

REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN IN THREE ENGLISH LITERARY WORKS: BYRON, BROWNING, AND HARDY

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The figure of woman has been surrounded by controversial ideas, since very early in history. Some of those ideas arose from patriarchal ideology and the power that men had in society. Sometimes, these expectations place women in a very complicated position, in which they lack freedom in every possible matter (as on a pedestal). Aspects to be analyzed with the use of Feminist Criticism: “What’s wrong with being placed on a pedestal? For one thing, pedestals are small and leave a woman very little room to do anything but fulfill the prescribed role” (90). The origin of this idea is connected to times as early as the Middle Ages, and even before that; times where the image of a woman used to be romanticized. In connection to the 1800’s, women were visualized as objects, in other words, they belonged to their parents or husbands. As a result of the objectification of women, the ones that used to follow a set of imposed societal rules were seen as almost perfect and, therefore, placed on a pedestal. However, this had a price to pay, no freedom at all. In literature, themes related to the image of women are recurrent, independently of the time in which these works are created. These themes are the placement of women on a pedestal (exaltation) presented in “She Walks in Beauty,” the destruction of that pedestal (displacement) shown in “Porphyria’s Lover”, and the devaluation of their image as portrayed in “The Ruined Maid”, this is, if they fail to meet society expectations.

In the poem “She Walks in Beauty,” the intention of placing women on a pedestal is clearly observed, which corresponds to the ideal of women expected by society in the Romantic Period. This poem is addressed to a woman that is deeply and passionately admired by the author. She is practically described as an angel, filled with light, innocence, and purity. This results in the idealization of the woman, ignoring the fact that she is human and also that she has her own flaws. “Meet in her aspect and her eyes/Thus mellow’d to that tender light/Which heaven to gaudy day

denies” (612). Her “light” or her essence is portrayed as something heavenly and magical. Her entire being represents beauty. The author also connects his muse’s image to heaven, in other words, this equals her to an angel. Lord Byron takes special care in the way he describes her: “Where thoughts serenely sweet express/How pure, how dear their dwelling place” (612). As a result, in these lines she is compared to a temple or to a place in which purity dwells. That dwelling place described in the poem, in which thoughts are expressed, could represent her mind or her heart. She is so pure, so bright. She is on a pedestal, her essence is unreachable to him, and he admires her from afar. “The smiles that won, the tints that glow/But tell of days in goodness spent/A mind at peace with all below/A heart whose love is innocent!” (612). As observed in the poem, this recurrent exaltation of the female image leads to a misconception of how a woman should be. It is her obligation to be perceived as innocent, pure, beautiful, also submissive, and obedient. In other words, she should follow what society establishes as acceptable for women. If she does not follow that, she would be taken off that uncomfortable pedestal on which she was placed (Lois Tyson refer to that woman as “bad girl”).

Consequently, this conception of the ideal woman experiences a transformation that is followed by a sort of displacement or destruction of this image which occurs around the Victorian Era. Women start to leave the pedestal; authors make them more human and more accessible to other people. In “Porphyria’s Lover”, Robert Browning depicts this transformation connecting it to the decay of human values that identifies literature at that time. Society was seen as corrupted and hypocrite. Additionally, women were given more space to express and behave as humans, although still subjected to strong criticism from society. Directly connected with that destruction of the pedestal is: “And all her yellow hair displaced/And, stooping, made my cheek lie there/And spread, o’er all, her yellow hair” (1252). This imagery of her hair being displaced could be connected to the fact of her image becoming disgraceful, that is, no longer being considered as innocent and pure. As the lover expresses: “To set its struggling passion free/From pride, and vainer ties dissever/And give herself to me forever” (1252). The pure and innocent woman’s image is corrupted and now she is easily accessed by her lover or by other people. Her place on that pedestal has been replaced by the arms of a man, that is her lover and, also, her perdition. As part of the most interesting aspects of this poem, Porphyria is murdered by the same man. This death represents a transition between the idealized image of that woman and her displacement; or the destruction of the exaltation of her graceful image. As stated in these lines: “In one long yellow string I wound/Three times her little throat around/And strangled her. No pain felt she/I am quite sure she felt no pain” (1252). Here, the lover is convinced that Porphyria did not suffer pain, but it is possible that she did, as women in general suffer when they

are not treated as equals to men or when they are judged for being just humans. This fact also connects to the shift of their figure's appreciation, an imminent devaluation of women's image in literature.

Henceforth, in the literary works of the Twentieth Century, a devaluation of women's image in general is widely observed. This is shown in "The Ruined Maid" by Thomas Hardy, which portrays a woman that can be considered a courtesan or a "selective" kind of prostitute. Practicing this millenary profession could be the reason why she is called a "ruined maid." She is ruined because she does not follow what society considers "good women's actions." Her lifestyle and manner of acquiring material richness is due to prostitution; in consequence, her image is devaluated. "O'Melia, my dear, this does everything crown!/Who could have supposed I should meet you in town?/And whence such fair garments, such prosperity?/O didn't you know I'd been ruined? said she" (1872). Interestingly, this maid answers all questions by acknowledging that she is "ruined." In this context, the word ruined means that she has been moved from a pedestal and a magical place to a totally worthless status. The author even describes her attire as an allusion to what she has attained from her controversial activities. As follows: "Your hands were like paws then, your face blue and bleak/But now I'm bewitched by your delicate cheek/And your little gloves fit as on any la-dy!/We never do work when we're ruined, said she" (1827). While she is described as delicate and as a lady that looks elegant in her new high-class status, she is still identified as ruined. She is now accessible to everyone. And at the end of the poem, the author makes clear that the other woman who asks the questions to the ruined maid belongs to a different social status; she is humble, described as a country girl. "I wish I had feathers, a fine sweeping gown/And a delicate face, and could strut about town!/My dear – a raw country girl, such as you be/Cannot quite expect that. You ain't ruined, said she" (1872). This creates a contrast between the country girl, and the maid who is totally corrupted by her selection of lifestyle. Or at the same time, these lines could be portraying the essence of the same woman, before and after being corrupted and opted to work as a prostitute for high-class men. That life of luxury was possible after becoming a prostitute, choice that was frequently made as a means of survival, even if she was worthier at that time, and now that she is devaluated by her own choices.

As a fact, women are humans, they experience all kinds of emotional changes, urges, and also physical necessities, same as men. These literary works express how they were intentionally shaped into the expectations of society through the poetry of great authors like Lord Byron, Robert Browning and Thomas Hardy. How a woman was portrayed moved from a very unreachable place, as a pedestal ("She Walks in Beauty"), to the transition and displacement ("Porphyria's Lover") to a totally

devalued space in which men felt complete freedom to treat them as they pleased (“The Ruined Maid”). As a result, women have been oppressed in various aspects, suffering a restriction of what they can express in general. Maybe, it is the inner strength of women that represents a threat to power, and that is why it is a recurrent theme in history and literature.

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