



ARTIFACTS

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Death as Freedom In 19th Century Women's Literature: An Escape from Idleness

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Introduction: Giving Voice to Struggle

Few would argue that Victorian writers were death-averse; generally, at least one of their novels or poems consists of a hefty, symbolic death that transforms the other characters around them. Being so numerous, these deaths' meanings undoubtedly vary—from messages about grief and sorrow to themes of freedom and afterlife—and grow more profound when examined in the feminine context in 19th century Britain. In so examining writers like Charlotte Bronte, Felicia Hemans, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, it is important to note that these women held enormously powerful positions in Victorian societies: the position to express and discern the struggles of British women. And with struggle comes a perhaps freeing death. These women, however, are anomalous in that they rose to a point in which they may inform and inspire the women who had been facing the same obstacles as they—women's education, the 'separate spheres,' views of female artists, and so on. Considering these struggles, a compelling argument for death as freedom is there, and these women hint at it throughout their works. Death can be freeing in 19th century women's literature, particularly in two ways: internally for the woman in a time of romantic, societal, or political strife; and symbolically in the context of 'the Fallen Woman' and purity.

Why Die? Victorian Obstacle and 'The Separate Sphere.'

However, a clear incentive for death must be established to consider it to be freeing, and that is shown through the systemic obstacles to women's upward mobility. The two genders occupied the 'separate spheres' in which men and women only came together at breakfast and dinner. Professor Kathryn Hughes from the University of East Anglia argues that, during the Victorian period, "men's and women's roles became more sharply defined than at any time in history." In earlier centuries, women were expected to work alongside men, living 'over the shop.' However, with the coming of the 19th century, specifically the 1830s, women were left to oversee the domestic duties that were increasingly performed by servants, wearing the crinoline—a huge bell-shaped skirt that made it virtually impossible to clean or sweep without falling over.

And even if a woman received education, it was usually separate from men and in a school that prepared them for the role of 'Angel in the House.' The concept is seen in Browning's *Aurora Leigh* when Aurora's aunt educates her, who "misliked women who are frivolous." Aurora describes this with a tinge of sarcasm, reciting her learning, "I danced the polka and the Cellarius, spun glass, stuffed birds, and modeled flowers in wax, because she like accomplishments in girls." It also appears also in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* when Rosamond proves to be a sort of

star in Mrs. Lemon's school, but turns out to be moody, spoiled, and childish—qualities not generally associated with educated people. Many books remain that women used in their schools, including *Bowles's Drawing Book For Ladies*, which was a book that taught women how to embroider flowers. Women adopted these books and curricula because no one wanted to be called a 'blue-stocking,' or a woman who focused too much on intellectual pursuits (Hughes). These stigmas that surrounded education also prevented mobility and could lead to an idle, depressing life that existed only in connection to a male counterpart, accentuating death as a release from the boundaries of day-to-day life. However, this is not to say that poor education led to suicide, but rather it made death an attractive literary symbol for authors.

At the core of all of this, however, was something that Simone de Beauvoir touches upon in her book *The Second Sex*: that women are unequivocally linked to their oppressor biologically, making the female-male relationship unique. In the introduction to her book, she chronicles history's male-dominated idealism, with quotes from Aristotle ("The female is female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities."), Saint Thomas Aquinas ("Woman is an incomplete man."), and Monsieur Benda ("Man thinks himself without woman. Woman does not think herself without man."). De Beauvoir's point is essential to understanding death as a way out. Women, in many cases, view themselves as existing solely on the backs of men, painting their reality as lesser, useless, and dependent.

Beauvoir's point understood it is easy to see why Hemans, Bronte, Browning, and Eliot could deem it powerful to illustrate magnificent, freeing deaths. Hemans' *Records of Woman* is littered with deaths, and recognizes her position in discussing it in "The Switzer's Wife," which Paula R. Feldman calls in the introductory notes, "a legendary tale about the origin of modern Switzerland that imaginatively reconstructs a gap in the patriarchal account—the important role and perspective of a woman nearly erased from the record." These "erased women" are for whom these authors are speaking, and about death, Hemans's line is evoked here: "Then must we rise upon our mountain-sod, and men must arm, and woman call on God! (Hemans 27)"

Internal Death: Unrequited Love

Of their works, Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* and Felicia Hemans' *Records of Woman* cover many key deaths that end some internal unrest, mental strife, or emotional turmoil. Tied in with them is the theme of unrequited love—a favorite of Hemans's. The first poem of the Hemans' collection, "Arabella Stuart," includes a profound epigraph of Lord Byron's asking, "And is love not in vain, torture enough without a living tomb?" If Hemans did not view the body of a woman as a "living tomb," then she would have flinched at putting this at the top of her masterwork, but she did not. As Paula R. Feldman writes in her introduction to the work, "Death, as Hemans sees it, may be at times a woman's most forceful adversary but can also be her salvation."

