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**The Image of Victorian Women as Depicted by Elizabeth Barrett
Browning**

Bakalářská práce

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Olomouc 2019

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V Olomouci dne 29. 4. 2019

Podpis
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Děkuji Mgr. Pavlíně Flajšarové, Ph. D., za veškerou pomoc při vedení mé práce, za poskytnutí odborných konzultací a za cenné rady. Dále děkuji mé rodině za obrovskou podporu, zejména mé sestře, která mi opatřila důležité sekundární zdroje.

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Introduction

Victorian England is a period from 1837 to 1901, during the sovereignty of the Queen Victoria. During her long reign there were a lot of changes concerning rights of women and the way the world perceived them.¹ The main purpose of this thesis is to develop an understanding of the position, home life and rights of women in this period as perceived by a Victorian poet, Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

It is my experience of working with youth and seeing their insecurities about the role of men and women in the society, that has driven this research. We live in a world in which equal rights of men and women is often a topic of discussion. First of all, I have to point out that I do not consider myself to be any kind of “aggressive” feminist. However, I do believe that men and women should have equal rights. That is, that both sexes are equally important and able to contribute to the society. I believe in freedom of choice concerning one’s career, partner and lifestyle. Lastly, I believe that each woman is valued, has worth, and that her opinion should matter.

In my thesis I focus on the social position of women and how they were perceived by men and society in the Victorian period. In approaching this issue, I use the works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who was one of the important female authors of the first half of the Victorian period. Primarily, I am going to work mainly with one of her most famous poems “Aurora Leigh,” which is a semi-autobiography of this author. I am going to describe the atmosphere and life of Victorian women through the eyes of the author. She described her life in this era, which to me seems a reliable narrator for my research.

The first chapter of this thesis is focused on a historical background of the life in Victorian period as recorded by various professors and authors concerned with this topic. This part describes life in different social ranks, which were typical at that time and which determined the subsequent rights and privileges of women, concerning education, marriage and divorce. The second chapter talks about life of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and serves as the necessary introduction of this author and her most important works. The third chapter is the analysis of a novel in verse *Aurora Leigh* where I focused on the main female characters as described by Barrett Browning. I used

¹ Daniel Richard Altic, *Victorian People and Ideas*, (New York: W. W. Norton & co., 1915), 1, 15, 55.

them as representatives of different ranks and as a comparison to the first chapter, which has already described the established so-called “norms” of Victorian life.

1. World of Victorian Women

To better understand the role of women in the Victorian period, this section explores the idea of social classes and different expectations which were required of women, depending on their social class. The next theme illustrates the opportunities for women to receive education and the differences in male and female education. Finally, the rights of women in the law, with the example of marriage and divorce, are discussed. The section concludes with a description of the negative influences on women at that time, primarily prostitution.

A key aspect of the Victorian society are social classes or “ranks.” There are three main classes in this period: the upper class, the middle class and the working class. Each class is characterized by different prototypes.²

To start off from the top of the social ladder there were women in the upper class, or aristocratic class. Members of the royal family belonged here. Position in this rank was usually inherited or strengthened by a marriage with someone of the same rank.³ Women in this class were set apart from the rest of the intellectual world. Their place was “in the home, on a veritable pedestal if one could be afforded, and emphatically not in the world of affairs.”⁴ In other words, they were considered useless in any productive job and their main task was to watch after the household servants and to occupy themselves with various activities, namely crafting and making decorations. Occasionally they devoted themselves to charity, providing blankets and basic hygiene kits for the less fortunate.⁵ Although for some this kind of lifestyle could be found very attractive, the main downside of this social class was that women were treated as objects or possessions of their husbands rather than independent beings who are able to think and decide for themselves.

In the class just below the aristocratic class was the middle class. Similar rules and privileges in the upper class applied in the middle class as well. For instance, each middle class family had at least one valet. However, this group was quite broad and, for this reason, there can be made a division into smaller groups, according to income, religion, education and occupation. A lot of Victorian authors belonged to this social

² Altic, *Victorian People and Ideas*, 17.

³ Altic, *Victorian People and Ideas*, 20.

⁴ Altic, *Victorian People and Ideas*, 54.

⁵ Altic, *Victorian People and Ideas*, 51-52.

class.⁶ Unlike in the seventeenth century, there were a lot more of middle class women working in different businesses, such as hairdresser's or catering, in the eighteenth century. It was even common for widows to carry on their deceased husband's trades. However, in the nineteenth century everything changed again. A new sophisticated concept was prescribed determining all women outside the working class were to refrain from working for wages, unless it was absolutely vital for their survival.⁷

The women in the working class were on the bottom of the social pyramid. In the previous centuries they were called "the poor." These women usually worked in the factories or on the farms and they were expected to work hard to earn money for their living. Women who belonged to the working class were supposed to help their husbands provide for the family. It was common that for them to work long hours, usually in terrible conditions and for a minimum wage. Beside children, women were among those who were most misused for labour where conditions often led to serious illnesses and poor health conditions.⁸ In 1851 over 10 percent of the female population were working as laundress and maids, however, with the increased number of commodities in shops which were previously homemade, women increasingly had less to do.⁹ Women who worked from home were often working for a little money so that they could feed themselves and their little children. In order to provide for themselves, they made different Christmas cards, box decorations or illustrated books for which they received a "starvation wage."¹⁰ Poverty and hunger forced parents who belonged to the working class to send their children to work from an early age. If they were lucky, toddlers were usually in the fields scaring birds. Observing these circumstances, Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote a poem called *Cry of the Children* which talks about children labouring in the mines. Children as young as 5 years had to work over 16 hours a day in terrible conditions.¹¹ Older boys and girls worked in the textile or matchmaking industry. When young ladies were fortunate, they went into service as prospective maids.¹² Only in middle and upper class were children privileged to receive an education, however, education for girls and boys was different in the early Victorian era. After children left

⁶ Altic, *Victorian People and Ideas*, 29.

⁷ Altic, *Victorian People and Ideas*, 52.

⁸ Altic, *Victorian People and Ideas*, 5.

⁹ Altic, *Victorian People and Ideas*, 53.

¹⁰ Altic, *Victorian People and Ideas*, 57.

¹¹ M. H. Abrams, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature. Vol. 2.* 6th ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993), 894.

¹² G.M. Young, *Early Victorian England 1830-1865. Volume I.* (London: Oxford University Press, 1934), 139.

the nursery, boys and girls were allowed to study together for a period of one or two years. After that, boys usually left for a secondary school, whereas girls were taught at home by a governess. In a better case, they could be sent to a boarding school.¹³ This inequality was resolved in 1853, when Cheltenham Ladies' College was established, which afforded a secondary education for girls comparable to that provided to boys. Concerning a higher education, in 1848 the Queen's College was founded at the University of London and two more Women's colleges were founded at Cambridge and Oxford University. However, first degrees were taken by women at both Universities in 1920-1921.¹⁴

As it is obvious, without any regard to their social status, women were seen as "second class citizens."¹⁵ Therefore, nobody took their voice into account. Women were on the very end of the electoral priority list. Another example of the inequality of rights was found in marriage and divorce law. To marry out of love was not an expected kind of behaviour in Victorian period. People were expected to marry someone from their social class. Also, all property which the women possessed became property of their husbands. This was changed gradually during the years 1870 and 1882. In the beginning of the Victorian period, when marriage did not work out for any reason and a husband and a wife were separated, their children were given to the care of the father and their mother lost all custody. This practice changed in 1839, when mothers were allowed to take care of children who were younger than 7 years old. In later years, this age was increased and children could stay with their mother until they were 16 years old. The whole concept of divorce was disapproved topic and a couple could be divorced only for the most unbearable affairs, such as adultery. Though even here were inequalities. A man could divorce his wife without any further proofs, whereas a wife had to provide sufficient evidence of her husband's infidelity and, on the top of that, those men had to be charged with "cruelty, rape, or incest."¹⁶

The darkest side of this historical period was that of prostitution. The women who went down this path closed the door for themselves and were risking not only severe illnesses but also that they would be an outcast in their society. Once they became prostitutes, they could never return and be taken in by their society.

