

Revolutionary Poetic Voices of Victorian Period: A Comparative Study between Elizabeth Barrette Browning and Christina Rossetti

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Abstract

This article is an attempt to provide a comparative study between Elizabeth Barrette Browning and Christina Rossetti, two famous authors in the Victorian period. As the first female poet Browning throws a challenge by dismantling and mingling the form of epic and novel in her famous creation *Aurora Leigh*. This epic structurally and thematically offers a new form that questions the contemporary prejudices about women. Being influenced and inspired by Browning, Rossetti shows her mastery on sonnets in *Monna Innominata: A Sonnet of Sonnets*. Diversity in the themes of her poem allows Rossetti to demonstrate her intellect and independent thinking, which represents the cultural dilemma of Victorian women. Though Browning is addressed as the ‘first female poet’ and the pioneer of revolutionary female poets, her *Aurora Leigh* recognizes and celebrates the success of a female poet in that period but at the same time acknowledges the importance of traditional romance as well as marriage union at the end of the poem. On the other hand, in *Mona Innominata*, Rossetti mingles the traditional idea of romance with High Anglican belief to establish and uphold the position of women in the society as an individual and self sufficient one. She is the first poet in Victorian period who boldly denies the dominance of men in a woman’s life by celebrating sisterhood in her another famous work *Goblin Market*. Though Browning and Rossetti belong to the same period, Rossetti is quite advanced than Browning in terms of experimenting with forms, themes and breaking the conventions of Victorian era.

Keywords: Victorian period, Browning, Rossetti, revolutionary, conventions

The Victorian period was remarkably gifted with female poets who initiated to break the conventions of that period, while remaining conventional themselves. Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Christina Rossetti are two significant poets of this period whose writings “pronounce discontent with male chauvinism that would set the tone of much poetry by women in succeeding decades” (Bristow, p. 10). These two revolutionary poets through an experiment with the form of different genres take over the command of male poets on men oriented genres. As the first female poet Browning throws a challenge by dismantling and mingling the form of epic and novel in her famous creation *Aurora Leigh*. This epic structurally and thematically offers a new form that questions the contemporary prejudices about women. Her influence was strong enough to extend “across the Atlantic to inspire the work of Emily Dickinson” (Bristow, p. 12). In Britain it inspired Christina Rossetti to do an experiment with traditionally male dominated forms. Being influenced and inspired by Browning Rossetti shows her mastery on sonnets in *Monna Innominata: A Sonnet of Sonnets*. In this sonnet she presents a mixture of conventional and unconventional in terms of structure as well as the theme. The common idea of love is depicted here from a female’s perspective that contradicts with the traditional idea of love presented by male poets in other Victorian texts. Rossetti, considering Browning as her precursor, is inspired to exhibit women’s desire, aspirations, role and contribution to the society in her other works. Diversity in the themes of her poem allows Rossetti to demonstrate her intellect and independent thinking, which represents the cultural dilemma of Victorian women. Though Browning is addressed as the ‘first female poet’ and the pioneer of revolutionary female poets, she cannot deny the imposed ideology of women in a male dominated society. Her *Aurora Leigh* recognizes and celebrates the success of a female poet in that period but at the same time acknowledges the importance of traditional romance as well as marriage union at the end of the poem. On the other hand, in *Monna Innominata*, Rossetti gives the voice of a female to announce her love not only for beloved but also for the God. Rossetti mingles the traditional idea of romance with High Anglican belief to establish and uphold the position of women

in the society as an individual and self sufficient one. She is the first poet in Victorian period who boldly denies the dominance of men in a woman's life by celebrating sisterhood in her another famous work *Goblin Market*. Though Browning and Rossetti belong to the same period, Rossetti is quite advanced than Browning in terms of experimenting with forms, themes and breaking the conventions of Victorian era. This essay offers a comparative study of Browning and Rossetti analyzing *Aurora Leigh*, *Monna Innominata* and 'Goblin Market' to establish Rossetti more revolutionary than Browning.

