

Middle-class Morality as Panopticon: A Foucauldian Reading of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* and Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*

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Abstract

This research presents a reading of Elizabeth Barret Browning's *Aurora Leigh* and Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* in the light of nineteenth-century middle-class morality which strictly imposed on women a particular socially accepted model of respectability the deviation from which meant condemnation and loss of social status. The reading will be informed by the writings of prominent social philosophers of the time which defined the spirit of the age and established the categories of social normalcy and deviancy. The methodology relies on Foucault's theory of Discipline and Punish, with particular emphasis on the concept of panopticism as a disciplinary mechanism. The analysis also incorporates Foucault's concept of the relationship between power and knowledge and their contribution to creating and maintaining obedience. A parallelism between nineteenth-century European middle-class morality and panopticism is drawn to bring to the fore the complexity of both the panoptic scheme of discipline and this social morality which involves similar techniques of disciplinary control. The analysis will raise several questions and attempt to answer them through the analogy drawn between nineteenth-century

social ideology and Foucault's theory of panopticism as a control system. Among these questions are: What does the rebellion of the main characters suggest about social ideology as a disciplinary pattern? How successfully is the socially endorsed knowledge structure in fulfilling its socially ascribed expectations?

Keywords Victorian social ideology of separate spheres, middle-class morality, Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, Michel Foucault's panopticism, docile bodies

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“Whenever one is dealing with a multiplicity of individuals on whom a task or a particular form of behaviour must be imposed, the panoptic schema may be used” (Foucault, 1977a, 205).

Nineteenth-century Europe has always been associated with strict social morality, particularly in relation to women's role in life, the education they should receive, and their position in society as delineated by this role and this education. In *Family Fortunes*, Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall contend that in the Victorian Age, the dominant cultural and social discourse valued a woman's life solely as long as it was spent in complete devotion to her family and ruthlessly denounced her if she deviated from this socially ascribed role. One of the main tools of reinforcing this role was the “ideal separation between masculine and feminine spheres,” a tenet central to middle-class social ideology which shaped the life of “European women of all countries and social classes” (Rachel Fuchs & Victoria Thompson, 2005, 2). Social philosophers of the time emphasized the idea that women were intrinsically pure moral beings who should be protected from the corruption of the public life of commerce and politics in which men were involved as their families' breadwinners. Consequently, the house came to be envisioned as a fortress protecting women from contamination by the public world. Women were regarded as angels whose moral

purity and refined sensibilities provided the moral haven that balanced the corruption and contamination of the outside world. It followed that adherence to their confinement to the domestic sphere was crucial for women to maintain a respectable status in society, as the “model of full-time motherhood [was regarded] as a central part of middle-class gentility” (Davidoff & Hall, 2019, 338).

Powerful as it was in its influence on the society, this ideology was still the subject of scrutiny in various literary works of the time. Two of the most recognized are Elizabeth Barrett Browning's verse novel *Aurora Leigh* (1856) and Henrik Ibsen's play *A Doll's House* (1879). As literary landmarks that questioned the contemporary social norms and the status quo they endorsed, *Aurora Leigh* and *A Doll's House* garnered significant criticism, both contemporary and subsequent.

In her edition of *Aurora Leigh*, Margaret Reynolds attributes the “grudging acknowledgement” of the poem by “contemporary readers” to its revolutionary ideas which created an unprecedented rift in opinion in London (2). The verse novel has been also critiqued from the point of view of art and aesthetics. For example, the London *Daily News* praised it as one of “the master works of the highest order of genius” (2). On the other hand, other critics cited the length of *Aurora Leigh* and its far-fetched metaphors “prove that a woman cannot be a great poet” (Venables 777, 776).

The compelling gender politics involved in *Aurora Leigh* was noted by many critics. Aurora's independence was denounced in many reviews among which is the Dublin University Review where “the effort to stand . . . on a pedestal beside man” is referred to as one of Browning's “grave errors” (Cora Kaplan 13). In contrast, George Eliot (1857) praised Browning in writing *Aurora Leigh* as “the first woman who has produced a work which exhibits all the peculiar powers without the negations of her sex” (306). Lynda Chouiten approaches the issue of gender in *Aurora Leigh* from the point of view of Browning's use of laughter as a form of irony to criticize Victorian gender politics (2).

A Doll's House, likewise, gained the attention of many critics by its realistic depiction of the marital institution. In 1908, Edmund Gosse commented on the first performance of *A Doll's House* in 1879, emphasizing the play's revolutionary aspect which came as a shock to the strictly patriarchal Scandinavian society. He writes that “all Scandinavia rang with Nora's ‘declaration of independence’ (120). Later, with the popularity of Freudian analysis at the turn of the century, Nora was attacked

using clinical language of condemnation. According to Ibsen scholar Joan Templeton, a considerable body of critics denounced the character as “an irrational and frivolous narcissist” and even as “abnormal,” “neurotic,” and an unloving egoist (29). Ibsen’s play was criticized from a feminist approach due to the heroine’s rebellious decision to leave her family to fulfill her duty to herself. For example, Balaky and Sulaiman focus on Ibsen’s departure from the stereotypical depiction of women in portraying Nora. In *Ibsen’s Women*, Templeton highlights Nora’s challenge of old assumptions, highlighting this as an embodiment of Ibsen’s modernism. In “The Politics of Money,” Shafiuddin Ahmad and Angela Gawel approach the play from the point of view of the capitalism-constructed patriarchy, arguing that individualism and freedom are defined by money, and, therefore, the “new woman” Nora opts to become assumes the standards of nineteenth-century capitalist patriarchy (172). Thus, most of the critique on *A Doll’s House* focuses on the presentation of the Woman Question, varying in approach from feminism to psychoanalysis as well as economic theory.

