact that the peasants unabashedly and with naïve good humor, produce the multitude of crops that feed greedy civilized Moscow shows their superiority in moral fiber.

The description of nature and its peasants share similarities with Karamzin's monastery metaphor that explores the decrepit, selfless and abandoned state of the monastery in strict contrast to the "majestic amphitheatres" and "golden cupolas" described previously. This extends to Karamzin's portrayal of the monks the narrator imagines to have lived in the monastery. Karamzin describes the abandoned and rotting structure of the monastery (i.e. the past's earlier closer proximity to nature): "the graves covered with tall grass, and in the dark passages of its cells... I heard the dull moan of times that have been swallowed up in the abyss of the past." Most poignant and relevant is his description of the two monks he imagines: "Here I see a gray-haired old man kneeling before a crucifix and praying for the quick dissolution of his earthly bonds: for all the joy has disappeared from his life, all his feelings have died except those of sickness and weakness... There a young monk with a pale face and languid gaze looks out to the field through

the bars on the window; he sees happy birds swimming freely through the sea of air – he sees them and bitter tears pour from his eyes.” The first monk’s depiction of the conflict of nature vs. civilization is more subtle; it simply illustrates the ultimate quality of death that makes one disregard, disavow, and want to dissolve their “earthly bonds,” that is civilization, as nature is what exists of its natural own, unable to truly be acquired as an earthly possession by a human. Thus, Karamzin indicates the frivolity and foolishness in savoring earthly and material bonds by proving that material possessions become only hindrances at the inevitable time one wishes for a consummate good ending in death.

The second monk indicates the inevitability of civilization’s conquering of nature, at least while on earth as an ultimately helpless human. Even a monk, who seemingly abandons civilization to only worship God with sparse, modest means, feels trapped by society’s “bars.” Only the birds “swimming freely” through the air, of pure nature, are really capable of experiencing freedom. Thus, the bars of the monastery prohibit the monk from being completely at one with nature, and analogically, represent bars of civilization that plague the human condition and prohibit civilization from being at one with nature.

The monks’ embodiment of the conflict of nature vs. their society (civilization) is then explored seriously through Erast’s personification of civilization and Liza’s personification of Nature. This personification is abundantly clear throughout the depiction of their relationship. Firstly, one of Erast’s premiere words to Liza is: “I think that beautiful lilies of the valley picked by a beautiful girl are worth a ruble. But since you won’t take it, here are five kopeks. I would always like to buy flowers from you. I’d like it if you would pick the flowers only for me.” Immediately, Erast’s need and sense of ownership is present. Having just met Liza, he already wants to monopolize flowers (i.e. affection) by literally paying her off. In plain words, he is

asking to buy her flowers and love with kopeks, disregarding her desire or loss of money in refusing other buyers. Further, after giving her the five kopeks, he grabs her arm when she then tries to leave, indicating his apparent purchase of her feelings. Liza's mother, who though naïve, is more versed in the ways of civilization's corrupting nature, warns Liza: "You still don't know, my dear, how evil people can hurt a poor girl! My heart is never at peace when you go to the city. I... pray that the Lord God preserve you from any misfortune and harm!" Here, Karamzin foreshadows the great misfortune and harm to come from Liza's impending heartbreak and suicide.

Erast's immoral substitution of money for feelings appears many times throughout the story. Most climactically, it occurs after he abandons Liza for good at the end of the story. He says to her "'Liza! Circumstances have changed; I've announced my engagement. You must leave me in peace and forget me, for your own sake. I did love you now, that is, I wish all goodness for you. Here are a hundred rubles – take it" – he put the money in her pocket." Here, when Erast states "that is, I wish all goodness for you" he reveals that he never truly loved her at all, or can even know what love really is, because of his corruption by civilization. He wishes her goodness so that she has money to feed her and her mother's stomach, not to feed her heart or soul. Thus, he bribes her to leave him alone for good with money, assuming that a servant girl like her, who always has money worries to consider, will be pacified once her economic means are straightened.

Karamzin introduces Liza's nature-like qualities: innocence, naïveté, morality, selflessness, modesty, strong work ethic and familial love by offering the reader information about her hardworking deceased father. Karamazin writes, "Liza's father was a rather well-to-do peasant because he loved work, plowed the land well, and always led a sober life... Only Liza...

worked day and night, sparing neither her gentle youth nor her rare beauty.” Here, Liza’s lineage is shown to be good and pure, uncorrupted as it were, by outside, civilized forces. The brief but important portrayal of her father attempts to show the natural, inherent qualities of peasants who work their whole lives in nature, that is, with the land and soil and focused on taking care of their family. Thus, we see Liza as a normal, natural descendent of her moral and pure father, indicating the beautiful continuity of nature, when unhampered by the civilized world. Erast’s attraction to Liza as his opposite thus diminishes when she inevitably loses for her former innocence through falling in love. Karamzin writes: “For Erast, Liza was no longer that innocent angel who had in the past inflamed his imagination and delighted his soul. Platonic love had given way to feelings of which he could not be *proud* and that were no longer new to him.”

It is important to note that the lesson of the story in the conflict of Nature vs. Civilization is that Civilization always inevitably wins. Karamzin illustrates this by, not only the obvious fact of Liza’s suicide, but the way in which she kills herself. Upon spotting a fifteen-year-old girl by the pond she chooses to drown in, she says to the girl: “Dear Anuita, dear friend! Take this money to my mother – it’s not stolen. Tell her that Liza is guilty before her; that I hid from her my love for a certain cruel man” The rest of her sentence gets cut off because she impatiently throws herself into the water. Here, civilization’s corruption of nature is apparent in Liza’s “re-gifting” of the money Erast gave her as a bribe and pay off. Just as Erast paid off Liza for his selfishness, cruelty, and inability to return her innocent, pure love, so does Liza selfishly kill herself in full knowledge that her mother completely depends on her; to atone for her sin and guilt, she attempts to pass the bribe to her mother. Thus, she loses her emotional capacity to love her mother and becomes selfish; as a once pure person of Nature, she possibly can’t handle the transition and thus kills herself. However, her dramatic example is a much sped up, passionate

version of a slower transition that happens to society as a whole when it is slowly corrupted and dissolved by selfishness, greed, and lack of feeling. Karamzin illustrates that this is the unfortunate human condition, and all fall victim to it as society inevitably “progresses.”

Nature is corrupted by civilization as seen in Liza when she falls in love with Erast to a point of more physical, carnal longing. Erast, an example of a corrupted via civilization youth is, naturally, attracted to his Nature-polar opposite. Thus, Liza’s collision with Erast, because they were of different social and moral classes, led to catastrophe, as Karamzin proves that Civilization inevitably conquers Nature.