Aurora Leigh, the long experiment verse-poem, is one of the famous and more studied works of Elizabeth Browning. It is a masterpiece with "a fast-moving plot and is full of ideas and conflicts of opinion" (Avery, p. 23). The female protagonist of the poem is exceptionally independent who possesses original thinking that inspires her not to accept convention and dogma of her contemporary age. This epic is well recognized because of its unusual form that breaks the traditional idea of particular genre. This is a story, an adventure of a young woman who struggles to establish herself as a recognized poet in such a male dominated society where acceptance of a female poet is unthinkable. This literary work blends the characteristics of a realistic novel and the epic poem, which makes it an unusual piece of writing "both for its own time and for today" (Avery, p. 30). The heart of *Aurora Leigh* is occupied with the issues related to women: women's domestic and social status, their role and contribution to the world as an individual and as a poet as well. This poem is similar to Bildungsroman novel as *Aurora Leigh* is a narrative of development and education of the protagonist. Through the narrative a comprehensive idea of Aurora's spiritual, psychological and circumstantial changes is exposed. At the end of the poem through the marriage union *Aurora Leigh* confirms its similarity with Bildungsroman as usually Bildungsroman ensures the success and peace of the restless protagonist through marriage or any other permanent solution for the protagonist. Though there is much similarity between *Aurora Leigh* and a Bildungsroman novel, it is asserted that *Aurora Leigh* is a "rarer version of the Bildungsroman form for it is also a Kunstlerroman, a story plotting the maturation of an artist/writer, a form that traditionally tells of the protagonist's struggle to find not just a settled adult identity but also an art. And in one last respect *Aurora Leigh* is a very rare species of Kunstlerroman indeed for its artist/writer is a woman" (Avery, p. 32). Moreover, in an epic, the hero goes through a series of obstacles to achieve his goal with the help of his guide. Similarly, Aurora as the heroine of this epic faces a series of challenges on her way to become a recognized poet in the society. She has her persuasion and free will as her guide to achieve her goal. Structurally *Aurora Leigh* is an epic where readers also find the taste of a realistic novel because of its narrative of minor details of the characters' lives. Rebeca Stott asserts that *Aurora Leigh* proves resistant to genre categorization: it is part autobiography, part biography, part Kunstlerroman, part philosophical rumination, part political invective, part religious discourse, and at once both novel and poem" (Avery, p. 114).

The plot of *Aurora Leigh* allows the reader to trace the development of its heroine from her childhood to eventual marriage to her cousin Romney. She is the only child of British father and Italian mother. When she is thirteen, she is sent to England to her aunt after the death of her parents. There she experiences the conventional life of an English lady. At the age of twenty she refuses her cousin, Romney's proposal to get married with him and moves to London to pursue her dream. Later she comes to know that Romney gets married to a working class girl, Marian Erle. "In a stunningly visual depiction that calls to mind Hogarthian London, rich and poor meet at St James's Church where Romney vainly awaits his bride. Marrian never arrives, having been persuaded to leave for Australia by Lady Waldemar, the woman who wants Romney for herself. Duped by the maid of this voluptuous aristocrat, and drugged in a French brothel, Marian is raped" (Bristow, p. 114). Aurora knows this story two years later and she finds Marian with a baby boy in a wretched condition. Aurora takes them with her to Italy where she has passed her golden days of childhood. At the end of the poem Aurora meets Romney again and has a long conversation about the importance of unifying spiritual and material remedies for social ills. The poem ends with Aurora's realization of Romney's presence in her life and a romantic union.

Aurora Leigh is a courageous experiment of Browning where employing blank verse and multiple images of degradation and exploitation in a patriarchal society the poet draws attention of the critics to its preoccupation with unconventional role of females in the society. In this poem Aurora appears as someone who is independent in thought and action. Though from her childhood she is implicitly dominated by her father's strong image, she frees herself from the shackle of prejudices of the society in her mature age. To Aurora life means

both heart and head-both active, both complete,

And both in earnest. Men and women make

The world, as head and heart make human life.

Work man, work woman, since there's work to do" (*Aurora Leigh*, II, 130-135).