And with that first poem we see Feldman's point, Hemans continues in her story of Arabella being confined separately from her husband-to-be, Seymour. Arabella places all of her faith in Seymour's return, stating, "But all my youth's first treasures, when we meet, making past sorrow, by communion, sweet. (Hemans 9)" So, the crux of her life is Seymour, painting Hemans's crude picture of romantic love, and confirming De Beauvoir's claims of the inextricable, life-sustaining link between men and women. Hemans does not seem to like that fact either, so as Arabella realizes that Seymour is never to come, she becomes nervous: "Dost thou forget me Seymour? I am prov'd so long, so sternly! (Hemans 13)" Her whole-hearted devotion to Seymour has chipped at her womanhood, leaving her in a state of confusion equipped with a sense of nothingness. And, as the poem moves forward, Arabella reaches the conclusion that she must die, but begins with questioning death,

"Death!—what is death a lock'd and treasur'd thing, guarded by swords of fire? A hidden spring, a fabled fruit, that I should thus endure, as if the world within me held no cure? (Hemans 14)"

Herein we see the struggle for women once hopes for romantic love have been dashed. The key line entails that “the world within” her held no cure, making this death one wrought of internal struggle, despair, and unrequited love. However, in the midst of dark, depressing themes, Hemans paints her suicide as an escape to better times—a lifting of mortal burdens. Arabella rejoices in this, exclaiming,

“Farewell! And yet once more, Farewell!—the passion of long years I pour into that word: thou hear'st not,—but the woe and fervor of its tones may one day flow to thy heart's holy place; there let them dwell—we shall o'ersweep the grave to meet—Farewell! (Hemans 15)”

Arabella's last words outline the significance of her death: an attempt to make hope everlasting without having to endure the painstaking wait for fulfillment. With her death, she will be able to wait for Seymour to “o'ersweep the grave to meet” her without the impossible hardships of life for women. Her internal wrestling with love, life, and death proved too strong and complex for her to handle, so much so that to die seemed less of a tragedy but more of a hearty and true, “Farewell!”

Hemans continues her string of internally charged deaths throughout *The Records of Woman* but what is interesting is how they vary and allude to different parts of Victorian society, the male view of female accomplishments, and the emotional struggle surrounding suicide. Regarding female art, “Properzia Rossi” does a great job of showing a woman who is motivated and inspired through sculpting but eventually crumbles under the indifference of a single Roman Knight. The unattributed epigraph to this poem writes, “Unknown, tho' fame goes with me; I must leave the earth unknown. Yet it may be that death shall give my name a power to win such tears as would have made life precious (Hemans 29).” This points to death giving “power” not available for her while alive and if she had been able to attain this power it would have “made life precious.” Hemans could be alluding to the fact that death is intriguing to living people, and that for her to die would make her, at the very least, a brief interest to others—longer interest than while living. However, it seems more plausible that this power would be internal, putting her demons and anxieties to rest, which also would have made life precious—she would no longer rely on him any longer. These internal deaths seem the only way to escape the torturous link between the women and the want of approval or the want of mobility, and this is seen too in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* with Bertha Mason.

Internal Death: Mental Stagnation

Jane Eyre's perhaps most controversial character is Bertha Mason, and she is among the few characters who die in the novel. Bertha, a once-beautiful Creole woman who is ravaged by mental illness and locked away, has been criticized by modern readers in Bronte's masterwork as a racist and insensitive portrayal of insanity, but she also shows one of the great internally motivated deaths in 19th century literature.

Modern readings of *Jane Eyre* do indeed toe the line between racism and symbolism; however, this is more reflective of the Victorian view on mental illness than blatant racism. Bronte's description of Bertha is fairly negative: “it groveled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing; and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face. (Bronte 250)” Bertha here, presumably because of her illness, is no longer a “he” or a “she,” but an “it.” Bronte continues using epithets like “the clothed hyena,” “the maniac,” and “the lunatic” to describe Bertha's condition, which was not considered in bad taste at the time, making Bertha's death all the more freeing. John Connelly, a fellow at the Royal College of Physicians at London, claims, “the whole of the barbarous system of coercion and restraint was founded on a fallacy, and that insanity is simply a state of unsound physical health (Iwama).” In fact, Rochester implies that Bertha had a choice in becoming insane, stating that she “like a dutiful child, she copied her parents in both points.” So, it would not be surprising if both Jane and Charlotte Bronte thought Bertha's insanity a problem with

her physical health, leaving both herself and her illness misunderstood.