Several scholars have highlighted the impact of Foucault’s paradigm of panopticism and power on feminist studies. In “Feminism and Empowerment,” Monique Deveaux (1994) acknowledges the influence Foucault’s theory of power on feminist thought, noting, however, the inadequacy of Foucauldian theory for studying women empowerment and social transformation. Deveaux supports shifting the focus to women’s capacities for self-determination and their response to the cultural ideals of femininity alongside Foucault’s theory of marginalization (244).

The specific topic of the convergence between Foucault’s concept of panopticism and feminist thought has been also examined. For example, Sandra Bartky and Susan Bordo discuss the social construction of femininity as a demonstration of Foucault’s ideas on the normalizing process and the production of “docile bodies.” Bartky (1998) explores the ways the disciplinary strategies Foucault describes function to regulate the body. She draws attention, however, to the limitations of his theory, noting that it treats the body with no recognition of the peculiarity of the experience of female body subjected to disciplinary practices (27). Bartky analyses these practices as means to achieve bodily perfection as delineated by social discourse which shapes the idea of femininity. Among these practices, Bartky writes, are dieting, fashion, posture, movement, and cosmetics, practices

which she describes as torturing and creating a distance between women and their bodies as if they are their enemies (28).

Susan Bordo (2003) discusses the intersection between Foucauldian theory of “docile bodies” and feminist thought. Bordo refers to the normalization of the female body as a long-standing control strategy where women get involved in an everlasting pursuit of the perfect ideal of femininity as defined by society, an ideal which is always changing (166). Focused on self-modification and self-discipline, Bordo writes, the female body becomes a “docile body” imposing on itself practices which, despite being “objectively constraining, come to be experienced as liberating” (168). In her article, Bordo deals with anorexia nervosa and bulimia as examples of disciplinary practices produced by the social norms of emotional discipline, physical fitness, and specific body configuration.

The present research seeks to contribute to the body of criticism on *A Doll's House* and *Aurora Leigh* by presenting a reading informed by nineteenth-century middle-class morality. The methodology relies on Foucault's theory of Discipline and Punish, with particular emphasis on the concept of panopticism, shedding light on how in both works, dominant morality subtly exercises power on women. It will be argued that the elements contributing to the image of the panopticon in both texts are manifestations of the strategies employed by the prevalent middle-class morality which acts as a tool of control. It will be argued that like panopticon prisoners, Browning's Aurora and Ibsen's Nora are not only assigned a specific role to perform but are also closely observed through specific disciplinary mechanisms which ensure that they strictly fulfill this role. The analysis will illustrate the hypocrisy and manipulation involved in middle-class morality as a coercive system of control whose devastating impact engulfs society as a whole.

Strict morality carried a conflict between its folds. For women, the nineteenth century was a time of struggle between the dominant social morality that confined them to the domestic sphere and the new spirit of individualism and freedom associated with the concept of the New Woman (Fuchs & Thompson, 2005, 1). This is the experience depicted in Browning's and Ibsen's texts. Underlying the seemingly peaceful, stable lives of the two heroines exists a feeling of oppression and a desire to discover their potential and aspire to goals conventionally deemed illegitimate.

In “Gender Roles in the Nineteenth Century,” Kathryn Hughes (2019) sheds light on the sharply disparate roles of men and women in Victorian England, with the role of the “angel in the house” strictly prescribed for women who are expected to counterbalance the corruption of public life where their husbands were involved (para. 6). Hughes adds that the ideology of Separate Spheres “rested on a definition of the ‘natural’ characteristics of women and men” (para. 3-4). Hughes’ statement sheds light on three issues at the core of Victorian social morality. First, calling the woman the “angel in the house,” is an instance of the manipulation of women where power, i.e., society, beautifies a woman’s confinement to the house through describing her socially ascribed role in divine terms. This is meant to detach women from public life and make them embrace their marginal position and, consequently, become submissive objects of power. Second, using the concept of disparate “natural characteristics” involves an essentialist approach to gender roles which makes any deviation from these roles seem an unpardonable transgression. Finally, women’s assigned role of rectifying the blemished values of the public sphere suggests that the duty they are required to fulfill is directed to the men in their families, not to their own advancement. That is, women are expected to have an obligation to others, but never to themselves.

Social philosophers were paramount in enhancing the necessity of maintaining two separate spheres for men and women, powerfully linking the idea to concepts such as virtue, modesty, moral purity, respectability, and the sense of responsibility, values which lie at the heart of nineteenth-century morality. A brief reference to the ideas of prominent nineteenth-century social philosophers is, therefore, of particular importance when analyzing the value system imposed on women and challenged by the heroines in the texts under discussion.

In *The Women of England* (1839), Sarah Stickney Ellis’s starting point is the emphasis on the domestic sphere as the “appropriate” place for women “from which those of the middle class in England seldom deviate,” and that any digression from this realm and its duties inevitably results in “culpability and disgrace” (72-73). Ellis subtly places on women the responsibility of keeping their society’s moral standards intact, making their abidance by the socially assigned norms the basis of “upholding the moral worth of our country” (5). This is an implicit coercive call for women to accept that they exist solely to serve their families and have no aspirations of their own. It follows that a woman’s endeavour to have a role in life other than

safeguarding her family's moral standards is to be condemned as a reckless, selfish act.

