

‘A MUSICAL INSTRUMENT’ AS AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL POEM OF ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING

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Abstract

The poem “A Musical Instrument” written by Elizabeth Barrett Browning is being discussed in the paper. The poem is viewed as it contains autobiographical elements. The poet indirectly describes how she fights against the conventional society of Victorian period. She reveals how she disturbed the river of rules with her pen. The poem represents the mythical story of god Pan and the syrinx. She compares herself with the Pan who created music out of reed. She struggled against societal themes just like Pan tore out reeds from the river. She made the best art like Pan made beautiful music from with the instrument. Like Pan modified reed into a musical instrument she reshape the modern thinking and attitudes. She fought for literary freedom in her poetic battle against a society that denied women all freedoms. Victorian society never accepted any art form from women rather they only considered for being a mother. Sufferings of Victorian women can be seen in Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*. Art was hidden from women by the Victorian society like Syrinx was hidden from Pan by the water nymphs.

The poem portrays the story that Pan once tried to chase the nymph Syrinx. She ran away from him and went near a river then she asked the water nymphs to save her. They turned her into a reed so as to hide her in the river. Pan never found her. So, in a rage, he jumped into the water and walked briskly, thus disturbing the calmness of the river. By the end, he made a musical instrument out of the reed, and its music was haunting and mind-blowing. Just as Pan did, she worked hard to polish her art to bring the best poetry to the literary world. The poem describes the power and control over women in the society but we are giving a new notion that it contains autobiographical elements.

Keywords: feminism, myth, autobiographical elements, Victorian society.

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The poem “A Musical Instrument” of Elizabeth Barrett Browning is a reflection of her inner self. It has subtle autobiographical elements that make it an interesting study. In the poem, the character Pan is the archetype of men in patriarchal society.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poetry had an immense impact on readers in the Victorian period—the age of restriction and morals. In that age, women suffered greatly. Education and even basic rights were denied to them. Society considered a woman’s only job was to take care her family and children. The concept of a formal education was an impossible prospect for women. But her life and work present a different case. Her family had given her freedom and a home-education, even against the backdrop of the disapproval of the society they lived. Her poetic voice served to disrupt society’s stagnant scenes, genteel as they might appear, with the sword of her pen that could both destroy and elevate.

She was born, the oldest of twelve children, to Edward Barrett Moulton Barrett in 1806. Though educated at home, her first poetry was published at the age of twelve. Her father printed fifty copies of her classic *The Battle of Marathon* in 1819. In 1826, her collection *An Essay on Mind and Other Poems* was published anonymously. In the 1830s, one of her cousins, John Kenyon, introduced her to the literary society, and her writing career took flight to a wider audience and powerful reach.

Hugh Stuart Boyd, a blind, middle-aged scholar who had befriended her, nurtured her interest in Greek studies. She studied Homer, Pindar, Aristophanes, and Dante etc. along with the Bible, Shakespeare, and other great thinkers like Paine, Voltaire, Rousseau,

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and Wollstonecraft. The influence of her absorption with such wide reading directly reflects in much of her poetry.

Her first major poem written at age fourteen, *The Battle of Marathon* was privately printed by her father in 1820. It was a rhyming, dramatic narrative poem where the Athenian state defeats the invading Persian forces. Her family supported her creative endeavours, especially her father, who believed in her talent rather than sticking onto the conventional ideas of Victorian society. In spite of conventional reviewers being highly critical of her work, he urged her forward.

Influenced by Romantic poets like William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Walter Scott, Browning explored the ballad form's strong narrative lines and scenes of tension and conflict set in the background of historical settings. This form grew to the peak of popularity with nineteenth-century readers. Browning manipulated the ballad style, in this case, to serve her purpose of exposing problems faced by women in her contemporary society.

Her bold attack on political issues, as well as religious, garnered critical reactions, though the response was split because many also admired her daring and conviction. She faced fierce opposition from her detractors, who condemned her for voicing issues previously taboo for women to speak of. The conservative critics also found her references to female bodily images shocking and critiqued her use of half-rhymes.

In the later years of her life, Browning became increasingly combative and politically engaged, using her poems as weapons against relative issues of her day.

