

Devices used in Jane Eyre and Aurora Leigh to represent female subjugation



Though the authors and genres of the works Jane Eyre and Aurora Leigh are distinctive, the messages and methods of communication within both are quite comparable. Both authors aim to, among other things, expose the plight of their female contemporaries and offer strong suggestions as to how the injustices faced by women might be rectified. The heroines of both stories, Jane and Aurora, face subjugation and oppression of many kinds, most being a direct result of their gender. Both authors utilize, in similar ways, certain literary devices in order to symbolize both the incarceration and notions of liberation for their protagonists. These two aspects of the stories, bondage and freedom, continually display the principal conflict in both plots: the struggle between ideal aspirations and the confinement of practicality and reality, specifically as applied to women (Pell 397). One of the most easily recognized symbols within both of the stories is the home. In Aurora Leigh, and in Jane Eyre, the home becomes, while both women are still girls, associated with domestic bondage of various kinds. The place in which Jane spent the first ten years of her life, Gateshead, was a fine, stately house and also the most understandable object of her distaste. Her parents having died in her infancy, Jane was severely ill-used by the family of her late maternal uncle. She was, amidst the splendor of affluence, abused physically, mentally and emotionally, continually reminded of her inferiority and seclusion. Despite the quality of her surroundings, Gateshead would always represent the worst period of Jane's life. Once removed to Lowood, a poorly-administrated, charity-funded boarding school, Jane proclaimed " I would not now have exchanged Lowood with all its privations, for Gateshead and its daily luxuries" (Bronte 24). For Jane, the move from Gateshead to Lowood was the first small step of many toward independence. Though at <https://assignbuster.com/devices-used-in-jane-eyre-and-aurora-leigh-to-represent-female-subjugation/>

Lowood Jane became more content than she had even been in her short life, after eight years the walls finally began to unbearably confine her. She lamented, " I went to my window...there were the skirts of Lowood; there was the hilly horizon. My eye passed all other objects to rest on those most remote, the blue peaks: it was those I longed to surmount: all within their boundary of rock and heath seemed prison-ground, exile limits" (Bronte 85). The physical confinement of the school began to constantly remind Jane of the social limits they inflicted upon her; as long as she stayed, her life would never change nor improve. Thornfield, the estate on which Jane comes to find freedom from Lowood as a governess, provides her with improved salary, a bit more independence and quality living conditions. The house, however, much like the others, still serves as a reminder to Jane that she is not completely her own, ever-dependent on the patronage of the wealthy. Upon returning to the house one day, Jane thought " I did not like re-entering Thornfield. To pass its threshold was a return to stagnation: to cross the silent hall, to ascend the darksome staircase, to seek my own lonely little room...was to quell wholly the faint excitement wakened by my walk" (Bronte 117). Though a happier existence, her life at Thornfield only perpetuated her lifelong ' protection' from the world. Her later laments on the subject are those she uttered not only for herself, but for all women of her time: " What good it would have done me at the time to have been tossed in the storms of an uncertain struggling life, and to have been taught by rough and bitter experience to long for the calm amidst I now repine!" (117). Bronte writes, through Jane's predicament, of the intended protection of women that essentially cripples them. Aurora Leigh also finds the home to be an oppressive place, but unlike Jane, it is the idea of the home that more

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confounds her than the building itself. While she is quite young, the expected idea of a home is thrust upon her by her aunt into whose care she is left upon the death of her father. The young girl is given books that are meant to instruct small wives-to-be, ' books that boldly assert/Their right of comprehending husbands talk/When not too deep, and even answering/With pretty " may it please you," or " so it is."' Her aunt assures young Aurora that all will be well with young ladies " As long as they keep quiet by the fire" (Browning 51). When Aurora shows resistance to this accepted and nearly inescapable feminine fate, she is told by this same aunt " I know I have not ground you down enough/To flatten and bake you to a wholesome crust/For household uses and proprieties" (Browning 70). Thus the idea of home was early tainted within the strong young mind of Aurora Leigh and also, through this vivid imagery, within the mind of any reader who happens upon her story. Beyond the teachings of her aunt, Aurora is brought to despise this idea of home also by her cousin, the young Mr. Romney Leigh. She knows him most of her life, and comes to love him as a friend, though ill-matched for any other sort of relationship. In one passage of the poem, Aurora grows livid as her cousin refuses to take her writing seriously. He reduces the female gender to " Mere women, personal and passionate/You give us doating mothers and perfect wives" (Browning 81). In his mind, no doubt, this is complimentary, though Aurora sees it differently. She rebuffs his comments, explaining that women, though often proving themselves to be only what he says, become this way as a result of a certain neglect. She argues " A women's always younger than a man/At equal years because she is disallowed/Maturing by the outdoor sun and air,/And kept in long-clothes past the age to walk" (Browning 85). Ironically enough, this conversation <https://assignbuster.com/devices-used-in-jane-eyre-and-aurora-leigh-to-represent-female-subjugation/>