Ellis proceeds to instruct women on how to fulfill this duty, emphasizing the popularly admired image of the young lady as "gentle, inoffensive, delicate, and passively amiable" (12). Closely read, these characteristics shift the focus from the self to others. That is, the qualities society approves of in women are those which gratify others and show no signs of independence. Urging women to embrace self-effacement, Ellis asserts that for a refined woman, "the very act of exertion would have become a pleasure" (18). Thus, through middle-class morality, women were raised to be givers only.

John Ruskin (1865), likewise, believes in the domestic sphere as the right place for women, asserting the view that men and women are inherently different (40). He also emphasizes the idea that women's role in life is complete devotion to others. He links a woman's true wisdom, dignity, and virtue to "her mode of help to man," thus, reducing a woman's worth to the role she is expected to play in the life of the man in her life (34). Limiting the meaning of a woman's life to her contribution to the domestic realm directly relates to the dynamics of docility as Aurelia Armstrong argues in "Foucault and Feminism" (2003). In her article, Armstrong elaborates on the aim of disciplinary practices that produce "docile bodies" as being "to simultaneously optimize the body's capacities, skills and productivity and to foster its usefulness and docility" (3). This is true of the experience of women living under Victorian middle-class morality. Docility is a particularly important tool employed by this morality system to keep women exerted for the benefit of the rest of the society.

The gender history of Norway in the nineteenth century reveals much similarity with its British counterpart. Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879) premiered at a time when traditional gender roles and relations were at their height and the ideology of separate spheres governed the Norwegian society. Aladin Larguèche (2010) expresses the same view as Hughes, writing that the ideology of domesticity was based on a belief in an "intrinsic difference between women and men, leading to a dividing up of social functions" (132). This essentialist approach to the issue of gender differences existed as a basis for reinforcing disparities that would place women on the periphery in both domestic life as well as public social roles. The premiere of *A Doll's House* received a review in *Social-Demokraten* where the

reviewer writes that the play dramatizes the typical marital life in Norway as a relationship where wives occupied a position inferior to that of their husbands. According to the review, “This play touches the lives of ... thousands of such doll-homes, where the husband treats his wife as a child, he amuses himself with” (*Social-Demokraten*, 1879). In other words, to be enjoyed as a doll was the only achievement a wife could attain.

This research argues that the confinement, control, and submission involved in the middle-class tenet of domesticity make this morality a form of panopticism, a disciplinary mechanism presented by Michel Foucault in his *Discipline and Punish*. Foucault analyzes the mechanisms of the modern Western penal systems as evolving from medieval disciplinary practices used to ensure the subjects' obedience to power. He traces these mechanisms to the relation between power and the body. He cites examples of disciplinary practices that emphasize the power of the state on its subjects and authorize it to punish dissidents. The present analysis will employ key elements of Foucault's theory of discipline to examine middle-class morality in Ibsen's and Browning's selected two works, presenting an image of this morality as a panopticon.

Using Jeremy Bentham's panopticon as the architectural figure of disciplinary power, Foucault (1977a) refers to the cells as cages, suggesting a place where “each actor is alone ... and constantly visible,” the work “actor” being used by Foucault to highlight the idea of being watched (200). Owing to its structure which allows for “a single gaze to see everything constantly,” Foucault uses the term “panopticism” as a metaphor of surveillance and the functioning of power in contemporary society (198). He describes the panopticon as “the perfect disciplinary apparatus,” as its scheme of discipline makes disobedience impossible (173). Foucault uses the term “normalizing gaze” to refer to surveillance as a tool of imposing certain norms, to make individuals act in a way that is accepted by society as “normal” (184). Foucault's idea of disciplinary normalization implies the difficulty as well as the dire consequences of the attempt to deviate from established norms, an idea that is dramatized in both *Aurora Leigh* and *A Doll's House*.

Foucault presents a complex image of the objects of this disciplinary mechanism, an image that simultaneously comprises oppression and voluntary behaviour. According to Foucault, discipline imposes certain practices on its objects, eventually leading to what he refers to as “the instrumental coding of the body,”

meaning that the imposed behaviour continues to be followed by the object of discipline even in the absence of disciplinary power (Foucault, 1977a, 153). In this context, Foucault describes the object of discipline as “a well-disciplined body” (152). Feeling they are continuously observed, the objects learn “the code of the signals and responds automatically to them” (166). That is, the culmination of the process of discipline is that those subjected to it no longer need to be observed or instructed on what to do, as the accepted behaviour eventually becomes part of their disposition. As Foucault puts it, “discipline produces subjected and practised bodies, 'docile' bodies” (138).

Both *Aurora Leigh* and *A Doll's House* use captivity as a metaphor of middle-class morality. In *Aurora Leigh*, Aurora's aunt figures as imprisoned in social norms, yet never complaining or attempting to set herself free. At the beginning of the verse novel, Aurora describes her aunt, saying “She had lived/ A sort of cage–bird life, born in a cage, / Accounting that to leap from perch to perch/ Was act and joy enough for any bird” (Browning, 1857, 7). A representative of the traditional Victorian ideology of domesticity, the aunt is a woman whose emotions have been so powerfully curbed that she has eventually internalized the dominant social values and become satisfied with her captivity, never seeking anything beyond what society allows her. Along the same lines, in *A Doll's House*, Nora sees her and Torvald's house as “a playroom” where she is her husband's “doll-wife” (Ibsen, 1879, 119). That is, she is imprisoned in a life where he totally controls her. Yet, throughout her marital life, Nora has been satisfied with this subordinate position, never dreaming of anything beyond her husband's approval.