¹³ Young, *Early Victorian England 1830-1865*, 110.

¹⁴ Altic, *Victorian People and Ideas*, 55.

¹⁵ Altic, *Victorian People and Ideas*, 57.

¹⁶ Altic, *Victorian People and Ideas*, 58.

Unfortunately, there were women who became prostitutes to avoid starvation. In other cases, young women were tricked into a brothel by false advertisements. Subsequently, they were held there against their will, by drugs or by force. Even more sorrowful was the age of some of these women. It was recorded, that most of the victims were under the age of twenty. The youngest case in this record included a girl who was only thirteen years old. People at that time considered the topic as taboo and, therefore, many women suffered in silence.¹⁷

To sum up, before the Victorian period, it was hardly possible to speak about any rights for women. It is indeed true that to be born as a woman in Victorian period was not the easiest task to bear, however, there were slow steps taken in favour of women.

¹⁷ See the discussion by Greg William Rathbone, “*The Westminster Review 53.*” In *Aurora Leigh: Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Contexts Criticism*, Margaret Reynolds (USA: W.W. Norton, 1996), 377-386.

2. Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Her Life

“Genius is a flower that grows without sowing it breaks out unforeseen, like the snapdragon on a wall.”¹⁸

There is not a more appropriate way to introduce this following chapter than with this quote, because it describes Elizabeth Barrett Browning precisely. She is considered to be one of the “fieriest geniuses”¹⁹ that England ever produced.²⁰ In the following section I will try to introduce, at least to some extent, the basic information about life and work of this Victorian author.

Elizabeth was born in 1806 as the oldest daughter of Edward Moulton Barrett and Mary Clarke Graham. A few years after she was born, they moved to the country, where Elizabeth experienced a rural way of life which she described in some of her later work.²¹ Her parents were considerably wealthy, because Elizabeth’s father inherited money from his grandfather who was one of the slave-owners. However, great possessions do not mean a perfect marriage. Her father, possibly because of his traditions and upbringing, displayed superiority over his wife and children, accompanied with selfishness, despotic tyranny, and other signs of a psychological disease. Despite his complicated nature he was loved by his children. He was very close with Elizabeth, and it was perhaps her devotion to him which made him love her more than the rest of his children. Therefore, he supported her passion to become a writer.²²

On the other hand, Elizabeth’s mother was described as “pallid and ineffectual”²³ with one main task: to bear children. Elizabeth perceived her mother as a very loving, submissive woman, who quietly accepted her destiny. Her mother died in 1828 leaving behind eleven children. Elizabeth expressed her love towards her mother when she wrote: “For we lost more in her than she lost in life, my dear, dearest mother.”²⁴

Aside from her close relationship with her parents, Elizabeth had a very close relationship with and devotion to her younger brother Edward. He gave her a nickname

¹⁸ Percy Lubbock, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning in Her Letters* (London: John Murray, 1917), 3.

¹⁹ Lubbock, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning in Her Letters*, 3.

²⁰ Lubbock, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning in Her Letters*, 3.

²¹ Lubbock, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning in Her Letters*, 6.

²² Lubbock, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning in Her Letters*, 5-7.

²³ Lubbock, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning in Her Letters*, 3.

²⁴ Lubbock, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning in Her Letters*, 14.

“Ba”²⁵ and this designation remained with her for the rest of her life. She was completely destroyed when he tragically died and his unexpected death was one the greatest tragedies for her, which overshadowed her life. In contrast, she did not have a close relationship with her younger sisters early in her life, however, their relationships changed later.²⁶

Elizabeth was the brightest child in the family, although her health betrayed her and she suffered with various limitations, especially physical ones, which made her the most fragile in the family. Among her passions from an early childhood were reading and writing short rhymes and stories. In one of the letters she wrote to her husband later in life, she called herself a “precocious”²⁷ child, that is a child more mature than her peers. She described how they acted out some of her tragedies in a nursery which she wrote when she was nine years old.²⁸ Without any doubt she was talented from an early age, with eagerness to share her literary enthusiasm with the world.

She joined her brother Edward and together they were taught by his tutor. Percy Lubbock in his work, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning in her letters*, expresses the thought that Elizabeth’s father allowed her to do so perhaps because he himself had an incomplete education and he respected educated people.²⁹ In that way, she received an exceptional education for a woman in the Victorian period. She learned foreign languages, mainly Latin and Greek. She read volumes of history and philosophy.³⁰ Soon it became obvious that Elizabeth was more eager to learn than her brother and results confirmed this observation to be true. Elizabeth became more advanced in speaking Greek than Edward and, later, more advanced than her tutor. Her “world of imagination”³¹ started at this time and she started to love Greece more than her homeland.³²

At the age of 13, she published her first volume of poems. Her father was proud of her and helped her to print out fifty copies, for which he received a “rhetorical dedication”³³ from her. This was the real beginning of her writing career.³⁴ Percy

²⁵ Lubbock, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning in Her Letters*, 9-10.

²⁶ Lubbock, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning in Her Letters*, 9-10.

²⁷ Lubbock, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning in Her Letters*, 7.

²⁸ Lubbock, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning in Her Letters*, 7.

²⁹ Benjamin Franklin, Benjamin et al., *Family Treasury of Great Biographies. Vol. 1.* (Pleasantville: The Reader's Digest Association, 1970), 200.

³⁰ Abrams, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 1029.

³¹ Franklin et al., *Family Treasury of Great Biographies*, 202-204.

³² Franklin et al., *Family Treasury of Great Biographies*, 202-204.

³³ Lubbock, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning in Her Letters*, 10.

³⁴ Lubbock, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning in Her Letters*, 11.

Lubbock, in his book *Elizabeth Barrett Browning in her Letters*, states: “Poetry was to be her life’s work. It was not to be merely a pleasant adornment....it was to be an integral part of her existence, a sacred mission.”³⁵

Elizabeth realised the slippery and unsure future of a poet and did not live under any illusions; she knew that failure was a possibility. She was aware of her inadequacy and little experience, however, despite all of that she was willing to consecrate her life to poetry. Elizabeth also decided to translate several Greek plays, although those translations were not exact, because she missed the point of the Greek literature, because her style was too romantic. She published another work, which saw only a little success, although it attracted attention to her personal life.³⁶

It was during that time, when she moved with her family to London, leaving behind her old life in the countryside. One of the reasons for their move was that the boys were maturing and starting their professions and their father wanted to have his family together. As mentioned earlier in this paper, his despotic behaviour and constant desire to control members of his family were at the worst extreme during their stay in London and people could sense that there was something different about the Barretts. Elizabeth was not immensely excited about their new home, but kept up hope that she could learn how to love life in London.³⁷ Maybe it was her inexperience with the city, or it was her poor health or despotic father, that made her transition less delightful. However, at the age of twenty-nine and with the help of her uncle John Kenyon, she found a circle of people of a poet generation who had already heard about her and were interested in meeting with her. Among those people were, for example, the famed William Wordsworth, who wished to see her again during his next visit to London. Unfortunately, she left many people without any response and was closed in her own little world.³⁸ Although she did not meet with many people and did not let many visitors into her house, she did exchange letters with many of her friends.³⁹

She spent most of her days lying on a sofa in a small dark room in London, reading different literature in different languages and writing poems, stories, and other works. This was because her health got gradually worse and made it almost impossible

³⁵ Lubbock, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning in Her Letters*, 17.

³⁶ Lubbock, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning in Her Letters*, 18.

³⁷ Lubbock, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning in Her Letters*, 21.

³⁸ Lubbock, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning in Her Letters*, 25-27.

