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ENG 333  
February 2, 2011

### Symbolism of Ivy in *Aurora Leigh*

Elizabeth Barrett Browning used her writing to comment on the political and social problems during the Victorian Era. One of these problems that she focused on was the role of the woman. In Book 2 in her poem "Aurora Leigh" Browning uses ivy as a symbol. Ivy is a plant that is most recognized for growing up the sides of trees, rocks, or man-made structures. It is known to be a climbing plant, but if it is growing on level ground, it is not able to climb as high. Browning uses ivy as a symbol to characterize Aurora Leigh and to comment on how the women in the Victorian Era should be treated.

Aurora Leigh walks around her aunt's garden trying to find leaves to use to make a crown. She decides upon "that headlong ivy...bold to leap a height 'twas strong to climb" (47, 50). The ivy here presents a characterization for Aurora Leigh. Just like how the ivy wants to climb and grow, Aurora Leigh wants to grow out of her surroundings and become more than what society expects and demands for her.

Romney talks with Aurora Leigh about how women "give us doating mothers and perfect wives/ Sublime Madonnas, and enduring saints!" (22-23) but in regards to Aurora Leigh wanting to be a poet, "We shall not get a poet" (225). Romney is commenting on the expectations of women during the time. Women were expected to get married and have children because they were not capable of learning as much as men could, and therefore, would not make good poets. This is reminiscent to the ivy that is unable to climb and that is stuck on level ground. It was harder for women to do what they wanted, to learn and grow, because they were stuck within a society that would not allow it for them.

Aurora Leigh tells Romney that women are capable of being both a wife and mother while also pursuing their own goals. She asks Romney "am I proved too weak/ To stand alone, yet strong enough to bear/ Such leaners on my shoulder" (359-361). This quote shows how contradictory the expectations for women were during the Victorian Era; they were too weak to use their minds, but were strong enough to bear and raise children. At first glance, it may seem that ivy would look weak enough to break off of the surface it is climbing; it needs to be remembered, however, that the ivy has been able to reach those great heights in the first place.