This image of captivity and unconscious surrender resonates the panopticon in Foucault's theory, the prison with nonstop vigilance and complete obedience. The Foucauldian idea of “The Eye of Power” is indeed at the core of nineteenth-century social morality (Foucault, 1977b, 157). In *Sesame and Lilies*, Ruskin (1865) addresses girls about the journey of life where guidance plays an essential role: “the good guide walks on quietly, without a word, only with his eyes on you ... and his arm like an iron bar” (75). Thus, Ruskin adopts the ideology of disciplinary societies as articulated by Foucault, namely that the main purpose of the panopticon is to “induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (Foucault, 1977a, 201). This uninterrupted vigilance guarantees obedience to the extent that even the slightest sign of

nonconformity is regarded as a crime (166). Similarly, according to Ruskin's statement, the "guide" subtly induces compliance by feeling his presence, a role similar to the guard's "disciplinary gaze" in Foucault's theory (174).

This relationship between docility and vigilance is depicted in *Aurora Leigh* and *A Doll's House*. Like prisoners in the panopticon, "docile" women in *Aurora Leigh* and *A Doll's House* do not only follow the dominant morality, but they also adopt it and seem to enjoy their peripheral status which it creates. In *Aurora Leigh*, Aurora's aunt is an epitome of the Victorian woman shaped by social norms and acting like a ward preserving them. Aurora describes her aunt: "Her somewhat narrow forehead braided tight/ As if for taming accidental thoughts/ From possible pulses" (Browning, 1857, 7). This image is a metaphor for restraint where the aunt so firmly abides by and acts to maintain social norms. Yet, the image suggests the complexity of the situation. Despite assuming the role of the protector of middle-class morality, the aunt is aware that this morality would condemn her dreams if they do not align with her domestic duties. Therefore, her compliance—which becomes a form of self-suppression—becomes her only way to maintain social respectability. Similarly, the aunt's neighbours ensure suppressing their spontaneity. During their morning visits, Aurora says, they "talked with measured, emphasized reserve" (44). These characters follow the stifling social morality as "docile bodies," despite the absence of actual vigilance. The fear of being visible and judged by society has gained control over them and has made obedience to the moral code part of their nature.

Ibsen's Nora also represents Foucault's idea of docility. At the beginning of the play, when Torvald treats her as a careless child, Nora is portrayed as enjoying her life and even grateful for the happiness this life gives her. She says to Mrs. Linden in the first act: "Oh...what a wonderful thing it is to live and to be happy!" (Ibsen, 1879, 29). In the last scene, nevertheless, disappointed by Torvald, Nora reminisces her life, realizing that she has been a victim of a morality which nurtures "The celebration of masculine virtues and the ignoring or trivializing of women's concerns" (Davidoff & Hall, 2019, 28). Disillusioned, Nora finally decides to set herself free from her life with Torvald which false values have governed. Although she knows that "With marriage, women assumed their full adult status," she decides to give it up with the respectability it grants her (322).

Through middle-class morality, Nora is trapped in a situation where all choices are painful. What the audience know about her in retrospect reveals her real personality as a resourceful, independent woman who can discreetly manage her family's finances and save it from adversity. At her moment of disillusionment, Nora realizes that this real self has been "smothered beneath the patronizing domestic banter" (Durbach, 1991, 109). Consequently, it becomes impossible for her to be true to her real personality while maintaining her life as wife and mother, as domesticity and cognitive autonomy cannot coexist within the panoptic context of middle-class morality. Nora finally decides to reclaim her right to live according to her beliefs. However, this means total condemnation by a society where disruptions of accepted moral expectations have drastic consequences. When Torvald asks her to "consider what the world would say," she resolutely answers: "I can pay no heed to that" (Ibsen, 1879, 121). Thus, for her, freedom from the fear of "vigilance" is portrayed as the way to break the shackles of unjust morality.

At this turning point in the play, Nora's parallelism with Aurora's aunt diminishes, giving way to a strong resemblance with Aurora who represents an alternative image of women as individuals who are aware of their usurped rights and determined to reclaim them. From the outset of *Aurora Leigh*, Aurora figures as "a wild bird" discontent with her life in the cage of unjust morality and eager to realize herself (Browning, 1857, 7). Aurora explicitly describes her conflict with this morality which makes women's social acceptance and self-realization irreconcilable: "I live self-despised for being myself" (174). She is aware that refinement for women in middleclass life means being merely wives and mothers. Yet, in an act of defiance, she refuses her cousin's marriage proposal. Like disillusioned Nora, she understands that in her society, marriage means the complete subordination of the woman and a delimitation of her capacities, which is the reason behind her refusal: "If I married him, I would not dare to call my soul my own" (42).

Read in the light of Foucault's theory, like Nora, Aurora is no longer afraid of being "visible" to society. In fact, she prefers to be condemned as a nonconformist rather than admired as a "docile body": "I'll not ask for grace, / Your scorn is better," she says to Romney (Browning, 1857, 35-36). She is willing to be recognized as—to use Foucault's words—an "'abnormal' individual," since this is the only way to achieve self-fulfillment (Foucault, 1977a, 166). This implies a paradox where social

injustice has made feeling disapproved of becomes more satisfying, as it means she has not been indoctrinated in a manipulative and ruthless set of beliefs.

The fact that both heroines can be themselves only by resisting the dominant morality establishes a compelling connection between Foucault's concept of docility and the idea of voice. In *A Doll's House*, Nora refers to her inability to express herself. According to the rules of domesticity, as a woman, she is not expected to have an opinion of her own. "While I was at home with father, he used to tell me all his opinions. If I had others, I said nothing about them, because he wouldn't have it," she says to Torvald (Ibsen, 1879, 118-119). To be accepted, she has to be "docile." The same connection is present in *Aurora Leigh*. Aurora's aunt has her read books that guide women on how to be "womanly" (Browning, 1857, 10). Aurora criticizes the ideology behind these books, namely that women can earn society's respectability "As long as they keep quiet by the fire/ And never say 'no' when the world says 'ay'" (10). A firm believer in this morality, Aurora's aunt equates feminine silence and submissiveness with moral correctness and refinement. What she calls "a virtuous life" is a life that is "quiet" and "harmless" (7).