³⁹ Lubbock, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning in Her Letters*, 60.

for her to leave the house. Elizabeth could write her poetry anywhere. She used scraps of paper and rested them on her knees, while she was creating poetry.⁴⁰ In 1838, the same year she published her collection *The Seraphim and other Poems*⁴¹ it became clear, that she had to move to Torquay, because she would not survive another London winter. Her beloved brother Edward was her companion during her stay there. She became so severely ill that there was no chance for her to return to London any time soon. She was bedbound. Her family visited her now and then, but again, as it was during her stay in London, she did not meet with anyone else. The devotion and love of her brother and his presence was sufficient in the midst of her trials. Nevertheless, the fates gave her a heavy blow. One day her brother decided to go on a boat trip with his two friends, experienced sailors, but they never returned from their adventure and their bodies were never found. This tragedy left Elizabeth with deep wounds, completely devastated.⁴² “And, in the silence of my evening prayer, /Thou shalt not be forgot — thy dear name shall be there!”⁴³ She composed Edward a poem, reassuring her love to him, and expressing that she would never forget him.

After a period of mourning, it had become clear to her there began a time of return. First, to poetry, which used to be so dear to her. She managed to do so with help of her friends and second, a return to London, although her health was still extremely poor and it took a major effort to get her safely back to London. She spent the next five years there, and until she got married, she had never left again.⁴⁴

Elizabeth met Robert Browning, her future husband, thanks to their common friend, John Kenyon. Later on, while exchanging letters, Elizabeth wrote to Robert:

“Kenyon often speaks of you—dear Mr. Kenyon!—who most unspeakably, or only speakably with tears in my eyes,—has been true friend of all hours! You know him well enough, I think, to understand that I must be grateful to him.”⁴⁵

From this part of her letter it is obvious that Kenyon and Browning were close friends. In the last part, where Elizabeth expressed her gratitude for Mr. Kenyon, there

⁴⁰ Franklin et al., *Family Treasury of Great Biographies*, 291.

⁴¹ Franklin et al., *Family Treasury of Great Biographies*, 232.

⁴² Lubbock, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning in Her Letters*, 36-39.

⁴³ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *The Poetical Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (London: Smith, Elder & co., 1897), 51.

⁴⁴ Lubbock, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning in Her Letters*, 41,42.

⁴⁵ Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Barrett: 1845-1846. Vol. I.* (London: Smith, Elder & co., 1899), 4.

can be found an ambiguity. Not only could she be grateful for all his help with literature, which she received from Kenyon during her poetry career, but also- these words of thanks could be words of gratitude for the introduction he gave to her future husband.

Robert Browning was almost an unknown poet at that time, often misunderstood, because of his experimental ways of writing. He became more popular after the death of Elizabeth and in the twentieth century even influenced two literary movements.⁴⁶ He was described as an uncommunicative, self-reliant person, who had only a few friends around him and who had never been in love. Yet, when he sent his first letter to Elizabeth, full of admiration, it read:

“I love your verses with all my heart, dear Miss Barrett.— Since the day last week when I first read your poems, I quite laugh to remember how I have been turning and turning again in my mind what I should be able to tell you of their effect upon me, for in the first flush of delight I thought I would this once get out of my habit of purely passive enjoyment, when I do really enjoy, and thoroughly justify my admiration. I do as I say, love these books with all my heart— and I love you too.”⁴⁷

As mentioned above, Robert was a reserved person and his letter which stated how much he admired Elizabeth’s poetry evokes a feeling of a hidden adoration not only towards her art, but also towards herself. This letter started a new chapter of Elizabeth’s life. She responded to Robert eagerly and the time intervals between exchanging their letters quickly shortened.⁴⁸ Topics of their correspondence varied-in the beginning of their relationship, the topics were almost exclusively concerning literature with slight signs of intimacy, until their first meeting at Elizabeth’s house.⁴⁹

After their first meeting Robert became a frequent guest at her house. The rest of Elizabeth’s family acknowledged him as “Ba’s friend”⁵⁰ but he was not their acquaintance, and Robert and Elizabeth thought it was for the best. Especially Elizabeth’s father was kept in ignorance.⁵¹ Presumably because of his possessive nature, mentioned earlier. Her father did not want his children to get married⁵². He had his

⁴⁶ Abrams, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 1182.

⁴⁷ Browning, *The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Barrett*, 1.

⁴⁸ Lubbock, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning in Her Letters*, 78.

⁴⁹ Lubbock, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning in Her Letters*, 85.

⁵⁰ Lubbock, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning in Her Letters*, 97.

⁵¹ Lubbock, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning in Her Letters*, 97.

⁵² Abrams, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 1029.

patterns established and did not want any changes to it.⁵³ On account of that, their relationship had to be kept in secret, and when it became clear that they wanted to spend the rest of their lives together, they began making plans to get married and to run away to Italy. On the 12th of September 1846, in the presence of two witnesses they were married. Then she wrote a letter to her father, asking him for forgiveness, and set off on a journey to freedom with her husband.⁵⁴

Elizabeth was sorrowful that her father was deeply disappointed with her decision to elope to Italy and he refused to communicate with her. Nevertheless, she still kept up hope that one day his heart would be softened and that he would forgive her. The Brownings had their first son, only after Elizabeth had several miscarriages.⁵⁵ They named him after Robert's mother's maiden name and also after Elizabeth's maiden name. Even this news about a grandchild did not soften Elizabeth father's heart and her letter still remained unanswered.⁵⁶ Later, Elizabeth's father showed her that his bitterness was everlasting by sending her back all her letters unopened.

Elizabeth composed sonnets to express her love to Robert. He insisted that she should publish them. At first, she did not want to hear about it, but thankfully she reconsidered. With that, the world could read a great collection of *Sonnets from the Portuguese*.⁵⁷ In her sonnets, as well as in other works, Elizabeth sometimes used words written in the letters to Robert,⁵⁸ where she described her devotion to her husband.:

“How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
With my lost saints. I love thee with the breath,
Smiles, tears, of all my life; and, if God choose,
I shall but love thee better after death.”⁵⁹

⁵³ Franklin et al., *Family Treasury of Great Biographies*, 219.

⁵⁴ See the discussion in: Franklin et al., *Family Treasury of Great Biographies*, 272,277-279.

⁵⁵ Franklin et al., *Family Treasury of Great Biographies*, 289.

⁵⁶ Franklin et al., *Family Treasury of Great Biographies*, 293, 301.

⁵⁷ See the discussion in: Franklin et al., *Family Treasury of Great Biographies*, 272, 277-294.

⁵⁸ Franklin et al., *Family Treasury of Great Biographies*, 287.

⁵⁹ Browning, *The Poetical Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, 321.

Robert was also devoted to his wife, he realised what a blessed man he was to call Elizabeth his, for she was a genius and he was well aware of that. He affirmed this view when he said: “I kissed your feet, before I married you, but now I would kiss the ground under your feet, I love you with so much greater love.”⁶⁰

Time magazine wrote about their relationship: “The love story of the Brownings is just as exciting as the semi-fictional versions of it, and far more warmly human.” Robert was supportive of her and she of him. Although she knew her worth, her strengths and weaknesses, she thought that he was a marvellous poet and put him above herself. She expressed these thoughts in her most famous work, *Aurora Leigh*.⁶¹ She worked on this masterpiece several years and finished it in 1856.⁶²

Perhaps it was their love that helped them to withstand Elizabeth’s father’s fury and helped them through health and other life struggles. However, there was an interesting observation when she was in Italy. Almost all symptoms of sickness disappeared and she was healthy as never before. When they returned to London, her health got worse and old symptoms came back.⁶³

They lived eleven years in Italy, though, now and then, they travelled back to London and spent a part of their life in Paris. Elizabeth did not write much around her late fifties, however, she and her husband travelled much.⁶⁴

She died in June 29, 1861 in Florence because of a lung condition. Robert was taking care of her until the last day. He wore her wedding ring on his watch chain till the end of his life.⁶⁵ Robert was devastated when the love of his life left him as it is obvious from his letter to his sister: “The future is nothing to me now, except inasmuch as it confirms and realizes the past.”⁶⁶

With the death of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the world lost one of its important women poets, who was not afraid to reach for her dreams, which showed from the beginning, for instance when she studied hard and outperformed her brother in the knowledge of foreign languages. Secondly, when she overcame hardships she encountered in life, especially with her health problems. Elizabeth was not afraid to

⁶⁰ Franklin et al., *Family Treasury of Great Biographies*, 281-282.

⁶¹ Franklin et al., *Family Treasury of Great Biographies*, 308.