Knowing the truth and essence of life Aurora successfully prioritizes her actions. She courageously refuses Romney's proposal to marriage and determines to establish herself as a successful poet to contribute to the society. Aurora sees herself as an independent individual rather than a female dependent, which is quite unusual and challenging for a Victorian woman. Browning also emphasises on the role of a poet in a society who should transcend the time to make a connection between the past, present and future. To Browning a poet's role in the society is no less than a prophet as a poet can act like a reformer possessing the quality of timelessness. Like the hero of an epic Aurora appears as a protector of Marian, a wretched woman, a fallen woman. Aurora becomes "a mother to Marian, giving utterance to a character who has no social right of narrative" (Bristow, p. 114). Making Aurora Marian's protector Browning sets Aurora outside the mainstream. Usually in her contemporary age women needed a shelter and protection from men to stay safe and secure with respect in the society. Aurora's role as a protector decreases the necessity of a male in a woman's life. Browning goes against the social and literary decorum narrating vividly Marian's rape to the readers. Victorian women, the wretched ones, were not allowed to expose their mistakes even though they were not responsible for their sufferings. Aurora questions to this prejudice:

We wretches cannot tell out all our wrong
 Without offence to decent happy folk
 I know that we must scrupulously hint
 With half-words, delicate reserves, the thing
 Which no one scrupled we should feel in full (Aurora Leigh, VI, 1220-1224)

Aurora is the representation of self sufficient individual woman of Victorian period. Browning depicts the full growth of Aurora's character in this poem. Though Browning fixes Aurora as the pioneer of breaking conventional ideas about womanhood and celebrating the success of an independent woman, she cannot free herself from the Victorian conventions. At the end of the poem Aurora expresses her wish to be united with Romney forever. This decision reemphasizes the presence of a male person in a female's life.

Aurora Leigh is composed by Browning as an attempt to express her revolutionary thought. For her challenging ideas Browning transgresses the traditional genre boundaries by employing the characteristics of the lyric, the epic, the narrative, the drama, the documentary, and the prose poem in one single literary piece. It is one of the greatest literary experiments of the Victorian age, "a generic hybrid, that Elizabeth Barrett needs it to be in order to accommodate her planned 'conversations and events' and 'philosophical dreaming & digression'" (Avery, p. 116). Browning's experimental work has been studied by many critics like Marjorie Stone who categorizes *Aurora Leigh* as a feminised epic. "By using the epic form, Barrett Browning makes Aurora the Odysseus or Aeneas of her epic and suggests that her struggle for self hood is no less heroic than theirs and that domestic spaces contain no less drama than the open seas and unexplored lands of the traditional epic adventure" (Avery, p. 118). Browning stands at the end of a long and brilliant tradition of 'grandfathers' to take over the command of her precursors on literary genres. So, it can be argued that Browning is a revolutionary female poet in terms of transcending literary conventions of Victorian period.

Among the Victorian female poets, Christina Rossetti has received remarkable appreciation from her progeny. Christina Rossetti though belongs to the Victorian century, "her poetry has commanded the attention of critics in the twentieth" (Charles, p. 11). Because of the unusual gender issues in her poetry feminist critics take Rossetti's works with a great significance to study. Her poetry is famous for symbolism, religious mysticism and utter simplicity. During her life time she was compared with her predecessor, famous female poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning. In the preface of *Monna Innominata*, Rossetti mentions Browning as "the greatest poetess of our own day" and admits Browning as her precursor. After the publication of *Monna Innominata: A Sonnet of Sonnets*, critics prefer Barrett Browning's ones as her poem is "overflowed with the happiness of fulfilled love, while the other(Rossetti) one's expresses frustrated, unrealized love" (Charles, p. 13). Later on Rossetti's works capture the attention of the critics of the new century because of the spiritual beauty, simplicity and technical excellence. *Monna Innominata* exposes Rossetti's talent in experimenting with form where *Goblin Market* allows her to establish the woman poet's sense of a female tradition. Rossetti in her works gives voice to the "unnamed woman" glorified by other famous male poets. She rejects the value of her society and sets her own idea of life and love by connecting it to her religious belief in her poetry. Rossetti tries to transgress the male poetic tradition by making an experiment with sonnet form in her *Monna Innominata* and transcend the conventional idea of womanhood in Victorian period by celebrating sisterhood in 'Goblin Market'.

