

# Life Writing in the Victorian Age: *Aurora Leigh* (1856) by Elizabeth Barrett Browning

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**Abstract:** Life writing in the Victorian Age took the form of Biography, Autobiography and memoirs which was written in different genres of literature. It also took the form of letters, journals, and diaries. Some of the great Victorian writers wrote about themselves using an indirect method so that they can present an aspect of their lives and that of their contemporaries to their readers. An example of this is Charles Dicken's *David Copperfield*. Life writing provides critical information about the Age. Most of the writers engage in this form of literary enterprise because they feel a sense of duty or in order to give themselves satisfaction that a record of their lived lives is available to future generations. *Aurora Leigh* is a novel in verse form and regarded as an example of Victorian life writing in verse. The heroine, Aurora, in the epic poem exemplifies some selective aspects of the life of Elizabeth Barret Browning and indeed, the situation of women in Victorian England. The 'Woman Question' is a core concern of Elizabeth Barrett Browning in this epic. The view and the place of a woman in the Victorian Age became an urgent concern for Browning.

**Key words:** Aurora, Conservative, Conventions, Epic, Poem.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Victorian Age covers an important era in the history of Great Britain. It covers the reign of Queen Victoria who reigned from 20 June 1837 to the time of her death on 22 January 1901. The Age was seen as a time of peace, progress, refined manners and a period of national self-confidence for Britain. In terms of Empire, it was a time that recorded the highest level of expansion and development to Britain abroad as a world power of reckoning. Technologically, it marked the time when the first railway was opened and this led to a massive improvement in transportation across the country. Although, the period recorded economic advancement, yet, it was a time of economic distress and harassment for many people within Britain. In the face of all this however, the Victorian Age was a time of stability coupled with prosperity and optimism. What is also obvious was that: "History was ubiquitous in Victorian cultural and intellectual life" (Fraser 115). The past in the era was not confined specific places such as the museum, it was everywhere. Literary artists look to history- whether of their lives or of certain events to draw inspiration in their works.

A core aspect of the Age which stimulated debate and powerful literary outputs was the role of women in the society. This issue known as the "The Woman Question" led to the exposure of the extreme inequalities between men and women being questioned. To a large extent this was made

possible due to another important development of the Age – publishing. With the growth of the periodical and an expansion in the reading public other forms of literary endeavours such as life writing took hold within the Age.

Life writing during the Victorian Age is important because apart from offering a critical and irreplaceable bank of information regarding the Age; it tends to offer a valuable insight into the personal lives of the writers and their contemporaries. It also provides a rare glimpse into the very spirit of the Age – the often hidden nuances - that official history would inevitably overlook. Life writing incorporates Biographies, Autobiographies, and Memoires. These are usually, presented to readers in different genres of literature. The writers who engage in life writing feel a sense of duty to leave behind an aspect of themselves to the coming generations. They feel satisfaction that a record of their lived lives and that of their contemporaries is available. (Peltason 381).

Elizabeth Barret Browning (1806-1861) was one of the most prominent English Poets of the Victorian era. John Kenyon, her cousin introduced her to literary society. She was a campaigner for the abolition of slavery which did not endear her to her father who was a plantation owner in Jamaica where he owns several slaves. Her work also influenced a reform in child legislation. Browning was sick and dependent on pain killers virtually most of her life. Among her life's influences was her husband Robert Browning and Mary Wollstonecraft whose book *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), she read in 1821.

Elizabeth Barret Browning wrote *Aurora Leigh* in 1856. It is a novel in verse form. This epic poem has nine books. From book one to book five we read about the story of Aurora's past up to her adulthood. Books six to nine reverts to the diary form of writing. Peltason maintained that:

This remarkable work is at once a novel in verse, a meditation on the condition of England and on the responsibility of artists and activists to remedy that condition, a diaristic faux-autobiography of its eponymous heroine, and an oblique and selective life history and self- portrait of its famous author (386)

In essence, what readers of this epic poem will encounter is a story that is similar to that of Elizabeth Barret Browning. In this poem Browning is presenting the plight of women in the Victorian era through a selective reference of her own life.