⁶² Browning, Elizabeth Barrett. *Aurora Leigh* (Praha: Jan Laichter, 1911), Vii.

⁶³ See the discussion in: Abrams, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 103. and Franklin et al., *Family Treasury of Great Biographies*, 281-282, 301.

⁶⁴ See the discussion in: Franklin et al., *Family Treasury of Great Biographies*, 302, 317, 323.

⁶⁵ Franklin et al., *Family Treasury of Great Biographies*, 302, 322.

⁶⁶ Franklin et al., *Family Treasury of Great Biographies*, 321.

fight for her rights and to follow her heart, like when she eloped with Robert Browning, her husband. They were a couple, devoted to each other, an example of everlasting love. She left a legacy to all future women poets and made a significant contribution when she wrote the work *Aurora Leigh*. This influenced other writers, not only in her time, but also in later centuries.⁶⁷ To conclude this chapter, it is important to say, that the life and challenges which Elizabeth faced had significant impact on her idea of writing *Aurora Leigh*, and by understanding her life, it is easier to understand this work and its main character, Aurora Leigh.

⁶⁷ Abrams, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 1030.

3. Picture of Victorian Women in “Aurora Leigh”

In the following section I am going to further examine the depiction of Victorian women, as perceived by Elizabeth Barrett Browning in her poem, “Aurora Leigh.” It is important to keep in mind that as I mentioned earlier in this paper, there were different ranks at that period and Aurora Leigh is mostly concerned with women in the middle class. However, Elizabeth also mentioned several women from other classes across her work and I am going to look at women from each rank more closely to paint a more complete picture of women in this period.

To better understand the whole concept Aurora Leigh, it is also important to acknowledge some basic characteristics of poets’ writing styles in the Victorian period. For instance, one of those methods was to use variety in style and in their main theme. Another characteristic in this period was the writers’ excitement to try something new, to create a so-called “modern poem.”⁶⁸ Almost all Victorian poets wanted to experiment in some way, for example with unusual metrical patterns, or with developing new ways to tell a story. Thus, a new style was developed called “a poetic narration”.⁶⁹ This style allowed poets to tell a story in verse, which is also the style in which Aurora Leigh is written.⁷⁰ Barret Browning could have written a novel, but that was not her purpose, she believed that poetry was more valued then pure fiction.⁷¹

Many Victorian works were concerned with topics of the past and myths. Some historians claim that, on one hand:

Although we may confidently identify the distinguishing characteristics of individual Victorian writers, it is extremely difficult to devise satisfactory statements about Victorian literature that are generally applicable to most or all writers. On the other hand, we can depict frequently recurring topics of the problems people were dealing with in the nineteenth century, questions concerning humanity’s relationship with God, the questions of time, past, present and future, and, specifically among poets, the main questions of love and gender roles.”⁷²

⁶⁸ Abrams, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 904.

⁶⁹ Abrams, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 904.

⁷⁰ Abrams, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 904.

⁷¹ David Deidre, *From Intellectual Women and Victorian Patriarchy* (London: Macmillan, 1987), 105.

⁷² Abrams, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 906.

The early- and mid- Victorian literature was influenced by strictly puritan society, therefore many writers were careful not to touch on taboo topics. Although there were exceptions to that, Elizabeth Barrett Browning being one of them.⁷³ Barret Browning realised that her work would be most likely prohibited for little girls because of the fate of some characters, as I will discuss later, and also for often unconventional views for her time about society. For instance, she was not afraid to point out the fact that middle class women had only little work to do during their day⁷⁴ as demonstrated in this excerpt from her poem *Aurora Leigh*:

“The works of women are symbolical.
We sew, sew, prick our fingers
Or else at best, a cushion, where you lean
And sleep, and dream of something we are not.”⁷⁵

Elizabeth Barret Browning in her letter to her sister described that she wanted *Aurora* to be her best work, and different from her all work or anybody else’s work.⁷⁶ Percy Lubbock says: “*Aurora Leigh* in the monologue spoken straight from the mind of the author.”⁷⁷ When *Aurora Leigh* was published, it had immediate success. It was sold out and within a month it was required to publish a third edition. David Deirdre in his work *From Intellectual Women and Victorian Patriarchy* explains: “For some, *Aurora Leigh* is revolutionary- a passionate indictment of patriarchy that speaks the resentment of the Victorian woman poet through a language of bold female imagery. For others, the poem is less explosive, and Barrett Browning's liberal feminism is seen as compromised by *Aurora's* eventual dedication to a life governed by traditionally male directives.”⁷⁸ Perchance this statement explains the great success. However, there were also critics who disliked not only this work, but also Elizabeth Barrett Browning and her writing style in general. For instance, Marjory A. Bald called Elizabeth in her work *Women Writers of the Nineteenth Century* “weak, foolishly praised, woman, feeble in spirit as

⁷³ Abrams, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 904-95.

⁷⁴ Abrams, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 903.

⁷⁵ Browning, Elizabeth Barrett, *Aurora Leigh* (London: Smith, Elder & co., 1883.), 17.

⁷⁶ Elizabeth Barrett Browning & Robert Browning, *Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning & Robert Browning on Aurora Leigh*. In Margaret Reynolds, *Aurora Leigh: Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Contexts Criticism* (USA: W.W. Norton, 1996), 332.

⁷⁷ Lubbock, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning in Her Letters*, 316.

⁷⁸ Deidre, *From Intellectual Women and Victorian Patriarchy*, 98.

well as body.”⁷⁹ It is obvious that there were two branches of opinions. I am going to work with this work for a simple reason. Elizabeth Barrett Browning lived in the Victorian period and I am convinced that her life experiences helped toward writing an authentic work, which helps its readers to understand life and conditions of women at that time.

The story itself is very simple, and that is what readers appreciated as well as the topic of the book, which was not connected with their current political situation.⁸⁰ Professor Cora Kaplan observed: “(It’s) the first work in English by a woman writer in which the heroine herself is an author.”⁸¹ Therefore, there is no doubt that when Barrett Browning said she put her all into this work, she meant it literally, for she is the real main character. She was able to express herself, her views, her ideas and perceptions of the world, work, beauty and relationships. Therefore, when I am describing views and opinions of Aurora Leigh in this thesis, they are nothing else but the thoughts of the author, herself.

Barrett Browning’s style of poetry improved from the beginning of her writing career and she was able to play with passion, rhetoric and variety which made this poem a “living poetry”⁸² My understanding of this term is that therefore the world can read about the life led by women born into the Victorian period, but it also has a timeless frame and the world can learn from it in this day, as well.

The first woman I would like to focus on is Aurora’s aunt. In the beginning of the book, the tragic destiny of the death of Aurora’s mother and father is narrated, which meant that Aurora was taken into the custody of her aunt, her father’s sister. As described in the book, the aunt represents a typical Victorian woman, by appearance⁸³ and also by her demands of Aurora. She wanted Aurora to look and behave as a proper English young woman in Victorian era: “I broke the copious curls upon my head/ In braids, because she liked smooth-ordered hair.”⁸⁴

This illustration is a requirement of Aurora’s conventional aunt to have control over her hair. The braids create an allusion, firstly to the conventional Victorian society,

⁷⁹ Marjory A. Bald, “Women of the Nineteenth Century.” In *Aurora Leigh: Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Contexts Criticism*, Margaret Reynolds (USA: W.W. Norton, 1996), 432.

⁸⁰ Franklin et al., *Family Treasury of Great Biographies*, 316.

⁸¹ Abrams, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 1030.

⁸² Lubbock, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning in Her Letters*, n.77.

⁸³ Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, 13.