Her poetic form explored not only the current political opinions, but also historical events and even religious belief. Her voice incorporated the lyric, ballad and narrative styles. The poem "A Musical Instrument" has an intense tone and pacing. The imagery is powerful, but the sound of the poem has an even more thrilling effect than the visuals. This innovative combination contributed to her becoming considered as Wordsworth's successor as poet laureate. She had spent decades aiming for that recognition by pushing boundaries in terms of both style and subject matter, and finally found international

acclaim in 1846. She published 'A Musical Instrument' in 1860, and this poem is one among her last and most influential poems.

The poem describes a mythical story of the God Pan and a nymph named Syrinx and explores the two-fold nature of art as well as delivering a strong message that supports women as artists. Pan is the God of forests, shepherds and wild animals. He is the representation of the dual nature of art and humanity and is usually depicted as a man with horns, beard and with goat legs. He can be represented as both a creator and a destroyer. Browning identified with him because she saw herself as a destroyer of ignorance and a creator of art. Her poem is an allegory of her own state of mind as well as the state of society at a time where things seemed stalled. She knew change was imminent.

The poem portrays the story that Pan once tried to chase the nymph Syrinx. She asked the water nymphs to save her but they turned her into a reed. Pan never found her. So, in a rage, he jumped into the water and walked briskly, thus disturbing the calmness. By the end, he made a flute out of the reed, and its music was haunting and mind-blowing.

The poem indirectly relates to power and control of men over women. Even though Syrinx tried to hide herself from Pan, she failed. Similarly, sometimes women can't break through the conventional ideas and rulings of men but eventually overcome the rules, however long they try to hesitate. We see this manifest in Browning's life story. She is now considered to be the most beloved Victorian poets of the Romantic Movement.

We can bring out a new aspect of the poem with the notion that it contains autobiographical elements. Her father had been tyrannical, and societal norms also stunted women's freedom. In spite of these influences, and perhaps, in part, because of them, the poet followed her path of art just like Pan followed his path to Syrinx. Art had been hidden by the conventions of the Victorian era just as Syrinx had been hidden by the water nymphs. Just as Pan did, she worked hard to polish her art to bring the best poetry to the literary world. The very first stanza reads:

WHAT was he doing, the great god Pan,
Down in the reeds by the river?
Spreading ruin and scattering ban,
Splashing and paddling with hoofs of a goat,

And breaking the golden Lilies afloat

With a dragon-fly on the river. (Kurien 48)

It is a description of how she fights against the conventional ideas of Victorian society through her potent weapon, the pen. She is actually trying to destroy the river of rules.

Her writings created turbidity in the waterways of Victorian ideologies. Before she brought forth her real talent, the lilies died and the dragonfly fled away. This signifies how her poetry questioned the Victorian norms that crippled women's ability to aim for any achievements other than motherhood. . The lilies afloat are a metaphor to some of the ideas that seem to be good for Victorian society. She struggled against societal themes just like Pan tore out reeds from the river. The lilies and dragonflies returning might also signify the progression of society's progression towards acceptance of the feminist movement.

Just as she was later known for her staunch abolitionist stance against slavery, she fought for literary freedom in her poetic battle against a society that denied women all freedoms. Her passion and intensity echo in between the lines:

High on the shore sate the great god Pan,
While turbidly flowed the river;
And hacked and hewed as a great god can,
With his hard bleak steel as the patient reed,
Till there was not a sign of a leaf indeed
To prove it fresh from the river. (Kurien 48)

The line 'while turbidly flowed the river' reflects the same ironic dual nature in the juxtaposition of images, since the river is often a scene of high society picnics where people submitted to the norms of society, whereas, in her case, the river flows turbidly with disruption to that scene and ideology. The serene river scene contrasts with her sharp word choices, such as "spreading ruin and scattering ban", "splashing and paddling with hoofs of a goat". The oxymoron, "turbidity ran the limpid river", implies conflicting imagery to evoke reactions in the readers, thus effectively highlighting the destruction of women's rights in the Victorian age.

Browning stood apart from society with her own unique voice, yet she also intimately aimed to serve the society by changing it. She completely drew the pith from society. She 'cut short the reed' in her efforts to reshape modern thinking and attitudes.

She carefully carved herself into a poet by completely isolating herself from contemporary society and diving into her calling as a writer. She spent more of her time in her room and met with few people other than family. She dove into her own inner consciousness to conjure unique expressive word-art. Thus, in the line:- "with his hard bleak steel as the patient reed / till there was not a sign of a leaf indeed," she reveals her experimental art style to be "fresh from the river."