Her approach underscores the belief of Victorian life writers such as Thomas Carlyle, J. S. Mill, and Harriet Martineau that they can influence more not by arguing but rather, by the telling of a life story.

## II. *AURORA LEIGH* (1856) BY ELIZABETH BARRET BROWNING

*Aurora Leigh* is a novel in verse form that spans nine books written by Elizabeth Barret Browning. It is an epic poem that highlights not only the selective life story of the author through the leading heroine, but it gave the reader a valuable insight into the condition of women in the Victorian era. The poem also indicated the penchant of writers in the Victorian Age of writing about the conditions in the era through the oblique use of their own personal life story as a basis for presenting critical issues. Life writing is therefore, an important form of literary work for the Victorians. In stanza one of the first book she highlighted clearly her intention for writing this epic poem:

*Of writing many books there is no end; / And I who have written much in prose and verse / For others' uses, will write now for mine,- / Will write my story for my better self, As when you paint your portrait for a friend, / Who keeps it in a drawer and looks at it / Long after he has ceased to love you, just / To hold together what he was and is.* (Browning 1).

This first stanza underscores the intention of the poet to write about her life for others to read. The main character, Aurora is used by the poet to speak in the first person thus, giving the whole story a ring of authenticity and makes for captivating reading. Normally, a person's life story follows a sequence that begins with childhood right into adulthood including all the concomitant life challenges. This epic narrative did not deviate from this norm. In the first book Aurora moves on to describe her childhood and the death of her parents which necessitates her relocation to London where she will stay with her aunt – her father's sister. Aurora's aunt is of the conventional Victorian breed. She insisted that Aurora should learn the vocation that the society had reserved for women:

*I danced the polka and cellarius, / Spun glass, stuffed birds, and modelled flowers in wax, / Because she liked accomplishments in girls / I read a score of books on womanhood* (Browning 16).

These vocations are specifically, taught to young women not because they are important but simply due to the conventions regarding women as spelt out in the era. This view was further underscored by Barrett when her poet persona – Aurora said:

*By the way, / The works of women are symbolical. / We sew, sew, prick our fingers, dull our sight, / Producing what? A pair of slippers, sir, / To put on when you're weary - or a stool / To stumble over and vex you... 'curse that stool!'* (Browning 17).

The symbolic nature of what women are taught to do in the Victorian Age are mere activities that are meant to demarcate

the difference in social status of the sexes. In essence, this epic poem is a valuable record of information on the condition of gender relations in the Victorian Age. Browning used this important method – the autobiographical approach to give the twenty-first century reader of this epic a vital glimpse into an era that was described as very crucial to the civilization of Britain.

## III. 'WOMAN QUESTION' IN *AURORA LEIGH*

Elizabeth Barrett Browning was concerned in her writings about the way women were treated in the Victorian Age. The epic poem under discussion in this essay is a clear testimony to that fact. It is more so because she was giving the reader a picture of her own life story. She shares the belief with other prominent Victorian writers such as Thomas Carlyle, J. S. Mill, and Harriet Martineau that the best way to make a point is to tell a story of a lived life. Browning used the persona – Aurora in the poem to speak about a condition within the Age which affected her. There are some critical issues embedded in the term the Woman Question. The first is: how should women especially, middle-class women be educated? What is their proper place in society? Should they be allowed to work outside the home? And then, should they be allowed to vote and have a political voice? These issues were discussed and analyzed in different fora – groups in coffee shops, in press publications, in the Parliament, and within both the Scientific and Medical circles in Britain. The debates were on-going even as the women themselves fought for more recognition and equality in the conservative and rigid societal establishment. However, the social and legislative changes came very slowly (women over 30 years of age were only allowed to vote in 1918, and those over 21 years of age were allowed to vote in 1928). Browning made important contributions to these topical issues. After she read Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) in 1821 which highly influenced her, Browning started writing vigorously on the need for gender equality in Victorian England. In order for Browning to venture into an area that was exclusively reserved for men she decided to undergo a deep personal education of the sociopolitical and cultural conditions of her day and the place of women in relation to men. The patriarchal nature of the Victorian Age believed that poetry is specifically, the literary domain for men only.

