

# Feminism and cultural exploration in aurora leigh



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Victorian literature, like almost all literature, speaks inherently of the social, philosophical and religious issues which molded the people of the time. The Romantic ideals of the singling-out and celebration of the self are often challenged by Victorian literature, with its focus on putting the self into a social context and examining the relationship which emerges. The statement ‘ a sense of crisis permeated every aspect of Victorian society as it struggled to reconcile past ideas and beliefs with progress and modernity’ describes this new aspect perfectly. Many changes caused this shift in Victorian society, but one of the most important and controversial was the increasing prominence of women in the public sphere, and the changing dynamics of male-female relationships. It is this revelation which will be explored in this essay, using *Aurora Leigh* by Elizabeth Barret-Browning as its basis. A book and a line number will be specified after each quotation, and due to the length of the poem, this essay will focus mainly on the first two books.

The Victorian ideal of the angel in the house, a term from a poem by Coventry Patmore, described (when analysed) how women were expected to be subservient to men, and their goals considered to be sublimated upon marriage in favor of helping the husband achieve his goals. Certainly, women were not thought to have much purpose beyond that and child-rearing. In *Aurora Leigh*, however, this is a central theme and is examined from the very outset of the poem. In Book 1, after Aurora’s mother dies, her father has to tend to her and this predominantly female-orientated task seems to weigh more heavily on him than on a woman; according to Aurora, women “ know/the way to rear up children” (Browning, 1864, 1. 47) and her father is described as “ Contriving such a miserable smile,/As if he knew needs must,

or I should die” (Browning, 1864, 1. 98). Having been thrust into this female role, Aurora’s father is said to have “ through love... suddenly/Thrown off the old conventions” (Browning, 1864, 1. 176) and thus sets up Aurora’s similar rebellion against society. The death of her mother is used to highlight the problems with the gender constructs of the time; how, she asks, can a man continue to function in his socially-approved place when his wife dies and leaves him all her duties? In this way, Aurora Leigh pokes holes in society’s then-dominant ideal of women taking care of the children and doing nothing but support their husbands. It is important to note, however, that Aurora’s father’s experience is not good. He is described as being somewhat displaced, being “ unmade from a common man/But not completed to an uncommon man” (Browning, 1864, 1. 183). Therefore, his departure from social norms left him in a sort of gender purgatory, being neither one thing nor the other.

Her father’s example is one of the ways in which this poem depicts the struggle between traditional values and progressive ones in the individual; her father is thrust unwillingly into a progressive role and doesn’t ultimately fare well in it. Later in the poem, of course, both Romney and Aurora wilfully disregard society’s norms and both fare well, allowing for one minor case of total blindness. So beyond examining tradition versus progression, Aurora Leigh examines the manner in which one comes upon a progressive role, and shows that progression is something of a double-edged sword. Romney ultimately finds love with Aurora but is unable to effect the social change for which he strives, her father becomes a sort of half-mother, caring for his child but uncomfortable with doing so, and Marian Erle becomes a single

mother through a horrible experience, but fiercely protects this unconventional status once she has it. Thus, the poem examines not only the crisis in the relationship between the self and society but the internal struggles of progressive change, as well as its pitfalls and the sacrifices which are sometimes necessary.

Upon coming to England, Aurora meets her aunt, who is a perfect example of an angel in the house, having lived a “harmless life, she called a virtuous life” (Browning, 1864, l. 290). Aurora’s view of her aunt is not flattering but nevertheless perceptive, as she notes that her aunt’s hair is held tight, “as if for taming accidental thoughts” (Browning, 1864, l. 275). This could be interpreted as ‘taming her bad thoughts’ but an alternative interpretation – ‘taming any thoughts’ – reveals more about what the aunt symbolises in this poem: she is almost entirely without agency. Her “frigid use of life” (Browning, 1864, l. 277), “eyes of no colour” (Browning, 1864, l. 283) and a mouth which speaks only of “unrequited loves” (Browning, 1864, l. 282) all leave her powerless to act of her own accord. She is an object in the poem, not a subject, never directly given voice by Aurora, and in her entirety constitutes a satirical swipe at the “angel in the house” paradigm.

However, this is not to say that Aurora Leigh is necessarily a feminist work; while it espouses the virtues of female agency, it also contains a large number of hints at a more traditional overarching viewpoint, embodying the Victorian ‘crisis of faith’ within the work itself. One of these hints comes in the mention of “lady’s Greek, / Without the accents” (Browning, 1864, l. 83), an infantilisation of Aurora’s intellect which she doesn’t challenge. She describes Romney’s nature as “godlike” (Browning, 1864, l. 565), saying <https://assignbuster.com/feminism-and-cultural-exploration-in-aurora-leigh/>