The simile used, "like the heart of a man," implies the present system had melted into the hearts of Victorian people. When she tried a new thing, it questioned conventional ideas. She shaped and moulded her art like Pan carved a flute out of a reed. Then she continued to create the best music out of her talent, just like Pan playing the instrument.

'This is the way,' laughed the great god Pan
(Laughed while he sate by the river),
'The only way, since gods began
To make sweet music, they could succeed.'
Then, dropping his mouth to a hole in the reed,
He blew in power by the river. (Kurien 49)

When her poems started to get accepted by society, she rejoiced at her success and pursued her poetry with a passion that later would inspire Emily Dickinson, who admired her as woman of achievement and felt called to follow a similar path of the pen. Her shining example motivated many women to embrace fresh perspectives. Thus her art accomplished, in her lifetime, the very thing this poem aims to highlight.

The lines

Sweet, sweet, sweet, O Pan!
Piercing sweet by the river!
Blinding sweet, O great god Pan!
The sun on the hill forgot to die,

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And the lilies revived, and the dragon-fly
Came back to dream on the river. (Kurien 49)

This section depicts Browning's pride when her poems were accepted by Victorian society. The very line "the sun on the hill forgot to die" shows how wholeheartedly glad she felt that society had accepted her work so well. Even the rules were refreshed and society enjoyed her poetry. Sometimes they relied on her poetry as a form of relief and entertainment, or as inspiration for spiritual ideals, or as encouragement for women to transform society.

Her example for women echoed in her life as much as it did in her poetry. She fell in love with the poet Robert Browning, who had written to her in admiration after he read her poems. Subsequently, they exchanged hundreds of letters and ultimately eloped. Her father disowned her for that marriage. She wrote of their love in one of her most famous poems today, *How Do I Love Thee?* (Sonnet 43), in which she raises love to a Divine pitch with these lines:

*I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
For the ends of being and ideal Grace. (Barrett Browning)*

"Blinding sweet" might be inferred as a reference to her special romantic love, and it is also an example of hyperbole that expresses her inner psyche and also emphasises the musical impact. By the phrase "spreading ruin..." the poet brings parallelism between the violation of woman and the violation of nature. "Hacked and hewed" reveals the strain and patient perseverance that fuelled her creative work. When the nymph Pan tried to chase turned to a silly reed in the river, it shows a metaphor for the cultural taste that were deeply ingrained in Victorian norms. It also highlights the notion that through destruction, great art is born. Suffering often proves the impetus for transcendent art. Her poem hints at this through both language and subject. Her approach is far from the timidity expected of women in that age!

Browning strikes out in protest against the religious rules that hamper the rising to power of female poets in society in her biblical allusion: “Dropping his mouth,” reminiscent of the Genesis creation tale where God created man from dust and breathed life into his nostrils. Victorian’s ironically considered themselves societal masters. She celebrates her word-craft while aristocrats lament the downfall of their religious dogma. Her work portrays the idea: is art superior to life or life superior to art?

Yet half a beast is the great god Pan,
To laugh as he sits by the river,
Making a poet out of a man:
The true gods sigh for the cost and pain—
For the reed which grows nevermore again
As a reed with the reeds in the river.(Kurien 49)

In the concluding part of the poem, the poet argues that her poetry was moulded by the issues and restrictions of the Victorian society. Then she brings the idea that it questions the rules, so the aristocrats would be against her work, yet no one could stop her or other women in writing. She broke the rule, so it no longer held power, as “The true gods sigh for the cost and pain—For the reed which grows nevermore again” (Kurien 49).

Browning used her success to further fight for changes in the world. In her later years, she employed poetry as a tool to battle injustice in social fronts, like slavery, child labor in mills and mines, Italian oppression, and numerous other avenues of social injustice. One cannot see any kind of mild language about her writing; instead, her poetical progression reveals destructive language to portray the degree of hatred she held against women’s suppression in society and other issues. Rising to a position in the Victorian society was the crowning achievement of her life.

In the nineteenth century, no other female poet held higher esteem by cultured readers. As the first female poet ever to be considered for poet laureate following Wordsworth, though the prize ultimately went to Tennyson, she stands out as a shining example for what women might achieve in spite of societal obstacles. Her determination

and confidence gave us high calibre poetry that addressed numerous issues in a unique voice and significantly influenced society.

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