Monna Innominata: A Sonnet of Sonnets was published as a response to Christina's brother Dante Gabriel's *The House of Life*. Simultaneously this work engages the works of Dante, Petrarch and Elizabeth Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. By using Dantean quotations in the preface to this poem Rossetti not only acknowledges her male poetical precursors but also challenges them by adapting the forms established and developed by them. Rossetti's first quotation from Dante in the preface suggests "how much Rossetti saw Dante as a "poets' poet, and how much she was seeking to establish herself as a similar kind of writer" (Arseneu 50). Giving voice to the unnamed lady who is always praised in the sonnets written by famous poet Rossetti challenges the traditional rules in sonnet where the male admirers express their desire for their beloved ones by depicting their physical beauty. In a critical analysis of *Monna Innominata*, Mary Moore mentions that Rossetti's novel technique, a prose statement alluding to seminal male and female sonneteers, reflects her mastery on this elevated literary genre which is not very usual during Victorian period for a female writer. Rossetti's idea of sonnet as "containers full of love" (Moore 485) inspires her to compose this meta poetic form, a sonnet of fourteen different sonnets. Because of her love for sonnet, Rossetti thus "displays poetic mastery under the sign of female voice through a formal metaphor that involves both containment and magnitude: the outermost sonnet- Rossetti's-is of necessity the greatest in size and in power" (Moore 458).

In this poem each section (sonnet) deals with a different issue related to love. First sonnet is about the speaker's simultaneous longing for her lover and denial of love:

Come back to me, who wait and watch for you

Or come not yet, for it is over then. (*Monna Innominata*, 1.1-1.2)

This conflict of the speaker's mind continues throughout the poem and results in the speaker's death wish mentioning Biblical references. This expression of self-inflicted denial motivates her to concentrate on the memory from the past, "first day, First hour, first moment" of their meeting. Being disappointed in recollecting memories, the speaker tries to find her solace in dream. With the supernatural power of dream the speaker wishes to change natural phenomena. Gradually, power of dream allures her to think about the long sleep, perhaps death. Logically Christina moves to the Biblical model of love that upholds sacrifice on this earth. Rossetti's strong Anglican faith lets her to appropriate the Bible in a conventional but creative ways. In the first few sonnets Rossetti frequently mentions the summer days and the beautiful time of spring when their desire is fulfilled. Like the circle of seasons, desire moves to despair and then decay. Everything in this world is the subject to decay and perish with the course of time:

Time flies, hope flanges, life plies a wearied wing:

Death following hard on life gains ground apace; (*Monna Innominata*, 10.1-10.2)

This Christian belief shapes Rossetti's conclusion to this sonnet where she invites her lover to embrace death in order to be free from the temporary temptations in this earth. She establishes her faith in death to overcome the shortcomings of earthly love.

Monna Innominata breaks the traditional notion of sonnet emphasizing on spiritual solace at the end. Elizabeth Ludlow, in *Christina Rossetti and the Bible*, asserts that "in *Monna Innominata*, Rossetti performs a particularly innovative move when she situates her lyric distillation of typological motifs within the literary context of sonnet tradition" (Ludlow, p. 142). Ludlow establishes in 'Shaping a Poetics of Affect in A Pageant and Other Poems (1881)' that Rossetti "combines an attentiveness to the contours of the devotional imagination with response to the surge of interest in the propensities of small and intricate verse forms"(142) by allowing readers to interpret each sonnet from teleological perspective. Mentioning 'charm' and 'attractiveness' in her prose preface to *Monna Innominata* Rossetti distinguishes between the traditional romantic love and spiritual love. According to Ludlow, Rossetti "suggests that Dante's Beatrice and Petrarch's Laura have alike paid the exceptional penalty of exceptional honour, and have come down to us resplendent with charm, but scant of attentiveness. While charm characterizes romantic love, Rossetti implies that attractiveness is more of a spiritual disposition" (Ludlow, p. 144). Structurally as well as thematically Rossetti does not confine herself in practicing the conventional forms of sonnet. Moreover, she challenges the limitations of 'masculine sonneteers of the past' by exhibiting her preoccupations with the secular world.

