

The Systematic Play of Differences: A Reading of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" Through the Concepts of *différance* and "Other"

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Abstract: Literature can be viewed as a medium wherein the concepts of *différance* and the "Other" find affinity, especially since oppositions within literary texts are usually interpreted through an ideological lens. In recent discussions of the link between literature and the predominant ideology of any given society, race has come to embody such opposition in literary texts and society since racial identity is dictated by a hierarchal order based on the domination of one race over another. This paper focuses on representing the Other as a factor of *différance* through the systematic play of differences in "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" by Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1848/1900). This discussion deviates from the critical tradition of approaching the poem through an autobiographical or abolitionist perspective; instead, it focuses on how the simplified binary opposition of white and black was highlighted to promote antislavery propaganda within a creative medium by the female writer. It does so by illustrating the intersection between the concepts of *différance* and the Other through employing the systematic play of differences in its textual and ideological reading of the poem.

Keywords: Other, Difference, Racial Identity, Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

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ملخص البحث: يمكن النظر إلى الأدب باعتباره كوسيلة يكون فيها مفهومي "الاختلاف" و"الآخر" متقاربان، خاصة أن التناقضات داخل النصوص الأدبية عادة ما يتم تفسيرها من خلال عدسة أيديولوجية، خلال المناقشات الأخيرة حول العلاقة بين الأدب والأيديولوجية السائدة في أي مجتمع، أصبح العرق تجسيداً لمثل هذا التعارض الموجود في النصوص الأدبية والمجتمع على حد سواء، حيث إن الهوية العرقية يملئها نظام هرمي يعتمد على سيطرة عرق واحد على المجتمع. تركز الورقة على تمثيل "الآخر" كعامل "اختلاف" من خلال اللعب المنهجي للاختلافات في قصيدة "الرق الهارب عند أرض الهجرة" للكاتبة إليزابيث باريت براوننج. تعرض المناقشة تحليل للقصيدة مختلف عن التقليد النقدي المتمثل في تناول القصيدة من خلال منظور السيرة الذاتية أو سياسة الغاء العبودية، حيث تركز على الطريقة التي تم بها تسليط الضوء على المعارضة الثنائية المبسطة بين الأبيض والأسود لعرض السياسة المناهضة للعبودية ضمن وسيط إبداعي من قبل الكاتبة من خلال استخدام مفهوم الاختلاف المنهجي لتوفير قراءة نصية وأيديولوجية للقصيدة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الآخر، الاختلاف، الهوية العرقية، إليزابيث باريت براوننج.

The link between the "Other" and *différance* emerges from their stress on the binary oppositions constituting meaning within a social, political, or literary context. While *différance* focuses on the process of creating meaning from two opposing entities, the Other focuses on the legitimization of the authority that has deemed the minority as weak, thereby leading to its subjugation and labeling as Other. Literature can be viewed as a medium wherein the two concepts find affinity, especially since oppositions within literary texts are usually interpreted through an ideological lens. In recent discussions of the link between literature and the predominant ideology of any given society, race has become the embodiment of such opposition in literary texts and society since racial identity is dictated by a hierarchal order based on the domination of one race over another. To explore the creative process of writing a literary text that utilizes oppositions to highlight a racial identity within a given society, the paper focuses on the representation of the Other as a factor of *différance* through the systematic play of differences in "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" by Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1848/1900).

The paper's significance lies in its discussion of how a female writer used the text's binary opposition of white and black to promote antislavery propaganda in a creative medium. This reading employs the systematic play of differences in Barrett Browning's poem to consider the intersection between the concepts of *différance* and the Other in a textual and ideological reading. The poem and this reading become relevant in the context of Barrett Browning scholarship, which has primarily focused on thematic readings of her poetry that are informed by abolitionist or autobiographical frameworks. The basis of the discussion is based on two key questions: (1) How can the poem be read outside of abolitionist and autobiographical frameworks using the concepts of the Other and *différance*? (2) How can the systematic play of differences make sense of Barrett Browning's textual use of black and white in the poem? The intention is to provide a reading of Barrett Browning's poem that highlights the poem's antislavery message by fusing two ideas that are not commonly explored in the scholarship of this Victorian poet.

