

# Anna letitia barbaulds the rights of woman

Literature



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Response to the poem, 'The Rights of Woman' Anna Letitia Barbauld's *The Rights of Women* has often been discussed as a poem written in the feminist point of view but varied from Mary Wollstonecraft's "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman" (1792). The poem is notable of the severe criticism on society which supports male chauvinism. But the poem is written in a satirical style that one may misunderstand the poet as opposing the rights of the women towards the concluding lines of the poem. The first stanza of the poem itself is notable for the exhortation of the poet when he addresses the women as 'injured women' and prompts them to 'rise, assert thy right!' The state of the women has been drawn in the coming lines—'Woman! too long degraded, scorned, opprest;/O born to rule in partial Law's despite,/Resume thy native empire o'er the breast!' (Barbauld 3-4). While reading through the poem anyone would understand that the poet is motivating the womenfolk to array against the oppressing powers that curtail their freedom and moral rights, and stresses on the need of mutual love than separate rights, realising their vulnerability as the weaker sex. The poet has made use of various poetical devices and additional attributes like symbols, irony, and so on to establish his arguments. The imagery of war has been effectively used all through the poem, adopting various terms related to war and war field like injured, empire, rule, reign, artillery, cannon's roar, magazine of war and the like to stress the fact that women are always engaging in a war against the opposite sex to attain their rights. This is also evident, from the opening lines of the poem that women is the sect that always gets injured. Here the poet says, 'Woman! too long degraded, scorned, opprest,' corroborating their ailments as the weaker sex disdained and destined to face the 'proud Man [and] his boasted rule' (Barbauld 8). Therefore, it is the duty of the

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woman to prepare for the war, collecting all type of weapons aiming the empire. The poet reminds them thus, Thy rights are empire: urge no meaner claim (Barbauld 13). The poet makes use of irony very successfully in the last stanza where he takes a sudden deviation from the proposed aims. Till the concluding part of the poem the poet was stressing the need of a crucial war. But now he reminds them the hard reality of life, Thou mayst command, but never canst be free (Barbauld 20). This is quite ironical when the poet affirming that women can never be free even though they command.

Through the irony the poet is actually stressing futility of making commands, knowing that nothing can be attained. After realising the hopeless and hapless state of the womenfolk, the speaker of the poem insists them, ‘

Then, then, abandons each ambitious thought,’ (Barbauld 29). But the real

irony is in the concluding lines where the poet puzzles the readers when

saying, ‘ In Nature's school, by her soft maxims taught, / That separate rights are lost in mutual love’ (Barbauld 31-33). Reading through the last two lines

of the poem, it is quite evident that the poet disregards the concept of

fighting each other and proposes the viewpoint that no separate rights are

needed in mutual love. The use of poetic devices like metaphor and

alliteration really enhances the beauty of the poem. One can identify many

examples for the use of such figures of speech and a perfect word ending

rhyme arranged in the four-lined stanza pattern. The repetition of the

sound /s/ in the neighbouring words, ‘ Soften the sullen,’ Subduing and

subdued,’ and the repetition of /k/ in ‘ clear the cloudy,’ are examples of

alliteration. The words, ‘ shunning discussion’ and ‘ sacred mysteries’ are

examples of metaphors used in the poem. The poem follows a word ending

rhyme scheme in four-lined stanza pattern. The rhyme scheme of the poem

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is ' abab', in words ' right', ' opprest', ' breast' and ' despite' in the first stanza and ' thought', ' move', ' taught', and ' love' in the last stanza. The alternative lines in the same rhyme give the poem a musical quality which makes it more enjoyable. This rhyme scheme clearly portrays the pathetic state of women and their endless suffering. The oft repeated rhyme is also suggestive of such an endless suffering. To conclude, one can infer that the poem is upholding the rights of women folk. However, the poem cannot be listed among the poems that blindly oppose male chauvinist society. Instead, the poet focuses on the need of mutual love between men and women where separate rights are unnecessary. Work cited Barbauld, Anna, Letitia. The Rights of Women. The Norton Anthology of Poetry. 2005. Web. 2 Oct, 2012.