Rossetti's another famous poem 'Goblin Market' is less experimental in comparison to *Monna Innominata* in terms of structure but thematically it demonstrates the unconventional thinking of Rossetti about womanhood. "Much of the criticism of 'Goblin Market' treats its story of buying and selling, like its rhymes and goblins, as the figurative dress for a narrative of spiritual temptation, fall, and redemption" (Bristow, p. 189). 'Goblin Market' is a narrative of two sisters' experiences of consumerism, human desire and conflict between desire and

lust. “The biblical story of the Fall in Genesis, Milton’s retelling of this story in *Paradise Lost*, the New Testament narrative of Christ’s temptation, and the Eucharistic liturgy are identified as underlining poem’s moral message about temptation and redemption” (Arseneau, p. 82). Making experienced Lizzie and Laura about the marketplace, the narrators of ‘Goblin Market’, Rossetti broadens the sphere of Victorian women. This poem reflects the relation of Victorian women to its political economy. Rossetti’s Laura and Lizzie are simultaneously the subject and object of consumption. Laura warns Lizzie about the disastrous result of having communication with the ‘goblin men’ and ‘consuming fruits from them’. In order to analyse the idea of ‘forbidden fruit’ in ‘Goblin Market’ Catherine Maxwell includes Sandra M. Gilbert’s interpretation. “For Gilbert, the poem pictures the woman writer who wishes to experience the full fruits of their imagination, but Rossetti, too much bound by conventions, is unable to let herself or her female characters have this freedom” (Arseneau, p. 80). The allegory of forbidden fruit is associated with the literary imagination and knowledge which is not easily acquired by the female writers in Victorian period. The goblins who are similar to some strange forms of animals can be interpreted as male seducers who are the threats for young women in the mid nineteenth century. Their fruits might be treated as sexual allurements that is considered one of the reasons of prostitution in the contemporary age in England. Rossetti demonstrates that after consuming the fruit Lizzie survives under the shelter of her sister Laura. Lizzie’s sufferings are healed with Laura’s healing power. As a fallen woman, since Lizzie experiences the temptation in human nature, presence of a male protector in her life is inessential. Even at the end of the poem, though readers find Lizzie and Laura as married ones with children, they notice the absence of male persons in the context. From another perspective, it can be asserted that the marginalized fallen women in Victorian society should also have their own space and voice to ensure their rights. Celebrating and upholding sisterhood at the end of ‘Goblin Market’, Rossetti acknowledges the strong connection between her and Barrett Browning in the reign of literature and admits Browning as her direct precursor.

Though both Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Christina Rossetti belong to the Victorian period, the later one is advanced and more revolutionary than the former one. In *Aurora Leigh* and other works Browning does the experiments with form to establish a new form of genre where she can expose her original thinking and ideology regarding a female’s life in a patriarchal society. Similarly, Rossetti takes over male poetic form of sonnet to give the voice of unnamed woman in her *Monna Innominata*. These two revolutionary female poets did not want to use the existing genres to present their ideas. In *Aurora Leigh*, Browning replaces the epic hero and his adventurous life by Aurora and her struggle to become a recognized poet in the society. Similarly, Rossetti devices a form in which a Victorian woman could be understood as one who have the capacity not just to be a passive object of amorous attention but to take the active role of a lover as well by dramatizing the speech of the unnamed ladies in *Monna Innominata*. *Aurora Leigh* has an explicit similarity to ‘Goblin Market’ as both of them show the “midcentury consciousness of the emergence of the strong woman poet and endorse the idea of sisterhood, of women enabling other women” (Arseneau 86). Both of them try to do experiment with forms, establish new ideas of womanhood, give the voice of woman to the society and constitute a connection among the women writers to resist female subjugation in literature. In spite of having many similarities, Rossetti is one step advanced in terms of being unconventional than Browning. Browning finds her protagonist’s fulfillment in a happy union, marriage, in *Aurora Leigh*, though Aurora herself presents as the protector of fallen woman, Marian. In contrast, Rossetti boldly denies the necessity of a male person as a protector in a female’s life, even for a fallen one, as she upholds sisterly redemption in ‘Goblin Market’. Moreover, with strong Anglican belief Rossetti establishes the significance of spiritual love above all earthly temporary love where Browning acknowledges the importance of secular love in her protagonist’s life, since “the closing lines of *Aurora Leigh* constitute a densely allusive hymn to work, sexual love, and the vision of a new city built from the consummation of man and woman” (Bristow, p. 125). In their works, both of these female revolutionary poets manifested that women should have a voice in every aspect of life from domestic realm to the political economy of the society. Remaining in the shackles of Victorian conventions Browning and Rossetti tried to transcend the traditional practices and customs related to women. In order to conclude, it can be argued that Elizabeth Barrett Browning breaks the conventions remaining conventional where Christina Rossetti transgresses the conventional ideas transforming herself as unconventional one that makes Rossetti more revolutionary than Browning.

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