Differentiation is seen by deconstructionists as a process that impacts both language and reality (Rivkin & Ryan, 2004, p. 258). According to Jacques Derrida, *différance* results in systematic transformations that are sometimes necessary to give words a purpose. These systematic transformations produce meaning by allowing differences between

words or objects in a network of relations to be traced. His concept is linked to the way that words can materialize meaning in writing through both the "temporization" and "spacing" of meaning within a written text (Derrida, 1982, p. 9). For Derrida (1982), "when the present cannot be presented, we signify," in which the sign that is being signified is a "deferred presence" (p. 9). The concept of *différance* is defined by Derrida as follows:

Différance is the systematic play of differences, of the traces of differences, of the *spacing* by means of which elements are related to each other. This spacing is the simultaneously active and passive production of the intervals without which the "full" terms would not signify, would not function. (Derrida, 2004, p. 337)

It is evident from such a definition that the systematic play of differences offers a framework that is versatile enough to be applied to the ideological construction of racial identity, which explains Derrida's conclusion that all reality is "textual" (Rivkin & Ryan, 2004, p. 259). In his essay "Différance," he provides a more direct explanation of the methodological function of the concept by generating meaning through "the process of scission and division which would produce or constitute different things or differences" (Derrida, 1982, p. 9). The core function of the concept of *différance* is to produce meanings through differences from "the network of oppositions that distinguishes them [words], and then relates one to another" (Derrida, 1982, p. 10). The relationship between the concepts of *différance* and the Other is strengthened by this function, which suggests a breakdown of boundaries and an active play of meaning in language. Both concepts rely on oppositions and differences to give signs, objects, or beings their unique identities. The systematic play of differences highlights the similarities between *différance* and the idea of the Other in literary texts by emphasizing the conflict and difference inherent in racial identity.

Since the 1990s, critical race theory (CRT) has focused on whiteness while deconstructing the relationship that deemphasizes any race through the use of the concept of the Other in relation to racial identity. By creating the Other, the emphasis on whiteness enabled "self-identification and communal collusion" against minorities (Rivkin & Ryan, 2004, p. 961). Critical race theorists, in particular, "tend to focus on questions of identity and representation" (Rivkin & Ryan, 2004, p. 962). Colonialism, slavery, and immigration have instigated ethnic and racial adversities, causing racial tensions in Western societies where the white ethnic group formed the majority. Because they are non-white, the dominated

groups would be branded as the Other, which embodies what I refer to in this paper as the “systematic play of differences” between black and white in a cultural sense. Toni Morrison questioned the legitimacy of this phenomenon in her 1993 book *Playing in the Dark*, asking how marginalizing what she terms a black presence within the literary imagination has constituted the American literary heritage. Morrison’s (1993) critical claims in *Playing in the Dark* affirm the importance of the opposition embodied within the concept of the Other by stressing the way “one can see that a real or fabricated Africanist presence was crucial to their [white ethnic group] sense of Americanness. And it shows” (p. 6). An oppressive hierarchical ideology that is predicated on subjugating the Other is condemned in “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point” through the systematic play of differences based on skin color. The poem explores the idea of the Other as someone marginalized, oppressed, and considered an outsider in society. The runaway slave, who is nameless in the poem, is depicted as the quintessential Other. She is a woman of African descent who has escaped from slavery, making her an outcast in a society that values and privileges whiteness. Barrett Browning (1848/1900) uses vivid descriptions to highlight the physical and emotional suffering endured by the speaker, emphasizing the way society has marked her as different and inferior simply because of her skin color. White and black present two binary oppositions that appear in Morrison’s critical take on the American literary canon and are being visualized in Barrett Browning’s poem. The poem reflects the racial conflict through the justified use of a black voice by a white writer since, as Morrison (1993) puts it, “imagining is not merely looking or looking at; . . . It is. . . *becoming*” (p. 4).