Moreover, *Aurora Leigh* and *A Doll's House* depict Foucault's (1977a) idea that all members of society are agents of enforcing morality: "the exercise of power may be supervised by society as a whole" (207). In *Aurora Leigh*, the loyalty of Aurora's aunt to this strict morality goes beyond being a "docile body" to safeguard society's norms, resonating the role of the panopticon guard as described by Foucault. Aurora says that not only is her behaviour determined by her aunt, but it is also under the latter's constant vigilance to ensure Aurora's obedience. As a mouthpiece of society, the aunt condemns a woman's intellectual independence, and sees herself entitled to judge Aurora. When Aurora tells her that she has refused Romney's marriage proposal because she does not share his values and dreams, the aunt sees this nonconformity as a "sin," (39) "a crime," to use Foucault's words (Foucault, 1977a, 166). Later in the text, criticism of middle-class morality becomes more explicit. Aurora describes the ladies at church, saying that they "corrupt your blood, / And grind to devilish colors all your dreams," harping on Foucault's idea of the panopticon guard performing constant vigilance and labeling, and crushing aspirations that deviate from the norm (Browning, 1857, 91).

Similarly, in *A Doll's House*, preserving separate spheres is Torvald's responsibility. Nora lives in anxiety for fear that Torvald might discover her act of

forgery. Examined against the context of separate spheres, this forgery, acquires a more serious implication than being a crime that would tarnish the family's reputation. In the nineteenth-century, women and children were believed to be "helpless and weak," and it was men who were expected to support and protect them (Davidoff & Hall, 2019, 25). This discourse fosters the image of men as heroes in the domestic sphere. Hence, the justification of men's control of the private sphere.

In this context, Nora's act of forgery is unpardonable because it threatens Torvald's superior position in the domestic realm and disrupts the established morality. Nora's life has been manipulated by the socially constructed image of her husband as a hero. As a "docile body," she has internalized the feeling that she is her husband's subordinate. That is why she has never told him that she borrowed money to save his life, believing it would have been "painful and humiliating . . . , with his manly self-respect" (Ibsen, 1879, 34). In other words, she is not expected to play the role of his saviour and, therefore, she remains silent.

Thus, disrupting the hierarchy set by the public/private sphere dichotomy, Nora is accused of an act of love done to save her family. She is crushed by a power that is gaining control over her life, with the least acknowledgement of her sacrifices. Nora's experience manifests one of life's main characteristics in the panopticon: "the increase of power created by the panoptic machine may degenerate into tyranny" (Foucault, 1977a, 207). As a representative of women in the nineteenth century, Nora is subjected to tremendous oppression and injustice. Although saving Torvald's life makes her the real "hero" of her family, this very sacrifice, paradoxically, subjects her to condemnation because it disrupts the socially constructed hierarchy within the family. At the end of the play, she says to Torvald: "It is your fault that my life has come to nothing" (Ibsen, 1879, 119). Owing to Torvald's role as the panopticon guard imposing this stifling morality, Nora feels she has lost the meaning of her life in both the public as well as the domestic spheres.

With this silence and blind obedience, women eventually become instruments of imposing society's dictates on themselves, in the process of which they lose their spontaneity. In *Aurora Leigh*, the aunt's "Eyes of no colour, once they might have smiled, / But never, never have forgot themselves/ In smiling," Aurora says (Browning, 1857, 7). The aunt voluntarily suppresses herself, reflecting a firm belief in the importance of curbing one's emotions, a notion Victorian morality powerfully encourages. Similarly, in *A Doll's House*, Nora embraces adherence to the accepted

morality. She says to Torvald: "I shouldn't think of doing what you disapprove of" (Ibsen, 1879, 23). This is what she believes to be right, and it is what she willingly does. Thus, both characters are portrayed as "willing slave[s]," a portrayal that implies uncoerced surrender to middle-class morality and the view of happiness and respectability it establishes (Mill, 2008, 16). Losing their ability to think independently from social expectations, women lack spontaneity which is a prerequisite for self-knowledge. Aurora's aunt and illusioned Nora are portrayed as people who have lost sight of what can really make them happy. This is because society has predetermined the source of their happiness and fulfillment: "domestic usefulness and ... personal exertion in the way of promoting *general* happiness" (Ellis, 1839, 74).

This obliteration of self-knowledge is part of the illusion docility creates. In *Aurora Leigh*, Aurora links illusion to ignoring one's dreams. She analyzes the break from one's dreams as a rejection to embrace life as a realm of fulfillment. To her, attempting to avoid conflict with the established norms leads to the suppression of one's dreams: "How oft we throw [life] off and think, 'herein we must break with Life, / Or be ourselves unworthy ... Then, Life calls to us, / ... Nature's voice, / ... Life's voice!'" (Browning, 1857, 15). This quotation throws light on the typical experience of Victorian women who, according to the dictates of middle-class morality, have to give up themselves as individuals and embrace their predetermined domestic roles, otherwise they would be deemed worthless. Aurora's use of "Nature's voice" to refer to the natural need of human beings to pursue their dreams represents a subtle, but very powerful, challenge to the nineteenth-century essentialist view of women as naturally domestic beings. In contrast, Aurora suggests that Nature's true call is the pursuit of one's dreams, which women are manipulated to ignore in the name of virtue and social respectability.