⁸⁴ Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, 14.

and secondly, they symbolize the desire to have control over the freedom of women. Aurora felt that desire more or less throughout the book, where she mentioned her desire for more liberty:⁸⁵

“And I breathe large at home. I drop my cloak,
Unclasp my girdle, loose the band that ties
My hair ... now could I but unloose my soul!
We are sepulchred alive in this close world,
And want more room.”⁸⁶

For the reason that the Leigh family came from a higher class, Aurora’s aunt insisted on Aurora’s education and so she began learning things appropriate for a woman her age. Her instruction included curriculum such as various languages, genealogies, mathematics and also Christian articles, at the direction of her pious aunt.⁸⁷ Apart from that, Aurora was supposed to learn how to work with a needle and to do other typical women’s work because her aunt liked a “woman to be womanly,”⁸⁸ especially an English woman. These were, according to her, the role models for women in the world.⁸⁹ Therefore, she was displeased when she found Aurora doing nothing and, due to that, she was constantly inquiring to know her every step⁹⁰:

“Aurora, have you done
Your task this morning?—have you read that book?
And are you ready for the crochet here?”⁹¹

It was a kind of oppression for Aurora, as free-minded as she was and aware of it. She openly confessed that she hated those years and patterns of education forced on her by the aunt. To escape this conservative distress, Aurora found solace among her father’s books, in nature and also when she was able to spend time with her cousin,

⁸⁵ Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, 90.

⁸⁶ Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, 218.

⁸⁷ Abrams, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 1037.

⁸⁸ Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, 16.

⁸⁹ Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, 16.

⁹⁰ Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, 17.

⁹¹ Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, 38.

Romney Leigh.⁹²

In my opinion, the character of the aunt, as described by Barrett Browning in this work, is a symbol of conventional Victorian ideas of what women should and should not do and how they should look, speak and spend their leisure time. The aunt was not bad nor evil, she only wanted Aurora to receive the standard education which was common for women of their rank and to acquire the knowledge of “true womanhood.”⁹³

However, the character of the “evil villain”⁹⁴ of some sort, can be also found in the book. Lady Waldemar is the second woman I take an interest in describing. She was a woman from an upper rank, and her attitude and appearance, as it is described, was typical of a woman, from a rich aristocratic family:

“She had the low voice of your English dames.

. . .

So gentle, because verily so proud;

But that they would not touch you with their foot

She said her name quite simply, as if it meant

Not much indeed, but something.”⁹⁵

This excerpt describes the perception which Aurora had of Lady Waldemar, when she saw her for the first time. She was beautiful and she knew it, she wore expensive clothes and did her best to look beautiful, even “immortal.”⁹⁶ She also participated in charity work to show good Christian manners.⁹⁷ This description, which explains the slight superiority of a higher class, goes well with the typical interests of women from the aristocracy, as discussed earlier in this thesis. In contrary, David Deidre stated that: “Lady Waldemar is an example of the sexual lasciviousness of the

⁹² Abrams, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 1039.

⁹³ Marjorie Stone, “Genre Subversion and Genre Inversion: *The Princess and Aurora Leigh*.” In *Aurora Leigh: Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Contexts Criticism*, Margaret Reynolds (USA: W.W. Norton, 1996), 496.

⁹⁴ J. M. S. Tompkins, “*Aurora’s Mistakes*.” In *Aurora Leigh: Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Contexts Criticism*, Margaret Reynolds (USA: W.W. Norton, 1996), 447.

⁹⁵ Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, 101.

⁹⁶ Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, 203.

⁹⁷ Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, 172.

aristocracy, and the provincial narrow-mindedness of the gentry.”⁹⁸ This statement proved to be true in both cases.

Firstly, at the further description of Lady Waldemar which seems to be done with a slight tone of dalliance: “Those alabaster shoulders and bare breasts,/ On which the pearls, drowned out of sight in milk.”⁹⁹ Lady Waldemar’s appearance is described as seductive in her behaviour, and her style of clothing completes this impression.

Secondly, where Lady Waldemar characterizes the narrow-mindedness of people of her rank was when she was not happy when Romney wanted to marry a girl called Marian, from a lower class. Not only did Lady Waldemar not approve of this idea, she wanted him for herself. Unfortunately, she was not the only one who did not want this inter-class marriage to happen. Other people from the aristocracy, who came to the wedding, were in favour of Lady Waldemar: “She’d have served him more/ By marrying him herself.”¹⁰⁰

There is no doubt that Aurora despites this aristocratic lady and when she learned what Lady Waldemar had done to Marian, she expressed her disgust openly:

“I never liked the woman’s face, or voice,
Or ways: it made me blush to look at her;
It made me tremble if she touched my hand;
And when she spoke a fondling word, I shrank,
As if one hated me, who had power to hurt;
And, every time she came, my veins ran cold,
As somebody were walking on my grave.”¹⁰¹

From my point of view, Barrett Browning picked one character to introduce her view on the whole thinking of the aristocratic class and, now and then, added more evidence to stress their dogmatic and conventional ideas.

Likely to express the views with which Barrett Browning agreed, the person whom Aurora loved was Marian Erle, who is the third woman I would like to focus on

⁹⁸ Deidre, *From Intellectual Women and Victorian Patriarchy*, 103-113.

⁹⁹ Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, 203.

¹⁰⁰ Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, 158.

¹⁰¹ Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, 270.

in my thesis.

As I mentioned above, unlike the rest of the female characters in the book Marian came from a working class. Contrary to Lady Waldemar she did not inherit extreme beauty nor did she wear costly apparel. She was a daughter of a drover and worked as a seamstress.¹⁰² Firstly, this suggests an example of a typical woman from a low rank who has to work to provide for herself. Although some critics argue that, for a woman from a low rank, Marian's rich and sometimes poetic vocabulary does correspond with that of poor people.¹⁰³ Secondly, Marian can be a symbol and an example of the "woman of the people"¹⁰⁴ which is illustrated mainly by her service to others and later by her devotion to her child.¹⁰⁵ For instance, when her co-worker, Lucy, was dying she left her work place and went to care for her, rather fearing what God would think of her than what other people might think:

"She could not leave a solitary soul
To founder in the dark, while she sate still.—
This moment; Lucy wants a drink, perhaps.
Let others miss me! never miss me, God!"¹⁰⁶

Marian, as depicted in the book, is an example of innocence and of selfless service, not expecting anything in return, and especially not to being thanked for her good deeds.

"When Lucy thanked her sometimes, called her kind,
It touched her strangely. 'Marian Erle, called kind!
What, Marian, beaten and sold, who could not die!
'Tis verily good fortune to be kind."¹⁰⁷

¹⁰² Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, 113.

¹⁰³ Deidre, *From Intellectual Women and Victorian Patriarchy*, 114.

¹⁰⁴ Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, "*The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination.*" In *Aurora Leigh: Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Contexts Criticism*, Margaret Reynolds (USA: W.W. Norton, 1996), 458.

¹⁰⁵ Gilbert et al., *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 458.

¹⁰⁶ Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, 137.

¹⁰⁷ Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, 137.

Perhaps her kindness was one of the reasons why she caught the attention of Romney Leigh. Therefore, I would like to discuss a clash between convention and love. It was not advised for a man to marry someone who did not belong to the same rank. It was seen as breaking up the “social system.”¹⁰⁸ Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their work *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth- Century Literary Imagination* suggest that Romney wanted to marry Marian to show “social equality.”¹⁰⁹ Romney was in love with her and surprisingly did not take in account conventions or what other people would think about him, as it is obvious from this part of his conversation with Aurora:

“I take my wife

Directly from the people,—and she comes,

...

And wed me at St. James’s, nor put off

Her gown of serge for that. The things we do,

We do: we’ll wear no mask, as if we blushed.”¹¹⁰

He believed that there was nothing wrong about this inter-class marriage, however, there were other people from the aristocracy, who did not agree with Romney, namely Lady Waldemar, who can to be seen as a symbol of conventionality. Thus, she decided to stop this intended marriage and made Marian believe lies about Romney’s love:

“She told me truths I asked for ...—

‘That Romney could not love me, if he would,

As men call loving; there are bloods that flow”¹¹¹

Marian was aware of the fact she did not belong to his class when she said: “If marriage be a contract, / look to it then, contracting parties should be equal, just.”¹¹² This statement brings me to the conclusion that it was one of the main reasons why she

¹⁰⁸ Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, 115.

¹⁰⁹ Gilbert et al., *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 460.

¹¹⁰ Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, 148.

¹¹¹ Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, 265.