Commentators on this poem, such as Sarah Brophy (1998), Tricia Lootens (2006), Melissa Schaub (2011), Sarah Ficke (2013), and Antony Harrison (2020), usually situate their analysis of the poem within American abolitionist rhetoric by projecting the poem as a controversially political text that draws some autobiographical significance from the author’s own life, which makes her “a central figure for serious students of Victorian poetry” (Lootens, 2006, p. 487). Sarah Ficke (2013) notes that the 1845 edition of the abolitionist annual publication *The Liberty Bell* contains a short essay by Charlotte Coues, titled “An Appeal to Mothers,” explaining how death can be “preferable to being sold by one human being to another” (Ficke, 2013, p. 253). Ficke (2013) suggests that Barrett Browning may have drawn inspiration from this essay for the

plot of her poem, which depicts the mother-child relationship as the pinnacle of unjust oppression. Due to its strong antislavery imagery, “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point” addressed the role of female poets in normalizing women’s participation in topics that were at the time dominated by men. The fact that both the speaker and author of the poem are women has directed most scholars to integrate feminist statements into their interpretations of the poem. Scholars such as Sarah Brophy (1998) and Isobel Armstrong (1993) have considered how Barrett Browning’s role as a poet reflects the way “female agency depends on the possession of a ‘privileged vision’ rather than on negotiating the right to speak authoritatively as an independent subject” (Brophy, 1998, p. 275).

The poetic form of “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point” follows the tradition of dramatic monologues with the presence of a single speaker who describes her state and life in front of a silent audience. By giving the enslaved woman a voice and illuminating her innermost thoughts and feelings, the poem challenges the idea of the Other. Barrett Browning’s (1848/1900) depiction of the escaped slave as a fully formed human being opposes the common objectification and dehumanization of enslaved people in general and enslaved women in particular. Diaries written by bookkeepers and overseers of the era reveal some of the dehumanizing treatment that female slaves endured. For instance, the entries in Thomas Thistlewood’s diary on the number of miscarriages, infant deaths, and runaways provide “valuable insights into health issues and women’s resistance to Jamaican plantation life in the mid to late eighteenth century” (Fish, 2006, p. 508). Typically, these white bookkeepers and overseers would “kick women in the womb, often crippling them or their unborn children” to exert their power over female slaves (Bush, 1990, p. 45). It should be noted that Barrett Browning might have been experimenting with the form of the dramatic monologue in this early work because of the influence of her husband Robert Browning as well as Tennyson, who “during the period...were beginning to establish the genre” (Schaub, 2011, p. 565). Barrett Browning composed “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point” in 1846 at the invitation of American poet James Russell Lowell and Maria Weston Chapman, editor and sponsor of American abolitionist magazine *The Liberty Bell* (Harrison, 2020, p. 53). The magazine was issued from 1839 to 1858 and was managed by female abolitionists to promote women’s antislavery views through literature, since it targeted a female audience (British Library). Barrett Browning held

explicit antislavery views and criticized her own family for being associated with slavery, as she described in a letter: "Cursed we [she and her family] are from generation to generation" (Kelley et al., 1984, p. 252). The importance of the poem in highlighting Barrett Browning's antislavery views is documented in a letter she wrote to Lowell, in which she stated "that in writing this poem, I have not forgotten, as an Englishwoman, that we have scarcely done washing our national garments clear of the dust of the very same reproach" (Kelley et al., 1984, p. 87). Accordingly, many interpretations have centered the poem within an autobiographical framework (Brophy, 1998, p. 276). Statements such as those in her letter to Lowell explain the reason why some scholars, such as Sarah H. Ficke (2013), have proclaimed her as a figure that promotes "a meaningful social change" rather than simply a feminist figure (Ficke, 2013, p. 249), thus extending this Victorian poet's impact beyond the scope of feminism to include the American political scope.

