

Victorian Feminism: Oppressive Notions Mediated in Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market" and Elizabeth Barrett-Browning's "Aurora Leigh"

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Abstract

Christina Rossetti and Elizabeth Barrett-Browning, two prominent poets of the Victorian Era, notably discuss various notions oppressive to women in their poetry, namely "Goblin Market" and "Aurora Leigh." Employing the Victorian theme of glamorizing death, Barrett-Browning speaks on the deadly protentional of normalizing such restrictive entrapping and an idea that love and sexual relations are often embedded in power disproportion. Rossetti on the other hand, focuses on chastity which is strongly implemented by the Catholic Church and deems unchaste women "fallen," while men are not being held up to the same standard. This overall critical examination of traditional gender roles, motherhood, and marriage, emphasizes the intersection of societal expectations, trauma, and autonomy in the lives of Victorian women.

The goblin's tempting fruit becomes an allegory unveiling the predatory dynamics prevalent in Victorian society, while the narrative simultaneously unfolds a nuanced exploration of sisterhood and homoerotic, the constraints of societal expectations, and the dichotomy of fallen and redeemed women. The periodical concept of the "Angel in the House" is applied onto the contrasting fates of Lizzie and Laura as virtuous and fallen woman, highlighting the pervasive notion of women's moral pre-eminence and revealing the unjust standards imposed on them. Laura's temptation and Lizzie's sacrifice are each explored through the lens of Christian imagery. Rossetti's departure from the traditional tragic outcomes for fallen women is emphasized, and the chapter concludes by positioning "Goblin Market" as a feminist narrative, which challenges societal norms and advocates for female solidarity.

The Elizabeth Barrett-Browning chapter portrays maternity in her nine-book poem "Aurora Leigh" on four characters: Aurora Leigh's mother, Marian Erle, Lady Waldemar, and Aurora's mother. Hence, illustrates the diverse outcomes of marriage and motherhood often resulting in death in one shape or form. For example, the death of Aurora's mother creates an unachievable maternal ideal for women and Marian's tragic life story causes her figurative death. Furthermore, Lady Waldemar's overt sexuality does not give her children but brings upon manipulation and more exploitation, while Aurora's fear of maternity results in her considering writing her true descendant. Overall, this chapter explores societal views on "fallen women" and the consequences of maternal sacrifice, highlighting Browning's critique of restrictive Victorian ideals.

Key words: Aurora Leigh, Chastity, Christina Rossetti, Elizabeth Barrett-Browning, Goblin Market, Maternity, Victorian feminism