afterwards that she is “ a worm” (Browning, 1864, 1. 568) in comparison. Another clue is in the fact that her aunt is not given direct voice but others are, perpetuating the idea that only ‘ modern’ women, who have voluntarily entered a male-dominated sphere such as that of Victorian literature, are deserving of a voice. This non-feminist interpretation is explored by critic Deirdre David, who says in *Art’s A Service; Social Wound, Sexual Politics and Aurora Leigh* that the “ novel-poem is an integrated expression of essentialist and ultimately non-feminist views of sex and gender, despite sharp attacks on sexual hypocrisy” (David, 1985). It could be said that Aurora’s desire to become a poet is either an attempt to emulate men, or to beat them at their own game; neither particularly evocative of the feminist ideology of rescinding conventional gender roles. Certainly Aurora’s desire to write an epic poem (such as *Aurora Leigh* itself), which is a completely male-dominated area of poetry, shows that she wants to prove herself as good as men; not necessarily an ignoble goal, but nevertheless a goal framed within traditional values.

Another point made by David, which could be considered a logical certainty, is that “ to speak of a masculine intellect evidently presupposes a feminine one” (David, 1985) and this is exactly what Aurora does when she says that Romney “ misconceive[s] the question like a man” (Browning, 1864, 2. 468). To be able to generalise about men, one must also be able to generalise about women, and Aurora’s supposition that there is a male mode of thought which always works a certain way implies that there must be a female mode of thought with the same stipulations. Such generalisations are contrary to progressive values and, indeed, to Aurora’s ability to achieve the task she

sets herself. Ultimately, the ideas of feminism and progressive gender values were, during the Victorian era, mixed up and unfocused since they required of the believer such widespread upheaval in the ways they defined gender. This ‘ crisis of faith’ centres entirely around how people viewed gender, and was a considerable force in the Victorian Era and, especially, on Aurora Leigh.

There are striking contrasts in the text, too, between the poem’s meaning and the poem’s form. The first example is the use of classical mythological references which would be unknown to most women of the time, such as Aurora’s description of her mother as “ a dauntless Muse” (Browning, 1864, 1. 155) and “ a still Medusa” (Browning, 1864, 1. 157). This is another device which shows the changing social ideals of the time; the poem having a female protagonist and yet being peppered with such references. It is almost subterfuge, too, for Aurora Leigh to be an epic poem; traditionally associated with heroic acts of national importance, and dating back to the very birth of poetry, the epic poem usually does not concern itself with subjects like Romney’s failed social reformation, and one girl’s decision to become a poet. In a way, it presupposes its own importance in a way which lends it significant self-referential weight, when viewed in context.

The use of the epic poem in particular has additional interpretive relevance; according to critic Herbert F Tucker, in his book *Epic*, “ the splendor of epic, so the lesson runs, is a glory that was” (Tucker, 2008). While Aurora Leigh could be thought of in this way, to do so would be to ignore its social relevance; writing an epic poem about social reformation implies that the reformation has already happened, and it could be concluded that combining

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these ideas makes the reader think the same. Something which would compound this assumption is that there is evidence that the epic was falling out of favour in the mid-19th century. Alfred Lord Tennyson himself, in a letter to his publisher Ticknor and Fields, said: “ I should be crazed to attempt [an epic] in the heart of the 19th century” (Tennyson, 1858). To revive an archaic genre in this manner, and in a sense corrupt it to act as both a Bildungsroman and a vehicle for socially progressive views, is to increase its impact on the reader. The juxtaposition of ‘ female’ content (i. e. having a female protagonist) and ‘ male’ form, combined with all the hitherto-mentioned elements, induces confusion about the gender gap; why is a story of a girl fulfilling her dream less important than an epic battle? Barrett-Browning’s poem, however, is in many ways the same as classic epics; the use of classical and biblical references. Perhaps the most meaningful of the latter is in the ending: “‘Jasper first,’ I said, / ‘And second, sapphire; third, chalcedony; / The rest in order, . . . last, an amethyst’ (Browning, 1864, 9. 988). This ending, with Aurora’s and Romney’s synergy and a description of the walls of the holy city, creates a powerfully positive image. In itself, it is the marriage of the progressive (Aurora blossoming as a poet) with the traditional (Christian theology), and a very fitting end to the poem as seeing the holy city almost mirrors entering heaven.

Even this small study of a small portion of Aurora Leigh’s representation of the “ crisis of faith” in Victorian society proves it extremely fertile material (much more could be written on this topic alone). The “ third gender” created in Aurora’s father sets the tone for the remainder of the novel-poem, which sets out to examine Victorian society’s emerging feminine literary

presence and concludes that they are not only capable, but can also be divinely inspired, as suggested by the ending. This naturally leads to a much wider interpretation than is contained within the poem: if women can be poets, and indeed rival male poets in their 'own' genres, then why can't they do anything else? This shift into the foreground for women was a devastatingly fundamental revelation for every member of Victorian society, and the seeds of feminism sown by Aurora Leigh ultimately germinated into their very own school of thought; changes don't come much more profound than that.

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