The autobiographical link and the purpose of the poem might also explain the reason why Barrett Browning changed its title from "Black and Mad at Pilgrim's Point" to "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point." This shift emphasizes the centrality of the systematic play of differences in Barrett Browning's creative process and her focus on targeting the cause of slavery rather than establishing a stereotypical emotion attached to black women. Ficke (2013) remarks on such exclusion in the title: "Although she commits the 'insane' act of infanticide, her trouble is not mental instability or even individual emotion, but a system that incorporates everyone designated 'black': a system she describes in detail at the beginning of the poem, before she even begins to think of madness" (p. 259). Moreover, the revised title's emphasis on the enslaved status of the speaker "highlights the conflicts between freedom and captivity," which is also reflected by the white and black opposition (Ficke, 2013, p. 259). The title explicitly promotes Barrett Browning's antislavery views by focusing on the location of Pilgrim's Point, which refers to Plymouth, Massachusetts, where the Pilgrims landed in November 1620. Her creative decision to include the location and emphasize the speaker in the title highlights the link she wants to create between the speaker and the audience, who were primarily women. The fact that the speaker is a slave who killed her newborn child to set him free refers to one of the inhumane laws of slavery that considered the children of enslaved people to be automatically born into slavery. Because of this, the speaker's choice to kill the newborn child is seen as an act of mercy. Morrison's 1978 novel *Beloved* also

makes reference to the law, thus further elevating the poem's prominence in contemporary society.

In "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point," the systematic play of differences is reinforced through its antislavery attitude, which portrays slavery as a destructive tool that takes the lives of innocent black people at the hands of white men. Barrett Browning (1848/1900) critiques racist and patriarchal oppression through the use of black and white in the poem. She succeeds in portraying an oppressive, hierarchical ideology that pits freedom against the Other, allowing the reader to construct a web of thematic oppositions, such as freedom vs. slavery, nature vs. society, and life vs. death. Importantly, the speaker uses the contrast between white and black as a textual binary opposition to symbolize the cruel oppression she endured as a black slave, thus reinforcing the thematic oppositions of the poem. The word "white" is mentioned nineteen times, whereas the word "black" and its variations is mentioned twenty times. Such numbers highlight the speaker's opposition between black and white that ultimately preconditioned her position in society as the Other. The notion of Other is first manifested in the poem through the representation of the speaker's skin color. The institution of slavery was founded on the violent eradication of the Other's identity and was made possible by the process of Othering darker-skinned people within a white society. The first stanza establishes the systematic play of differences between white and black when the speaker states the location, being on the site of "the first white pilgrim's bended knee" (Browning, 1848/1900, p. 160), and her physical attributes that establish her difference for having "skin...as dark" as the night (Browning, 1848/1900, p. 160). The third stanza enforces the inferiority of the speaker when requesting freedom due to her "black face" and "black hand" (Browning, 1848/1900, p. 160).

Moreover, the opening lines set the first thematic opposition, freedom vs. slavery, in motion. To break free from the bonds of slavery, the enslaved speaker makes a desperate trip to Pilgrim's Point, which serves as a metaphor for freedom. The speaker's profound longing and desire for freedom to flee oppression and to live a life in which she would not have to kill her own child to protect it is depicted in the opening scene. In sharp contrast, the speaker's horrific and dehumanizing experiences are used to depict slavery. By exploring the dichotomy between human longing for freedom and the inhumane practice of slavery, Barrett Browning (1848/1900) strengthens the immoral and unethical aspects of slavery. The submission of the speaker to the systematic play of differences between white and

black is voiced explicitly for the first time in the fourth stanza, which the speaker begins by declaring that she is “Under the feet of His [God’s] white creatures” for being black (Browning, 1848/1900, pp. 160–161). The speaker further states that her “blackness” sealed her fate as being inferior to whites as her black skin “shuts like prison bars” (Browning, 1848/1900, p. 161). The speaker’s sense of inferiority stems from white men’s color-based belief that their lighter skin makes them more civilized. The speaker stresses such flawed superiority by kneeling at the poem’s opening, which both signifies her position in relation to the white race and likens her quest for freedom that would help her lift her black face to the Pilgrims’ quest for religious freedom (Browning, 1848/1900, pp. 160–161). The opening creates a thematic binary opposition between her, a slave with black skin, and the white master who enslaves her.