¹¹² Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, 142.

believed Lady Waldemar who said that because of her class origin Romney lied to her and could not truly love her. Believing so, Marian left Romney at the altar. She left him because she loved him deeply and she did not want to hurt him.¹¹³ The clash between these two women can be understood as Barrett Browning's depiction of a clash of the rich and the poor and the destiny of Marian was the reason for many critics to condemn this character.¹¹⁴

The reason for this is because Barret Browning touched another taboo topic of the Victorian period. When she described that Marian was a victim of a fraud when she got into a brothel, where she was raped and ended up with a child. Luckily, she managed to escape.¹¹⁵ As I mentioned earlier in this thesis, Marian symbolizes ordinary women from the lowest class and prostitution was one of the controversial topics, at that time, which was connected with the loss of innocence and decadence of women which had the consequence that such a woman was cast out of society. There is also one more mention of the hypocrisy of the higher class in the book, illustrated when Marian's mistress found out about her pregnancy. She told her to leave her house and condemned her, although she herself had a relationship outside of her marriage:

“Yet she herself,
A wife, I think, had scandals of her own,
A lover, not her husband.’
‘Ay,’ she said,
‘But gold and meal are measured otherwise;
I learnt so much at school,’ said Marian Erle.”¹¹⁶

This passage shows that women from the higher class were judged less harshly for their mistakes, although they did not hold back while judging others, especially people from the lower class.

However, Barret Browning described Marian as a victim of the cruelty and it was not her choice to live this kind of lifestyle, nor was it her choice to break any of God's given commandments. She accepted her destiny and did not judge her mistress

¹¹³ Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, 171, 264-266.

¹¹⁴ Deidre, *From Intellectual Women and Victorian Patriarchy*, 114.

¹¹⁵ Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, 250.

¹¹⁶ Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, 278.

for not understanding her condition. Thus, she showed better moral standards than the representative from a higher class. Moreover, when Marian decided to speak openly with Aurora about her experience, it was a sign of standing up for women's rights and accusing the public of ignorance. People in this period were overlooking the inequality that was the plight of women at that time.¹¹⁷ Angela Leighton states in her work about this topic: "Not only, therefore, does Barrett Browning provocatively assume the moral and political right to speak, but she also accuses the guardians of decency and delicacy of being themselves corrupt."¹¹⁸ Angela Leighton goes on explaining that one of the things Barrett Browning wanted to point out was that if women were silent about the wrongs which have been done to other women, then there is an endless circle of women's suffering.¹¹⁹ Therefore, on one hand, there is Lady Waldemar, who is silent although she was, in reality, partially responsible for Marian's tragedy. On the other hand, there is Aurora who stood up for Marian and decided to take care of her:

"Come with me rather, where we'll talk and live,
And none shall vex us. I've a home for you
And me and no one else'"¹²⁰

Aurora wanted to help Marian and she wanted to be a support for her, but she was not aware of the fact that Marian had other commitments- towards her child:

"She looked the whiter for her smile.
'There's one at home,' she said, 'has need of me
By this time,—and I must not let him wait."¹²¹

Thus, there is one more aspect I would like to discuss which Aurora learnt from Marian's example- and that is the love of a mother for a child. Marian refused to go with Aurora on the conditions she suggested- that is alone- because she had a little baby who was waiting for her at home. Even though this baby was seen as a curse and the

¹¹⁷ Angela Leighton "Come With Me My Sweetest Sister': *The Poet's Last Quest*" in *Aurora Leigh: Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Contexts Criticism*, Margaret Reynolds (USA: W.W. Norton, 1996), 475.

¹¹⁸ Leighton, "Come With Me My Sweetest Sister': *The Poet's Last Quest*", 476.

¹¹⁹ Leighton, "Come With Me My Sweetest Sister': *The Poet's Last Quest*" 476.

¹²⁰ Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, 245.

¹²¹ Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, 246-47.

reason why Marian, as a single mother, stood at the edge of society¹²² she refused to give him up because she loved him dearly, in fact, she admitted that it was her child who kept her alive after her appalling experience:

“I’m nothing more
but just a mother. Only for the child,
I’m warm, and cold, and hungry, and afraid,
And smell the flowers a little, and see the sun,
And speak still, and am silent,—just for him!”¹²³

Perhaps it was these words from Marian which awoke in Aurora the denied feelings of womanhood and also maternity. Aurora insisted on taking care of Marian and her child. She decided not to judge Mariann and assured her that she is there for her because she loved her.¹²⁴ Thus in a sense, she became a “mother to Marian.”¹²⁵ Marian’s words mentioned above: “I’m nothing more but just a mother,” should draw attention to all women. As I mentioned in previous paragraphs, Marian was a fallen woman who was at the edge of society because she had her child out of wedlock. She understood that the only role left for her was to be a mother. Although it was the expectation of women, at that time, to be mothers and there was not much more expected of them, as it is obvious from Aurora’s thoughts earlier in the book. However, in my opinion to be a mother should not be seen as something inferior in any period of times. Therefore, I appreciate that Barrett Browning let this character make a decision to play the role of mother and to be responsible for an entrusted child even though that care had the consequence of being an outcast.

The last woman I want to focus on is the main character herself, Aurora Leigh. In contrast to all other women described above, young Aurora Leigh, as described by Barrett Browning, is a symbol of a modern thinking woman for the Victorian period. She was looking for ways to prove that, as a woman, she had the same rights as men and that women should freely do what they loved:

¹²² Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, 253, 277.

¹²³ Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, 259.

¹²⁴ Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, 254-57.

¹²⁵ Deidre, *From Intellectual Women and Victorian Patriarchy*, 115.

“For me, I wrote
False poems, like the rest, and thought them true,
Because myself was true in writing them.”¹²⁶

Aurora found her passion in writing poetry. At this point, this main character closely resembles the author herself.

In my thesis, I have focused on different kinds of women and, in my opinion, Aurora is the most progressive one because she wants to pursue her dreams of becoming a poet. Aurora does not settle for the conventional expectations which society had for people from her rank and for women in general. This was first illustrated when Aurora stated to her aunt: “But I am born, I said with firmness, / To walk another way than this, dear aunt.”¹²⁷ She proved this statement by trying to change a conventional view of men’s and women’s roles in society, which can be demonstrated with the examples of her education, her career as a poetess and her view of marriage and love.

As I discussed earlier in this thesis, Aurora’s aunt wanted her to receive the standard education for a young Victorian woman. However, she was not the only one who educated Aurora. She was taught previously by her father when she was growing up in Italy, who gave her education which was “wholly male.”¹²⁸ It became clear that by being a woman, she was automatically seen as weak.¹²⁹ First, when she studied “the ideology of true womanhood”¹³⁰ as it was presented to her by the aunt:

“I read a score of books on womanhood
To prove, if women do not think at all,
They may teach thinking.”¹³¹

¹²⁶ Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, 37.

¹²⁷ Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, 64.

¹²⁸ Stone, *Genre Subversion and Genre Inversion: The Princess and Aurora Leigh*, 496.

¹²⁹ Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, 52.

¹³⁰ Stone, *Genre Subversion and Genre Inversion: The Princess and Aurora Leigh*, 496.

¹³¹ Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, 16.

Second, when she heard doubtful thoughts of her cousin Romney about her dream to be a poetess:

“...If your sex is weak for art,
(And I who said so, did but honour you
By using truth in courtship) it is strong
For life and duty.

...

We get no Christ from you,—and verily
We shall not get a poet, in my mind.”¹³²

However, she wanted to show that she is wholly dedicated to poetry. She wanted to prove that women can also create and wanted to take the risk by becoming poetess herself.¹³³ She realised that if she wanted to pursue this career, she would have to “redefine herself as a man,”¹³⁴ that is, to distant herself from the conventional expectations of women and to go against standards of that time. Therefore, she made plans to go to London where she wanted to have her own place and to write poetry.¹³⁵ She wished people around her could understand and accept, that not only men should have the privilege to work as poets or in any other kind of job, and that not only males should be seen as heroes, though that was typical for their time:

“All actual heroes are essential men
And all men are possible heroes: every age,
Heroic in proportions, double-faced,
Looks backward and before, expects a morn

¹³² Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, 51, 56-7.

¹³³ Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, 61.

¹³⁴ Joyce Zonana, “‘The Embodied Muse’: Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* and Feminist Poetics.” In *Aurora Leigh: Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Contexts Criticism*, Margaret Reynolds (USA: W.W. Norton, 1996), 524.