The same connection between docility, illusion, and the lack of self-knowledge is present in *A Doll's House*. At the beginning of the play, Nora is illusioned into believing she is leading a happy family life. Nora has spent her life with Torvald as a "docile body" deprived of her own judgement and seeking his instruction; "Torvald dear; direct me and put me right, as you used to do," she begs him at the peak of her anxiety (Ibsen, 1879, 90). She is ignorant that her joy lasts only as long as she is "incapable of error" and that this joy is a superficial peacefulness that only makes her imagine she is happy (Ruskin, 1865, 40). At the

end of the play, however, she decides to “take off [her] masquerade dress,” a symbol of her fake life with Torvald (Ibsen, 1879, 116). The moment Nora’s eyes are opened to the reality of her life, she realizes that she has never been happy. At this moment, her docility suddenly vanishes. Deciding to leave her family to gain experience, she fiercely defies the rules of morality she has been blindly embracing all her life and appears as a woman imbued with the idea of becoming a person (Adams, 1957, 416).

This relation between docility and illusion is directly linked to Foucault’s concept of knowledge. According to Foucault, through society’s endorsement, socially constructed norms acquire a kind of sacredness which creates an illusion of them as being a “truth” and, therefore, deviation from them becomes regarded as a form of nonconformity of serious consequences (Foucault, 1977b, 131). In this way, manipulating knowledge is key in the panoptic mechanism where the status quo is preserved through coercive discourse which makes subjects adopt the promoted knowledge and impose it on themselves. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1977) stresses the critical and complex role of knowledge in the process of producing and maintaining docility. He refers to compliance as “rigorous exercises ... that marked the gradual acquisition of knowledge and good behaviour; the striving ... towards salvation” (161, 162). Panopticism’s first step in the process of producing docility is, therefore, casting other directedness in the form of voluntary adoption of what renders a person normal and accepted.

This is the trap Ibsen’s Nora falls in. Nora internalizes the imposed knowledge structure of middle-class women’s domesticity and the false contentment this internalization creates. She finds life’s glory in being “able to play and romp about with the children” and “to have things tasteful and pretty in the house, exactly as Torvald likes it” (Ibsen, 1879, 36). Her only way to “salvation,” to leading a peaceful family life, is to earn Torvald’s approval, a goal she can only achieve by striving to be what he wants her to be, rather than what she truly is.

A believer in this knowledge structure, Nora is content that her only source of pride is her sacrifice to save her husband’s life, an act of devotion to her domestic sphere. Nevertheless, a closer examination of her experience reveals that this pride involves her movement to the public sphere, which she seems ignorant of. To save Torvald, Nora forges her father’s signature to loan the money, an act of gaining experience in the world of business and moral deprivation. Ironically, Nora has never associated herself with this world, except for the part that involves her role as the

giver, the healer of her family's wounds. Later in the play, her anxiety implies the fear of the consequences of trespassing the public realm. Nora starts to realize that she has deviated from the dominant morality; thus, her self-image shifts from a pure and loving mother to a corrupt person of bad influence. When Anna asks her to let the children in, she replies: "don't let them come to me! ... corrupt my children! Poison my home!" (Ibsen, 1879, 59). She, thus, becomes afraid of the consequences of her deviation from the domestic sphere on her children whose moral propriety is her responsibility.

Nora's fear echoes Foucault's idea of the "danger of contagion" represented by panopticon prisoners (Foucault, 1977a, 200-201). Indeed, the idea of contamination exists in both Foucault's theory and nineteenth-century morality discourse, yet, with some variation. According to Foucault, deviant individuals are placed in the panopticon to protect the society from their negative influence, which implies the virtue and purity of the rest of the society. Conversely, nineteenth-century moral discourse propagates the idea that limiting women's lives to the domestic sphere is the only way to protect their moral purity. However, the social history of the nineteenth century reveals this discourse's hypocrisy. It is not women who are meant to be protected from the "danger of contamination." It is the public sphere which seeks to protect itself against any possible disruption that would occur if women became part of it. Restricted to the domestic sphere, women are treated like prisoners in Foucault's panopticon; both are confined to ensure that those outside thrive. Thus, Nora's panopticon of false marriage is the way mainstream morality is kept intact and any nonconforming values are suppressed.

The significance of the domestic space in both texts contributes to this depiction of the double standards of Victorian morality. The idea that both heroines decide to leave their houses sheds light on the significance of the domestic space in both texts. Within the house, Aurora and Nora are tied by the codes of morality. As a symbol of domesticity, the house becomes a metaphor of the panopticon where docility is the only way for survival. The house and the values it stands for become causes of anxiety and frustration. Refusing this captivity, both heroines leave in pursuit of self-knowledge and intellectual freedom.

This reading of the domestic space in both works presents an alternative interpretation of the conventional Victorian image of the house as women's "shelter ... from all terror" (Ruskin, 1865, 40). In both works, women's imprisonment in the

domestic sphere preserves the status quo from the “terror” of women’s possible rebellion if they become aware of their rights and attempt to reclaim them. Ironically, rather than being a “place of Peace” for women, as powerfully promoted by nineteenth-century social philosophers, the house is portrayed as a place of protection for middle-class values which make the rest of the society thrive at the expense of women (40).

Besides exposing the hypocrisy of middle-class moral discourse which suppresses and exploits women in the name of protection and stability, this interpretation is a manifestation of the connection between social discourse and resistance as Foucault explains it in *The History of Sexuality*. According to Foucault (1978), social norms are the products of coercive social discourses which draw upon socially accepted ideas in order “not to state the truth but to prevent its very emergence” (55). Foucault calls this a masking of the truth aiming at blocking access to it. Underlying this view is a fear of resistance and, thus, a desire to obscure and silence those victimized by discourse as seen in both texts.