The speaker is not ashamed of running away because she will obtain her freedom in this land, or at least that is what she has hoped for. She is so aware of her skin color that, in the ninth stanza, she reiterates her black identity repeatedly to emphasize how being black keeps her from falling in love with another black person (Browning, 1848/1900, p. 162). As she recounts her forbidden love story with an enslaved man, she changes the pronouns of her declaration from “I” to “we” to indicate that the systematic play of differences between black and white does not discriminate between black men and women (Browning, 1848/1900, p. 163). In the sixteenth stanza, the speaker presents the result of being raped by her white master and introduces her newborn child (Browning, 1848/1900, p. 164). The following scene, in which she commits infanticide, deserves a closer look as it showcases the way the opposition of black and white overrides the relationship between a mother and her child when situated within slavery. The conditions of the speaker’s oppression make it difficult for her to accept the child, as he solidifies her position as a slave by being “too white” for her (Browning, 1848/1900, p. 164). The child reminds her of her white master and all the pain of her oppression, hence why the child is “too white” for her. As Brophy notes (1998), Barrett Browning’s focus on this relationship highlights the negative impact of slavery on the natural order and how it can even disrupt the natural relationship between a mother and her child, as the speaker states she wants to save him from her curse (Brophy, 1998, p. 277). Barrett Browning skillfully highlights the detrimental effects of slavery that gnaw at the existence of Othered black people by utilizing the textual

opposition of black and white. The thematic oppositions of freedom vs. slavery and life vs. death work together in this scene to elucidate the perpetuating horrors of slavery and the hypocrisies and moral biases of Barrett Browning’s society. Because the runaway slave cannot accept the infant as hers and since she is aware of the horrible conditions of being born into slavery, she shockingly tells the readers that “to save it from my curse, I twisted it round in my shawl” (Browning, 1848/1900, p. 165). She suffocates the infant with the pressure of her hand, and the infant shakes his arms and legs in rejection. Even though she is aware that the infant is struggling, she does not stop; she even laughs: “For the white child wanted his liberty- / Ha, ha! he wanted his master right” (Browning, 1848/1900, p. 165). Is this a cruel scene? Or a scene with which we should sympathize? It is the speaker/mother who kills the child, but it is the system of oppression and enslavement that is ultimately responsible for his death, specifically those white men who claim to stand close to God and understand his wishes yet either actively promote slavery or do nothing to act against it (Brophy, 1998, p. 276). The narrative portrays the thematic opposition of life vs. death as a vicious cycle in which there is a symbolic life in death and death in life. Although the speaker is alive, she is socially dead because she is a slave, and the infant is dead but has been granted eternal life in the afterlife.

As explained earlier, the relationship between the mother and the child in this poem is caused by the conditions of oppression that make it difficult for her to want to be connected with the child. By forcing the act of silence through infanticide, the oppressive cycle is transferred to the mother–child bond. This act holds significance as it portrays the speaker’s circumstances not only as a mother but also as a slave, unable to provide for her child and traumatized to the point where it affects how a mother can care for her infant. Browning (1848/1900) emphasizes the contrast between the beauty and serenity of nature and the brutality and inhumanity of the society that enslaves the speaker through her decision to bury her infant’s body in the forest. The speaker tells us from the start of the poem that she ran away during the night because both have a dark color: “I have run through the night, my skin is as dark” (Browning, 1848/1900, p. 160). When seeking to bury her child, the speaker rejects the sites of the hierarchal ideology that objectifies and Others her by going not to “white man’s house” or the “black man’s hut” but to the natural world, with which she has created a bond by associating it with her own blackness (Browning,