Through *Aurora Leigh*, Elizabeth Barrett Browning explores the role of female poets as agents of social change in the Victorian society. During the Victorian period, the role of women was largely confined to the domestic setting. While women were allowed to write, female writers were limited to the realm of the novels, which was perceived by the Victorian society to be the less distinguished genre. (Pooi 3).

Women are regarded as intellectually inferior and thus, if they must write poetry at all, the areas that they are expected to cover includes things such as love, nature, or pious religion. Contemporary issues such as politics, war, industrialization, and so on are considered too intellectually superior to women.

“In writing *Aurora Leigh*, Barrett Browning challenged this gender stereotype by producing a “novel-poem” that unites the feminine voice with masculine authority and superiority” (Pooi 3). Thus, Browning effectively went against the conventions of her day because she started writing poetry whose dominant themes are the topical issues of the day. Her endeavor put a lie to the assumptions of the dominant conservative views of her day due to the quality and force of her verse. Like Barrett Browning, the young Aurora in the epic poem rejected her aunt’s conventional education. When she discovered her father’s library Aurora was freed from the narrow confines of her aunt’s conservative world. The range of ideas and knowledge she discovered within her father’s library greatly exceeds the limitations imposed on women through the Victorian era education which prohibits them from becoming Poets. For Aurora, the poet persona of Browning this is the sort of education that is more meaningful and useful.

*As the earth / Plunges in fury, when the internal fires / Have reached and pricked her heart, and, throwing flat / The marts and temples, the triumphal gates / And towers of observation, clears herself / To elemental freedom – thus, my soul, / At poetry’s divine first finger- touch, / Let go conventions and sprang up surprised, / Convicted of the great eternities / Before two worlds* (Browning 31).

This aptly describes Aurora reaction and eventual immersion into the higher and more beneficial realm within her father’s library. She threw away her limitations which was imposed by the conventions of her day in favour of education.

Intelligent, passionate, well read, and determined, Aurora has within her the utmost potential to realize her dream. She is, however, deeply troubled by the fact that such an endeavor is considered by her society to be frivolous at best, and a sinfully self-indulgent rejection of social duty at worst. (Leonardo 1).

The conservative Victorian society do not care about Aurora’s level of intelligence or the potential in her of achieving success in a patriarchal society; this knowledge is all too clear to her and a source for worry. In spite of this inner worry and turmoil,

... Aurora Leigh works in innumerable ways to make the woman and the woman poet – she pointedly eschews the term “poetess” – the subject rather than the object of her poem. Instead of presenting an aestheticized female object for consumption, this remarkable poem from the outset asserts the self-sufficiency of its project. (Brown 193).

Her overall project and its reason was set out in the first stanza of this epic. In other words, Barrett Browning is clearly telling her readers that her aim is not frivolous but, a very serious enterprise being undertaken; the object of which is to bring about some critical changes to the conventional ways of doing things. Romney, Aurora’s cousin does not take what she has immersed herself in – poetry writing – as something important. His views is steeped in the views of the Age; that

women’s position and role should be confined to the home and that any idea of a woman’s freedom to fend for herself is unheard of. Romney proposed marriage to Aurora in Book II: *‘I ask for love, / And that, she can; for life in fellowship / Through bitter duties – that, I know she can; / For wifehood...will she?’* (Browning 56). But Aurora rejected his offer of marriage since she felt the genuineness of it is questionable and that he personifies the conservative conventions of the Age which stifles the freedom of a woman towards self-actualization. So she told him:

*What you love, / Is not a woman, Romney, but a cause: / You want a helpmate, not a mistress, sir,- / A wife to help your ends...in her no end!! ‘Why, sir, you are married long ago. / You have a wife already whom you love, / your social theory. / Bless you both, I say. / For my part, I am scarcely meek enough / To be the handmaid of a lawful spouse. / Do I look a Hagar, think you?’* (Browning 57-58).