¹³⁵ Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, 86.

And claims an epos.”¹³⁶

About this response Marjory A. Bald stated, that it was Barrett Browning’s own projected experience with misjudgement of the world around her.¹³⁷

On the top of that, she wanted to accomplish more than to sit at home as a housewife and to be a helpmeet for her husband, as Romney suggested to her:

“Women as you are,
Mere women, personal and passionate,
You give us doating mothers, and chaste wives,
Sublime Madonnas, and enduring saints!”¹³⁸

In this conversation Romney represented the typical conventional opinion of men about wives and marriage in the Victorian period. Aurora’s response to this was a demonstration to stand up against all conventions and beliefs of their society:

“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!”
Your cause is noble, your ends excellent,
But I, being most unworthy of these and that,
Do otherwise conceive of love...”¹³⁹

Aurora refuses him and his proposal, for she feels that he had his “social theory”¹⁴⁰ as his wife.¹⁴¹ If she would have married him, she thought she would have lost not only her freedom, but also her soul. I believe that it was caused by her presumption and observation that as a married woman, she would have to stay at home in seclusion:

¹³⁶ Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, 186.

¹³⁷ Bald, *Women of the Nineteenth Century*, 435.

¹³⁸ Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, 51.

¹³⁹ Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, 57.

¹⁴⁰ Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, 58.

¹⁴¹ Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, 58.

“A woman’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.”¹⁴²

I would like to point out couple of facts. First, she was promised to Romney the day she was born.¹⁴³ However, when he came to claim his “right,” that is Aurora, he was refused. Second, she wanted to marry out of love.¹⁴⁴ She expressed that she would rather die poor, than to marry somebody she did not love as she explained to her aunt. According to this example it seems to me that in the Victorian period it was not uncommon that people were promised to someone when they were born. Also, I assume, that marriage with a wealthy man could bring financial stability for a woman and that was a desirable wish of young girls in the Victorian period. It was also desired especially by their parents or guardians, as demonstrated by the aunt’s dissenting reaction.¹⁴⁵ Aurora broke this conventional idea by choosing to follow her career and by refusing love: “I would not be a woman like the rest,/A simple woman who believes in love.”¹⁴⁶ By doing so, she became a blossoming poetess, however, later on she realised that in order to be more successful and complete, she had to “renounce her womanhood.”¹⁴⁷ As I mentioned above in this thesis, this process was partially inspired by the example of Marian and her motherly love towards her child. To quote from work *Gender and Genre Society: Elizabeth Barrett Browning and H.D. as Epic Poet* by Stanford Friedman: “Aurora’s enchantment with Marian does not have to be read as her capitulation to conventional Victorian motherhood...Her love for Marian represents her acceptance of her own womanhood.”¹⁴⁸ This statement is supported by the views of Joyce Zonana, who said said: “Aurora’s final maturation as a woman and as a poet comes when she acknowledges and articulates her love for Romney.”¹⁴⁹ They have a point in thinking like that. Thus, my view is that Aurora has changed and matured and

¹⁴² Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, 55.

¹⁴³ Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, 66.

¹⁴⁴ Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, 73.

¹⁴⁵ Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, 67.

¹⁴⁶ Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, 392.

¹⁴⁷ Susan Stanford Friedman, “*Gender and Genre Society: Elizabeth Barrett Browning and H.D. as Epic Poets.*” In *Aurora Leigh: Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Contexts Criticism*, Margaret Reynolds (USA: W.W. Norton, 1996), 468.

¹⁴⁸ Friedman, *Gender and Genre Society: Elizabeth Barrett Browning and H.D. as Epic Poets*, 471.

¹⁴⁹ Zonana, *The Embodied Muse’: Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Aurora Leigh and Feminist Poetics*, 526.

her views came to the conclusion that in order for her to be fully happy and successful, she needed both. Her passion, which was poetry, together with love.¹⁵⁰:

“O Art, my Art, thou’rt much, but Love is more!
Art symbolises heaven, but Love is God
And makes heaven. I, Aurora, fell from mine:
.
.
.
And owns the right of love because she loves,
And, hearing she’s beloved, is satisfied”¹⁵¹

Aurora realised, that she had loved Romney all along but had been too proud to admit it until she confessed that love is more important, than art.¹⁵² It is interesting to observe, that now when she decided to be with Romney, she likely had to literally become a helpmeet to him because of his new condition. He had become blind.¹⁵³ Thus, I believe, this is a sign of her maturity and humility, which she gained. However, I do not think that she lost anything or that she became a slave, as she had feared she would in the beginning, by her agreement to marry Romney.

I entirely agree with Romney’s view about men and women, when he said: “Men and women make/ The world, as head and heart make human life.”¹⁵⁴ To explain this statement, in the Victorian era they believed that women were more sensitive, therefore, they compared them with the heart. Men were believed to have more reason, therefore they compared them with the head. Barret Browning wanted to cross out this conventional belief and I really appreciate how she explained that both men and women are important to create the complete society. This, Romney’s statement, meant that he also changed his view. He did not see Aurora as his property anymore, but as an equal partner. Thus, by stating this, I assume that the author did not want to surrender to Victorian conventions, only to point out the importance of equality between men and women.

¹⁵⁰ Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, 392.

¹⁵¹ Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, 392.

¹⁵² Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, 392.

¹⁵³ Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, 387.

¹⁵⁴ Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, 48.

Conclusion

The main purpose of my thesis was to depict the social position, home life, and legal rights of women in the Victorian period, as perceived by the Victorian poet, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, primarily through her most famous poem, *Aurora Leigh*. I strived to accomplish this task by looking at the main female characters in this work and her relationships with each of the other leading characters.

In the first part of the thesis I described the characteristic historical background of the social life in the Victorian period, which was necessary for the establishment of generally accepted conventions and ideas of the time. The second part described the life and work of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. It helps to establish a better understanding of her condition and life challenges but, more importantly, it helps to understand the views of her main character, Aurora Leigh, who can be understood as an “incarnation” of the author. To do so, I drew on letters which were exchanged between Elizabeth Barrett Browning and her husband to have the most precise and authentic information.

The third chapter starts with the general definition of poetry in the Victorian period and its structure. Additionally, and more importantly, it is dedicated to the description of each important female character of the poem *Aurora Leigh*. These characters are from different social ranks, and either represent different stereotypes of the society which Barrett Browning wanted to point out, or they go against those conventional ideas.

The first person I focused on was Aurora’s Aunt. I came to the conclusion that, as described by Barrett Browning, she represented the conventional ideas of education and behaviour among English girls and women in the Victorian period. This was not only obvious because of her appearance but also by her requirements for Aurora to behave, dress, and speak in a certain way. Therefore, Barrett Browning’s view of education for girls as presented in their time was seen as stiff, restricted and unfair.

The second character I focused on was Lady Waldemar, who was portrayed as a representative of people from the aristocracy. As described by Barrett Browning, I drew the conclusion that she saw the aristocracy as puffed up people who were, on the inside, concerned only with themselves. They did not care about other people, and certainly not about people from a lower class, which was described in the clash between Lady Waldemar and Marian.

Marian was the third character I examined. She was a poor girl from the lowest, working class. There were several daring aspects which Barrett Browning touched while describing Marian. First, by her intended marriage with Romney a man from a higher class, which was not a desirable act. Second, by her unhappy fate on the involuntary path of prostitution, which made this character unfavourable for the audience, especially in the Victorian time. However, there were also good characteristics which can be learnt from her. For instance, when she helped her friend in need or when she showed Aurora the importance of being a woman and a mother, even though she was despised for it by the rest of society. All of this points to the conclusion that Barrett Browning wanted to show through this character that people from the lowest class, although without costly apparel, sometimes had bigger hearts than the aristocracy. With this character, she also wanted to break the silence of suffering women, who were judged harshly by their fate and were condemned by society, although there was much greater evil happening among people from the higher rank.

The last character of interest was Aurora Leigh. As I suggested above, she is the character which resembles the author and her opinions the most. She went against conventions in the Victorian period almost in every way possible, trying to prove that women are strong, intelligent creatures who should be allowed to think and speak out loud. She showed that with her opinions about education, career and marriage. To do so, she was forced to distance herself from her feminine nature. That allowed her to pursue her dream of being a successful poet, however, she realised that love is what makes a person complete. With that, she finally decided to marry Romney, which suggests that she regained her feminine confidence.