1848/1900, p. 166). She buries the infant corpse in black earth, symbolizing the color of the mother's skin: "All, changed to black earth — nothing white" (Browning, 1848/1900, p. 166). During the burial of her child, this darkness comforts her because it feels natural, even maternal: "A dark child in the dark, -- ensued/Some comfort, and my heart grew young" (Browning, 1848/1900, p. 167). In this part of the poem, the thematic opposition of nature vs. society takes shape, serving as a poignant commentary on the conflict between the innate human desire for freedom and the constraints imposed by society. Barrett Browning's portrayal of nature as a place of solace and purity highlights the stark divide between the natural world and the corrupt societal norms that perpetuate slavery. This theme underlines the struggle for individual autonomy and the human connection to the natural world in the face of a repressive society. In the poem, nature provides the slave with a refuge in which to hide her newborn's body and feel protected when she runs away. In this sense, nature is portrayed as a sanctuary and a source of spiritual sustenance for the enslaved woman as her senses are immersed in her surroundings. Barrett Browning uses vivid descriptions of the landscape and the sky to convey a sense of liberation and solace in the natural world, which turns nature into a symbol of freedom (Browning, 1848/1900, pp. 167–168). In comparison, society, which hosts her white master, embodies the places where oppression and cruelty are justified.

In the final parts of the poem, the speaker stresses her rejection of an attribute stereotypically assigned to black women, as she says in the final stanzas, "I am not mad: I am black" (Browning, 1848/1900, p. 168). Such statements indicate that what led her to kill her newborn baby is not a mental disability or illness but the fact that she is black, and thus enslaved and oppressed. This argument is bolstered by Barrett Browning's inventive choice to retitle the piece from "Black and Mad at Pilgrim's Point" to "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point," given that the speaker's experience of black oppression served as the catalyst for her act (Ficke, 2013, p. 259). Although this paper focuses on the opposition of black vs. white in the poem, it does not devalue the poem's thematic oppositions. Rather, it concentrates on the vocabulary Barrett Browning employed to represent a morally and figuratively binary dilemma in her story. The opening scene's prayer for assistance by the escaped slave centers the reader between the major thematic oppositions of freedom vs. slavery, nature vs. society, and life vs. death, directed by the textual contrast of black vs.

white. The speaker is a black slave who runs to achieve freedom through the night and to survive imminent death. By selecting Pilgrim's Point, she expresses her comprehension of her master's background as the descendant of religious fugitives, referring to "the whips of one who in" these ancestors' "names works sin and woe" (Browning, 1848/1900, p. 160).

The poet's method of posing an ethical dilemma that she wishes to address is supported by the text's deployment of contrast in colors. Topics such as freedom and the relationship between nature and society are amplified through the opposition of colors Barrett Browning (1848/1900) chose to represent through the words of the poem. Barrett Browning scholarship is filled with readings that discuss the horrors of slavery and the origin of slavery within Western societies. In contrast, this paper focused on an element overlooked by many readers, which is simply the central presence of white vs. black in her poem. "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" presents a case in which a systematic play of differences takes the form of a hierarchal ideology that promotes the domination of a white race while marginalizing other races. The poem contains many elements that Barrett Browning uses to convey her antislavery message by persuading authority figures to end slavery rather than defying such pleas. The female speaker expressed her position as an enslaved person and as a mother who is not able to be a mother to her child because her status as a slave destroyed the purpose of her existence. She is a pleasure tool for her white master, who abuses the freedom that was given to him by the early Pilgrims. The *différance* presented by the differences in these opposing elements in Barrett Browning's poem, "the network of oppositions that distinguishes them [words], and then relates one to another" (Derrida, 1982, p. 10), produces the meaning of her antislavery message.

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