In rejecting his proposal she told him some important things: First of all Romney was already ‘married’ to a cause that is, he is a philanthropist whose main interest in life is his social work and so domestic issues would hardly concern him. To Aurora therefore, she would not accede to the proposal of someone who was already committed. She made a reference to Hagar, the handmaid of Sarah, Abraham’s concubine in the Bible. In essence, Aurora was telling him she will not play a second fiddle. Romney’s mother, her aunt was not happy that she had rejected her son’s marriage proposal:

*‘What means this, Aurora Leigh? / My brother’s daughter has dismissed my guests?’* (Browning 63).

Her aunt informed her that marrying Romney would be beneficial to her because she will have a share in the family inheritance which she would not otherwise benefit being a woman. This also underscores the dilemma of being a woman in Victorian England where property and inheritance can only be passed to a male heir.

Marian Erle, one of the key characters in the epic poem exemplifies further Barrett Browning’s important stance on the ‘Woman Question’ in Victorian England. Marian Erle was abused by her family and eventually sold to a brothel through the actions of Lady Waldemar who wanted her out of the way in order for her to marry Romney who was planning to marry Marian. She was raped and brutalized and as a result became pregnant and gave birth to a son. By the conservative norms of the Victorian Age Marian was regarded as a fallen woman who should be shunted and ostracized. When Aurora found her by chance in Paris she took her in and provided for her and her son. Through this action of Aurora’s, Barrett Browning is clearly questioning the conventional judgmental attitude of the Age against women who were victims of violence by men:

*By law, - the law which now is paramount; / The common law, by which the poor and weak / Are trodden underfoot by vicious men, / And loathed for ever after by the good. / Let*

pass! I did not filch...I found the child.' (Browning 253). Marian's story to Aurora highlighted the injustices meted out to the weak and the poor and in this case the women who were victims of discriminatory social standards imposed by a conservative and harsh society.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* is an important epic poem which has given readers a valuable insight into the often hidden and ugly aspects of an Age that has come to be regarded as an era of both progress and prosperity. The Victorian Age can easily be said to be the most critical in the history of Britain. Barrett Browning was one of the Age's accomplished Poet. In this novel in verse she highlighted the condition of women which has been termed as the 'Woman Question'. It is a quasi-autobiography of Barrett herself. Although, there are several instances in the epic that do not exactly mirror Barrett's life yet; it can still be regarded as an important form of life writing which emanated from a key writer the Victorian Age. What should be noted however is the similarity between the epic and selected lived life of Barrett. Like the epic's key character Aurora, Barrett had to struggle with established conservative conventions of the Victorian Age before she can become a successful Poet. While the era last, women's role in the wider society was quite limited. The conventions of the Age had effectively confined them to the home. This inevitably means that women are virtually dependent both socially and economically to the men. Politically, women do not have a voice. This means that they cannot vote or be voted for. Another implication of their

being confined to the home is that women cannot go out and work as men. Marriage was used during the Victorian Age not as a means for love and companionship but a brutal instrument for the oppression of women. In the epic Aurora rejected Romney's marriage proposal because at that point she realizes that he was motivated by the harsh conventions of the Age and not as a result of love for her. The social position of a woman is closely tied to whether she marries or not. Aurora was cut out of her family's inheritance because is a woman and also due to her refusal to marry Romney initially. When at the end of the epic they got married she regained her social status. Two quite different standards of social conduct were in force during the era. Women are usually brutalized by men and then the same patriarchal laws reject these victims of violence such as Marian.

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