includes also a marriage proposal on the part of Romney, an invitation to Aurora to become a member of that expected household which she had already come to scorn. She expectedly and soundly rejects, knowing the proposal to be only a social item of propriety and economics, rather than a gesture motivated by love or passion, for which she might consider entering into such a contract. In addition to the home and marriage becoming symbols of constriction for Aurora, she speaks also of Britain as a tamed or domesticated sort of country which has forced itself and its expectations upon her. She was born and partly raised in Italy, something that her aunt continually tries to make her forget, finding the influences to be much too reminiscent of the unapproved woman her brother, Aurora's father, chose to marry. It is, however, in these memories of Tuscan landscape that Aurora feels free. Though she learns to love Britain, she sees it as " Not a grand nature. Not my chestnut-woods/Of Vallombrosa" (Browning 57). Just as Aurora's memories of nature in Italy provide for her a sense of inner freedom, so do Jane Eyre's reflections on her natural surroundings bring intimations of liberation. In her description of the Moor-House, the place in which she comes to live after Thornfield, Jane uses mostly natural language, treating the house as if it were a part of nature itself. " They loved their sequestered home. I, too, in a the gray, small, antique structure , with its low roof, its latticed casements, its mouldering walls, its avenue of aged firs-all grown aslant under the stress of mountain winds; its garden, dark with yew and holly-and where no flowers but the hardies species would bloom-found a charm, both potent and permanent" (Bronte 354). This is the most positive and sentimental description Jane gives of any of the houses she resides in. Is this because the house itself held a special charm? Perhaps, but more likely <https://assignbuster.com/devices-used-in-jane-eyre-and-aurora-leigh-to-represent-female-subjugation/>

because it was the first place in which she felt true kinship and thereby a small sense of independence. It is no wonder that Jane chose to associate a place dear to her with nature as it is made clear, throughout the novel, that nature is her only ever-present comfort. She explains that “ I have no relative but the universal mother, Nature: I will seek her breast and ask repose...Nature seemed to me benign and good: I thought she loved me, outcast as I was; and I from whom man could anticipate only mistrust, rejection, insult, clung to her with filial fondness” (Bronte 328). At one point in the story, as Jane becomes more and more subdued into the prospect of accepting her cousin, St. John Rivers’ marriage proposal against her better judgment, nature, in a sense, frees her by carrying to her the voice of her true love on the wind, reminding her of where her heart is, “ It is the work of nature. She was roused, and did-no miracle-but her best” (Bronte 425). Though Jane ultimately finds independence in money, kinship in newfound family, and happiness in the arms of the man she loves, nature sustains and provokes her toward greater things from the beginning of her life onward. Amidst the small victories of Jane and Aurora, the hopelessness of women of limited financial means is a theme that pervades both stories. Jane Eyre, from her earliest years, is constantly reminded by those around her that, because of her poor financial situation, she will always be obliged to live in the service of others. One of her least favorite of the household staff in Gateshead, Miss Abbot, explains to her that “ they will have a great deal of money, and you will have none: it is you place to be humble, and to try to make yourself agreeable to them” (Bronte 13). Even Bessie, the most well-meaning and caring of Jane’s childhood associates advises her “ You should try to be useful and pleasant, then perhaps you will always have a home

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here” (Bronte 13). Because of her situation, young Jane is prevented from even dreaming of the independence that she will one day realize. When she is older, Jane remembers her childhood thoughts of “ Liberty, Excitement, Enjoyment: delightful sounds truly; but no more than sounds for me; and so hollow and fleeting that it is mere waste of time to listen to them. But Servitude! That must be matter of fact” (Bronte 86). The importance of wealth is made abundantly clear to Jane as a child. Her physician, in response to her expression of intense personal misery, asks the ten year-old girl if she would like to search out and live with some paternal relatives, though they would likely be poor. Jane cannot see past her upbringing and assumes that such people are incapable of love or kindness. This ill-founded judgment prolongs her captivity at Gateshead (Bronte 24). Aurora Leigh similarly faces the inevitable trials of a woman of little means and connection. When she refuses the proposal of Romney Leigh, a man who loves her not and who she does not love, Aurora is reprimanded by her aunt, as marriage, she believes, for the poor is a matter of economic position, not love. She scolds “ You suppose, perhaps, /That you.../Are rich and free to chose a way to walk?” (Browning 93). Despite her aunt’s ranting, Aurora is unmoved in her decision not to live only to improve or maintain her social status. She reflects later that if her life is to be always about financial improvement, then she shall never personally thrive, for “ What you do/For bread will taste of common grain, not grapes” (Browning 124). It is by this idea of invaluable principal that both Jane and Aurora chose to live throughout their lives, determined to succeed in a way that is true to their own priorities, regardless of immediate consequences. Both women sufficiently overcome the countless obstacles hurled at them. They do not

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succumb to the pressures of stagnant domestic life, or the limitations of their caste. Through the successes of these heroines, in the midst of undeniable conflict, Charlotte Bronte and Elizabeth Barrett Browning communicate their own hopes that the female sex might be inspired to do the same, against whatever obstacles they may and will encounter. Essay Word Count: 2,023

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