To conclude, the analyses I have presented suggests that Barrett Browning sought to point out the inequality of women's rights in the Victorian period in which she lived, as well as off a different way of treating women, based on their social rank. My hope is that each woman will understand that: "... a woman, poor or rich, Despised or honoured, is a human soul;/ Still good enough to pray in"¹⁵⁵ That is, that it does not matter where she comes from, each woman has worth and can contribute to the society.

¹⁵⁵ Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, 380.

Resumé

Tato práce se zabývá tím, jakou roli, postavení a práva měly ženy ve viktoriánské době a jak toto postavení vnímala anglická spisovatelka Elizabeth Barrett Browningová, která působila v první polovině viktoriánského období.

První část této práce je zaměřena na obecný popis toho, jak ženy ve viktoriánské době žily a jaká práva a povinnosti měly vzhledem k sociálním třídám, do kterých patřily a které byly nedílnou součástí společnosti v tomto období. V této části jsem došla k závěru, že se ženy rozdělovaly do tří hlavních tříd. Každá z nich obnášela jistá očekávání, která byla na ženy kladena. Nicméně, ať už ženy patřily do jakékoliv třídy, vyšlo najevo, že se na ně pohlíželo jako na neplnohodnotné občany. To se projevilo na příkladech vzdělání, manželství a rozvodu a v neposlední řadě při demonstraci na jedné z temných stránek tehdejší doby, což byla prostituce.

Druhá část této práce popisuje život a nejvýznamnější dílo Elizabeth Barret Browningové, která se i přes svá mnohá omezení stala jednou z důležitých osob v britské poezii. Na jejím životě je ilustrováno, že je možné jít si za svým cílem, a to i navzdory předsudkům společnosti a těžkým životním zkouškám. Tato část byla zároveň nápomocná k tomu, aby pomohla lépe pochopit hlavní charakter zveršovaného románu *Aurora Leigh*, ve němž autora vyjádřila své názory na společnost, ve které žila. Tento román sloužil jako hlavní zkoumaný zdroj ke splnění hlavního záměru mé práce, a je mu zasvěcená závěrečná část této bakalářské práce.

Rozbor tohoto díla je zaměřen na ženské postavy, které se zde vyskytují. Tyto ženy pocházejí z různých sociálních vrstev. To napomáhá k celistvému obrazu tehdejší společnosti a k pochopení, jak ji sama Barret Browningová, hlavně očima hlavní hrdinky Aurory, vnímala. Tyto ženské postavy jsou buď obrazem konvencí viktoriánské doby, anebo se proti těmto konvencím stavějí. První část této závěrečné kapitoly jsem věnovala obecnému popisu a definici viktoriánské poezie, jež slouží jako přechod k pochopení a rozboru samotného díla. První postavě, které jsem se v této práci věnovala, byla teta hlavní hrdinky Aurory. Dospěla jsem k názoru, že je vyobrazením konvencí tamější britské společnosti a v tomto duchu se Auroru snažila vychovat.

Druhá žena popisovaná v této práci je Lady Waldemar, která je představitelkou aristokracie, tedy nejvyšší třídy. Na jejím jednání a vzhledu je demonstrováno, jak podle Barrett Browningové tehdejší ženy z vyšších vrstev shlížely na lidi z vrstev nižších a jak pomocí intrik a uplatňování vyššího postavení, využívaly své zdánlivé moci ve svůj

prospěch. Toto chování je Barrett Browningovou uvedeno na příkladu postav Marian a Lady Waldemar, které usilovaly o jednoho muže.

Předposlední žena, kterou jsem v této práci popisovala, byla již výše zmíněná Marian. Je představitelkou ženy z nejnižší třídy. Tato postava bývá nejčastěji kritizována ze všech ženských postav v tomto díle, protože je s ní spojeno několik tabu témat, o kterých se v dřívější době nehovořilo. Jedním z nich je plánovaný sňatek s mužem z vyšší vrstvy. Dále je na její postavě vykreslen neblahý osud mnohých žen ve viktoriánské době, které byly přinuceny žít na okraji společnosti jako prostitutky a svobodné matky. V případě Marian došlo k částečné záchraně alespoň ze spárů prostituce. To se však, podle názoru odborníků prodiskutovaných v první kapitole této práce, nedá říct o všech ženách ve viktoriánské době. V neposlední řadě slouží Marian jako příklad toho, že člověk nemusí být bohatý, aby měl zlaté srdce a povznáší hodnoty mateřství na vyšší úroveň, než byly dosud vnímány viktoriánskou společností.

Poslední žena rozebíraná v této práci je samotná hlavní hrdinka, Aurora Leigh. Tato postava se nejvíce shoduje s myšlením samotné autorky. Její jednání a názory jsou velmi pokrokové a nekonvenční na tehdejší společnost, což je demonstrováno na jejím přístupu ke vzdělání, zaměstnání, a manželství. Ke vzdělávání, jak jí bylo představeno její tetou, měla odpor a považovala ho za nejužší roky svého života. To mě vede k závěru, že Barrett Browningová považovala tehdejší osnovy vzdělání dívek za zbytečné a nespravedlivé. Kariéra básničky, pro kterou se Aurora rozhodla, byl další příklad protikonvenčního chování. Nejenže Auroře toto chování příbuzní a přátelé neschvalovali, ale navíc ji přiměli si myslet, že jako žena nikdy nemůže být dostatečně dobrá a úspěšná. Aurora jim tento názor vyvrátila, nicméně to pro ni znamenalo přehodnotit vnímání svého ženství a jisté odcizení se od něj. Tím, že si zvolila raději kariéru, také odsunula důležitost lásky a manželství. Na jednu stranu to bylo dáno tím, že se odmítala vdát bez lásky. Na druhou stranu to chápu jako názor autorky, že žena je dostatečně silná a dokáže se o sebe postarat. Na konci tohoto románu je však Barrett Browningovou ilustrováno, že muž i žena jsou pro společnost stejně důležití. To je popsáno na příkladu Aurory a jejího rozhodnutí znovu plně přijmout vlastní ženství a stát se rovnocennou partnerkou Romneyho.

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Anotace

Tato bakalářská práce se zaměřuje na téma pozice, práv a života žen ve viktoriánském období skrze vnímání britské básnířky Elizabeth Barrett Browningové. Úvodní část této práce podává obecný popis života a práv viktoriánských žen v závislosti na různých sociálních třídách, jmenovitě v aristokracii, střední třídě a v pracovní třídě. Druhá část této práce poskytuje popis života Elizabeth Barrett Browningové. Závěrečná část je zasvěcena rozboru ženských představitelk v díle Aurora Leigh, který slouží jako příklad toho, jak autorka vnímala postavení a práva viktoriánských žen z různých tříd.

Klíčová slova: Elizabeth Barrett Browningová, Aurora Leigh, viktoriánské období, sociální třídy, ženy, práva.

Synopsis

This thesis focuses on the topics of position, rights and home life of Victorian women as it was perceived and described by an English poetess, Elizabeth Barrett Browning. The opening section gives a general description of life and rights of women in different ranks, namely in the upper class, middle class, and working class in the Victorian period. The second chapter provides description of life of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. The last part is dedicated to an analysis of the female characters in Barrett Brownings' work Aurora Leigh, which serves as an example of the author's view of women in each class at her time.

Key words: Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Aurora Leigh, Victorian period, social classes, women, rights.

Bibliographic Entry

Příjmení a jméno: Dagmar Dynková

Katedra: Katedra anglistiky a amerikanistiky

Název práce: Obraz viktoriánských žen očima Elizabeth Barrett Browningové

Vedoucí práce: Mgr. Pavlína Flajšarová, Ph.D.

Počet stran: 42

Počet příloh: 0

Name: Dagmar Dynková

Department: English and American studies department

Title of the thesis: The Image of Victorian Women as Depicted by Elizabeth Barrett Browning: Mgr. Pavlína Flajšarová, Ph.D.

Number of pages: 42

Number of attachments: 0