**Aurora Leigh Summary**

*Aurora Leigh* – 1857

*Jane Eyre* – 1847

*Maria* (similar novel by Mary Wollstonecraft) - 1798

*Aurora Leigh* was the first major poem in English in which the heroine, like the author, is a woman writer. *Aurora Leigh* rewrites Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* from a female point of view. It also contains echoes of Milton, and is a novel written in blank verse format.

The work focuses on woman’s struggle to achieve artistic and economic independence in modern society.

It is also a witty, Byronic treatment of Victorian manners and social issues, and an emotionally charged love plot that recalls Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*. (In fact, the ending takes quite a bit from the plot of *Jane Eyre*).

Aurora Leigh overcomes the prejudices of both a masculine audience and the man she loves, in order to find fame and happiness in Italy, which closely mirrored Barrett Browning’s own life.

The poem was an overwhelming success, even though it posed radical ideas, like the two sexes working together so that each could achieve its fullest human potential.

It was similar to other novels of the time in that it was a Bildungsroman, a novel of all around development or self-culture (like Dickens’ *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations* or *Jane Eyre*). The hero/heroine is usually an orphan or has lost one parent, is brought up by unsympathetic relatives, turns to books and self-education, and escapes to more congenial setting. It also contains some element of autobiography.

**Summary:**

**Book 1:** Aurora is born in Florence, to a Florentine mother and English father. Her mother dies when Aurora is four. Her father raises her (lovingly) until he dies when she is 13. Aurora is sent to England to live with his sister, her aunt. Her aunt tries to educate Aurora in things women need to learn—needlepoint, etc., but Aurora discovers her father’s old library and educates herself.

**Book 2:** Aurora is now 20. Her cousin, Romney Leigh (a philanthropist who holds socialist ideals), proposes marriage after criticizing her writing. She refuses him. She has her own calling, she tells him. Her aunt is angry with Aurora for making this decision. Her aunt subsequently dies and leaves the family fortune to Romney. He gets 30,000 pounds, while Aurora gets 300.
He offers some financial assistance to Aurora, but she refuses and goes to London to make a living as a poet.

**Books 3 and 4:** Aurora has seen some success as a poet. She is visited by Lady Waldemar, who tells her she is in love with Romney, but Romney has decided to marry a woman from a lower class, Marian Erle. Lady Waldemar asks Aurora to go speak to Romney to talk him out of the marriage. Aurora instead goes to see Marian, and learns her life story: Marian’s mother was an alcoholic who tried to sell Marian into prostitution. Marian ended up ill and in the hospital for the poor. That is where Romney met her and got her work as a seamstress. She is abused in that position. Romney then asks her to marry him. She tells Aurora she will be a good wife to Romney. Romney then walks in, and Aurora tells him she approves of the match. But on the wedding day, Marian never shows. A letter from her arrives at the church, telling Romney she isn’t good enough to be his wife. The crowd at the wedding then attacks Romney, assuming he seduced her. He searches for her in vain.

**Book 5:** Two years later, Aurora is still struggling to write, and Romney has turned the ancestral home into a refuge for the poor. Aurora learns that he is now engaged to Lady Waldemar. Distraught, Aurora decides to travel to Italy.

**Book 6:** While traveling through France, she sees Marian Erle, who has a child with her. Marian explains that on the wedding day, Lady Waldemar had her abducted, told her Romney did not love her, and sent her to France, where she was left in a brothel and raped.

**Books 7 and 8:** Aurora takes Marian and the child to Italy, and the three of them live together in Florence. She sells a book. After several years, Romney finds them. He tells them a mob burned down his ancestral home—and blinded him. He never married Lady Waldemar, but he brought a letter from her for Aurora. She reads it, and discovers that she couldn’t marry him because she knew he was in love with Aurora. Romney doesn’t know the contents of the letter, and asks Marian to marry him. She refuses—and leaves with her child. Aurora and Romney confess their love for one another.