In the last scene, Nora realizes that her identity and role in life have been determined by others who “reduce [her] to the raw material of their own needs” (Durbach, 1991, 111). As a result, she decides to defy this imposed knowledge structure and ceases to be a “docile body”. She decides to move to the public sphere to gain the experience she needs to become independent. This time, however, her movement to the public sphere is not forced by circumstances, but by her free will.

Similarly, the world of *Aurora Leigh* is governed by a body of knowledge that is regarded as sacred and as the only acceptable way of giving significance to women’s life which would otherwise be spent in vain. The verse novel depicts women’s education as a form of knowledge which emphasizes the opposition between social welfare and women’s self-realization, an opposition established by nineteenth-century social philosophers. “We sew, ... prick our fingers, dull our sight,/ Producing what?/” says Aurora, suggesting that what women are allowed to learn serves others while, for them, it is completely futile (Browning, 1857, 10, 11). This is the voice of the rebellious subject defying the knowledge imposed on her and refusing to regard it as an unquestionable truth.

Aurora says that she has done everything she is expected to do because her aunt “liked accomplishments in girls” (10). The use of the word “accomplishments” is rather complex. In the context of the nineteenth century, “accomplishments”

simply refers to the skills and leisure activities of young ladies of class. Women's education had "to focus on domestic duties, reading and writing ... knowledge of the Bible ..., French, music, painting or drawing" because these skills reflected feminine virtues of modesty and refined taste (Larguèche, 2010, 132). During this era, these skills gave ladies better marriage chances, as a wife's finesse was a reflection and an enhancement of her husband's social status (Delia Gaze, 1997, 74). Thus, women were made into "docile bodies" to maintain men's superior position. Aurora challenges this knowledge structure throughout the text and finally manages to undermine it, an implication that it is far from sacred.

In fact, Browning and Ibsen portray the violability of this normative system not only through Aurora's and Nora's rebellion but also through the acknowledgement of the defeat of this knowledge structure, a defeat expressed by Romney and Torvald, the representatives of the dominant morality in *Aurora Leigh* and *A Doll's House*, respectively. In light of the Foucauldian concept that "Where there is power, there is resistance," the challenge of dominant social norms can be seen as a product of the oppression the characters have been subjected to as subjects of power (Foucault, 1978, 95). Thus, as a disciplinary strategy, panopticism, ironically, carries within itself the seeds of its own destruction.

The outset of *Aurora Leigh* foreshadows the end of middle-class morality, describing it as "A weary ... darkness, spurred ... With flame, that it should eat and end itself" (Browning, 1857, 5-6). The verse novel progresses toward this end with the gradual unfolding of the hypocrisy of this morality: "That I failed, / Is certain," Romney later says, condemning the "society's wide wrong" (196). Romney speaks of the long-established knowledge structure as fruitless and exhausting, and therefore, it is a shakable one that could be replaced by another that would bring happiness to life: "You have shown me truths ... and I bore to take it in, / And let it draw me" (199). Using the plural form "truths" is very significant here, as it acknowledges the existence of alternative truths or knowledge and implies embracing new possibilities.

Some critics see the ending where Aurora and Romney are united in marriage as a defeat for Aurora's claims to autonomy and artistic success. For example, Alison Case (1991) states that the heroine's struggle for independence should have been "kept from the undermining influence of the traditional love story" (32). Commenting on the ending, Clinton Machann (2016) writes that it adds

uncertainties, as the love story takes precedence over individual success. Along the same lines, Amanda Anderson (2018) maintains that for many, Aurora's and Romney's marriage "represents a lamentable capitulation to conventionality" (169).

These statements, however, overlook the impact of the heroine's art and beliefs on traditional Victorian ideology—as represented by Romney—and the fact that the union between them happens only when Romney changes. The role of Aurora's poetry in transforming Romney's worldview not only suggests the success of what Aurora stands for but also marks a reversal in the power relation upon which the panoptic mechanism of morality functions. In light of the parallelism established in this research between middle-class morality and the panoptic disciplinary scheme, as a woman, Aurora is supposed to be cast in the conventional image of the subordinate object of power observed and supervised by conformists to ensure her compliance with social norms. Nevertheless, the influence of her art on Romney suggests a reversal of roles where she becomes the powerful party and the status quo her follower. This change implies a destabilization of middle-class morality as an enduring power. Aurora's victory also has an ideological implication, as she manages to achieve self-fulfillment in both the public and the domestic spheres which have been conventionally deemed irreconcilable.

In *A Doll's House*, despite the open ending and the fact that the audience do not see a change in Torvald, the play still retains a prospect for a shift in the dominant knowledge structure. This is achieved through Torvald's hope to change so that he and Nora would reunite. Torvald's begging her to stay and his will to "become another man" suggest the defeat of middle-class morality and its inaptness to lead to real happiness for all members of the society (Ibsen, 1879, 125).