Perhaps the most striking reason Bertha is misunderstood is because she never once speaks for herself, bringing us back to the silenced woman. Bertha represents so well the silenced woman that Charlotte Bronte had a responsibility to represent, but she too silences her and allows her to die in a ball of flames. And when she dies, we again see less of a sad turning over to death and more of a triumphant swell of payback, freedom, and power. In Chapter 36 of the novel, Jane stumbles upon Thornfield Hall in ruins, with a man explaining that Bertha was Rochester's wife—something unknown to the townspeople, accentuating Bertha's perceived worthlessness. Then, the man explains her death, saying,

“And then they called out to him that she was on the roof, where she was standing, waving her arms, above the battlements, and shouting out till they could hear her a mile off: I saw her and heard her with my own eyes. She was a big woman, and had long black hair: we could see it streaming against the flames as she stood. I witnessed, and several more witnessed, Mr. Rochester ascend through the sky-light on to the roof; we heard him call ‘Bertha!’ We saw him approach her; and then, ma’am, she yelled and gave a spring, and the next minute she lay smashed on the pavement.”



Bertha's illness combined with the misunderstanding of her peers and husband led to a suicide that was engulfed in empowering fire lined with black glistening hair.

Symbolic Death: 'The Fallen Woman.'

Insisting that she had never read *Jane Eyre*, Elizabeth Barrett Browning delivers a starkly similar novel-in-verse in *Aurora Leigh*, which, again, tells of an orphaned girl's life from childhood to strong, feminine adulthood. Brilliant in her character development, Browning shares a stunning account of 'the Fallen Woman' in Marian Erle, who is, at first, planning to marry Aurora's cousin Romney Leigh before jilting him on his wedding day. Like Bertha, Marian comes from a daunting family background, with her grandfather abusing her mother, and thus her mother abusing her. However, rather than having her erupt in a flurry of flames without a word, Browning provides stunning symbolism in Marian's rape as well as her recovery afterward, making her an apt example for symbolic death. Lauren Smith from Brown University agrees, writing, "Most strikingly, Marian refuses to be silenced by her rape, a typically taboo subject in Victorian society. Perhaps turning to her voice as her only instrument of resistance, Marian derives a sense of self-empowerment from telling Aurora that she *can* and *will* talk about the violence committed against her."

The language Browning implements in so describing Marian's rape is similar to language used to describe murders. After Aurora declares that Marian took the hand of a seducer, Browning writes,

“What ‘seduced’'s your word?

Do wolves seduce a wandering fawn in France?

Do eagles, who have pinched a lamb with claws,

Seduce it into carrion? So with me.

I was not ever, as you say, seduced,

but simply, murdered. (Book 6, line 760-770)”

To Marian, her rape may as well be murder, and this is due to the Victorian perception of 'the Fallen Woman.' Kathleen Blake writes on the matter, describing the Victorian view, "according to Victorian standards, respectable women did not consider sexual intercourse pleasurable. It was a duty to be intimate with their husbands." Even the term "fallen" was conflated more with sexual experience; thus, a fall from the grace of God and a loss of purity. This view reasserts Simone de Beauvoir's view that women are viewed as 'the Other' while men are continually able to oppress them. But, Beauvoir says this is almost an advantage, claiming that women,

"Being poorly integrated in the universe of humanity and hardly able to adapt herself therein, she, like the child, is able to see it objectively; instead of being interested solely in her grasp on things, she looks for their significance; she catches their special outlines, their unexpected metamorphoses."

This holding true for Marian, she moves beyond her 'Fallen Woman' status and devotes herself entirely to her son, who many would call a product of sin and defilement. Marian, however, never thinks so, believing that she must keep a good disposition for his health, "he has eyes the same as angels, but he cannot see deep, and so I've kept for ever in his sight a sort of smile to please him,—as you place a green thing from the garden in a cup, to make believe it grows there." Marian is spending her time protecting her son from society's view of her, hoping someday he will grow. Her 'death,' then, becomes her sustenance for life and creates a more profound happiness in her than any life had before, creating a lurid symbol for Browning and a contrast to traditional Victorian values.

Conclusion

All in all, death represents a grave symbol for women in Victorian literature, and the woman does not have to die. In cases of suicide and rape across various novels, death has proven to be superior to living on further, which shows well how deep with gender oppression Victorian society had gone. Facing poor education, views of mental health, consideration by men, and poor prospects for mobility, death breathes new life.

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