The confrontations between the two heroines and their partners make tenable the argument that it is not only nineteenth-century women who are imprisoned in the panopticon of middle-class morality, but also their prison guards, namely men as believers in this morality. Romney and Torvald internalize middle-class norms. Although this morality seemingly nourishes men, the present analysis holds that men, ironically, are also victims of it. In his analysis of Ibsen's play, Errol Durbach (1991) expresses a view of Torvald close to that presented in this study, contending that social structures can "encage us within the very systems we endorse" (110). Durbach proceeds to argue that due to the promotion of women's image as fragile and featherbrained, Torvald is imprisoned in his presupposed role as his wife's

protector. However, a new perspective can be added to Durbach's interpretation, namely that as products of a patriarchal culture, Torvald and Romney are imprisoned in their role as guards of social morality. Their compliance with this stifling moral system has deprived both men from the vision of what they really want in life. Their life lacks true connectedness with their partners, and, consequently, happiness. Torvald lives in the illusion of having a happy married life and Romney is unable to earn Aurora's affection. This victimization of Romney and Torvald by the morality they have been supporting and their subsequent rebellion against it reflect Foucault's concept of the "plurality of resistances" where opposition is present at various points within the power framework even where defiance is most unlikely (Foucault, 1978, 96).

Similar as they are in dramatizing the defeat of the dominant knowledge structure, the two texts have opposite endings: a marital separation in *A Doll's House*, and union through marriage in *Aurora Leigh*. This can be attributed to the contrary ways the two heroines and their partners react to this knowledge structure. Nora's realization of the injustice done to her comes after her marriage has long been based on false values. So, her realization necessitates ending this marriage where her husband is still captive to these values. Aurora, on the contrary, is portrayed throughout the text as an independent person who has a clear vision of her rights and her needs, and it is Romney who is illusioned by the hypocritical social norms. Therefore, a union between the two characters becomes possible when Romney reaches a true understanding of Aurora and the meaning of a true relationship founded on love and respect.

The way the plots unfold suggests the inefficiency of panopticism as a sustainable means of control, despite its seeming success at the beginning of the texts. Foucault (1977a) describes the panopticon as a "place for experiments on men, and for analyzing with complete certainty the transformations that may be obtained from them" (204). As a system of discipline, panopticism places the individual in an environment where certain rules are enforced in a way that guarantees specific outcomes. Ironically, in both texts, the "panopticon" figures as yielding results opposite to its original purpose. Aurora refuses to abide by the panopticon's rules, and Nora finally rejects docility. These results suggest the futility of imposing discipline and emphasizes the ability of those subjected to it to destabilize the knowledge structure that endorses it.

Analyzing *Aurora Leigh* and *A Doll's House* through drawing a parallelism between nineteenth-century European middle-class morality and panopticism brings to the fore the complexity of both the panoptic scheme of discipline and this social morality which involves similar techniques of disciplinary control. Attempting to guarantee women's compliance with social norms, the adoption of the concept of separate spheres by middle-class morality involved confinement, visibility, vigilance, and docility, strategies which align middle-class morality with panopticism. These elements comprising panopticism lead to a complete obliteration of freedom. Similarly, middle-class morality coerces women into giving up all aspects that make them independent, making the rest of the society thrive and, in the process, destroy their own potential. Not only do women become ignorant of their rights but they also exercise self-vigilance to suppress any sign of autonomy before it starts to bloom. The analysis has also attempted to demonstrate the unsustainability of this powerful disciplinary mechanism through the rebellion of both the victims and the believers in the dominant morality. In *Aurora Leigh* and *A Doll's House*, the vicious cycle of suppression and obedience is eventually broken by the characters' realization of the injustice done to them and their subsequent refusal to accept this coercion. Hence, the rebellion of the targets of power in *Aurora Leigh* and *A Doll's House* implies shaking this mechanism through the deviation of one of its constituent elements from the disciplinary pattern designed by social forces. Becoming agents rather than subjects in relation to the men in their lives, both Aurora and Nora subvert the categories of agency and subjectivity set by middle-class morality. In addition to achieving their intellectual independence, they assume the role of authority which changes the status quo and whose influence and true cause are acknowledged by their previous oppressors. Finally, the convergence of the victims and the representatives of morality as different points of resistance signals a powerful destabilization of middle-class morality as a panoptic mechanism and ending the power relations on which, this mechanism is structured.

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أخلاقيات الطبقة الوسطى كبانوبتيكون: قراءة بنظرية ميشيل فوكو لأورورا لي لإليزابيث باريت براوننج وبيت الدمية لهنريك إبسن

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ملخص البحث

يقدم هذا البحث قراءة للرواية الشعرية *أورورا لي* لإليزابيث باريت براوننج و مسرحية *بيت الدمية* لهنريك إبسن في ضوء القواعد الأخلاقية الصارمة للطبقة الوسطى في القرن التاسع عشر والتي فرضت علي النساء معايير اجتماعية محددة كشرط للقبول و الاحترام الاجتماعي، سوف يستخدم البحث نظرية "التأديب و العقاب" لميشيل فوكو مع التركيز علي مفهوم "البانوبتية" كأداة للتأديب و الانضباط، و سوف يتضمن البحث أيضا العلاقة بين القوة و المعرفة من وجهة نظر فوكو و كيف تساهم هذه العلاقة في تحقيق الطاعة و الحفاظ عليها، يقوم البحث باقامة تشابها بين البانوبتية و أخلاقيات الطبقة الوسطى في أوروبا في القرن التاسع عشر و يثبت هذا التشابه من خلال التحليل. و يحاول البحث الإجابة علي من ضمن هذه الأسئلة التالية: ما هو معني تمرد الشخصيات الأساسية فيما يتعلق بالفكر الاجتماعي كأداة تأديب و سيطرة؟ الي أي مدي نجح فرض المفاهيم الاجتماعية في تحقيق أهدافها المرجوة؟

الكلمات الدالة فكرة العالمين المنفصلين في الأيديولوجية الاجتماعية الفكتورية، أخلاقيات الطبقة الوسطى، بيت الدمى لهنريك إبسن، *أورورا لي* لإليزابيث باريت براوننج، نظرية البانوبتية لميشيل فوكو، الأجساد الطبيعية