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Powers' "The Greek Slave: Discovering Female Beauty

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Abstract

"Beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder" and it was not only me to feel the beauty of Power's Greek Slave but there were lot more to appreciate and explore its beauty. Pythagoras and Pythagoreans understood that harmony is an objectively existing principle that constitutes the cosmos as a unified body. Harmony is built upon mathematical order and balance, and beauty exists as the objective principle in beings which maintain harmony, order, and balance. This paper explores the subjective form of female physical beauty taking Power's "The Greek Slave" as its core element. It helps out to understand the divine, pure, and the spiritual beauty. Female whose beauty was and is to be appreciated and was subjective will help out the readers to understand and feel the charm and beauty of a female: the beauty which is to be felt not to be used. This paper explains Power's artistic excellence of his work and the reason behind the nude sculpture.

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Introduction

Beauty has at all times been a theme of song for the poet. It has always been the object of passionate adoration for the artist. Visualizing on the ideas of the great philosophers from Plato to Horace, Socrates called it a short tyranny; Plato, the privilege of Nature and the harmony of the soul with the mind. Beauty is conformity of members, high colors, soft flesh, a certain elasticity of form, and harmony of traits. It is accomplished in the form of objects to which art and poetry hold the position of defining them.

Keats gorgeous descriptions sometimes seem to be, not the imaginative efflorescence of clear original thinking, but decorations concealing the common place. He says Greek poetry and art meant beauty. They meant the highest manifestations of physical beauty, in women, in sea and sky and mountain and forest, in flower-laden earth and winding grottos in noble statues and immoral paintings, and they meant spiritual beauty of friendship, love and the kind emotions, of imaginations, and above all, for Keats, indissolubly connected. Physical beauty was the expression of spiritual beauty. Loves, imaginative ardor, were the response to physical beauty. And yet physical beauty is limited and temporary. Spiritual

beauty is eternal. Unless they are linked together like body and spirit, one and perhaps both are meaningless. A moment, whatever passion fills it is only a brushing bubble unless it is eternalized by the spirit. He had learnt from the Greeks, Physical beauty exists only as a symbol of spiritual beauty, and as a way to it. Physical beauty is transient and immemorable unless it is made permanent for art and imagination. He says beauty is truth and truth is an eternal beauty.

Art and Artists are those who create sensation in reader's mind. Visual and verbal techniques are the only tools which help the modern writers as well as artists to express themselves. Inspired by the recent Greek War of Independence, Powers designed in 1843 the first six full-length statues of *The Greek Slave*. In a letter to Edwin W. Stoughton dated 1869, he said:

"... As I promised, I shall now give you an account of the origin of *The Greek Slave*. It was several years after being in this city, and while thinking about... During the struggle the Turks took many prisoners, male and female, and among the latter were beautiful girls, who were sold in the slave markets... These were Christian women, and it is not difficult to imagine... sufferers while exposed to be sold."

These beautiful lines of Power became a kind of homework for those poets, artists, philosophers as well as critics who attempted to analyze this artistic work.

Powers' choice of *The Greek Slave* and the truth behind it was a political as well as an aesthetic statement. Taking center stage at the exhibition and generating unequivocal praise Power intended his nude to represent a chaste Christian girl awaiting her facts with dignity. She was meant to represent the triumph of purity over adversity and was a pure abstract human form tempered with chaste expression and attitude . . . calculated to awaken the highest emotions of the soul for the pure and beautiful.

Each and every aspect of life runs on two phases as for Plato – Venus had two aspects: she was an earthly goddess who aroused humans to physical love or she was a heavenly goddess who inspired intellectual love in them. Plato further argued that contemplation of physical beauty allowed the mind to better understand spiritual beauty which is also termed as Eros generally referred to a kind of madness. In Hiram Powers's *The Greek Slave* it is observed that the Christian girl is seen by others were she is inferred by the people and the aesthetic pleasure of it elicits countless poems, critiques, journalistic commentaries, and engravings. Much of the poetry written about it stresses the fact that the woman is not only really naked. The Poet James F. Clarke began his work with the following verse:

“Unclothed, yet clothed upon; her best defenders
From gazers rude thoughts are snowy splendors
Her perfect beauty scatters; heart and eye
Filling with awe of Woman's majesty

...She stands not bare—
Another robe, of purity, is there.”
Modern poets were also found to be very much attracted as well as inspired by it. Some of the poetic verses for the Slave were:

“Passionless, pure, and perfected
In patient pride of wo!
The giddy gazers mock the form
Grief-frozen into snow!”

- Mary Irving
New York: 11 September 1851

“Some pent glow, methinks, diffuses
O'er those limbs a grace of soul,
Warm with Nature, and yet chastened
By a holy self-control—

Teaching how the loyal spirit
Ne'er can feel an outward chain”

-Henry T. Tuckerman
9 September 1847

It was not just those with poetic flair who were able to clothe the figure with chastity and virtue. The reviewer for *The National Intelligencer* found her “...less a mortal than a spiritual body.” In *Neal's Saturday Gazette*, Clara Cushman lauded the “...purity with which the form is veiled.”

The public clothed the figure, as it were, in a veil of moral sentiment. By attributing to the young woman a lofty purity, a saintly spirituality, and a heart of gold, and then by endowing her with a certain air haughty pride, they were able, in a sense, to bypass her nakedness and see beyond to her purity. Aesthetic pleasure comes from the free play between the imagination and understanding when perceiving an object. Kant calls aesthetic judgments “judgments of taste” and remarks that, though they are based in an individual's subjective feelings, they also claim universal validity. All plausible accounts of beauty connect it to a pleasurable or profound or loving response, even if they do not locate beauty purely in the eye of the beholder. Talking about *The Greek Slave* one finds a nude woman in chains representing an explosive subject, shocking, titillating, potentially even pornographic but on the other hand it can be aesthetically assumed that the works based on this sculpture is in some sense the problem of how to understand woman in her complex spiritual and sensual nature sketching the sense of the symbolic significance in female physical body. Power presents an attractive female subject that would simultaneously invite and repel erotic associations but it is a nudity combined with modesty, constraint, and Christian resignation. Defining the moral issues of nudity in arts he says:

“It was not my object for interest's sake to set before my countrymen demoralizing subjects, and thus get even my bread at the expense of public chastity. A pure abstract human form tempered with chaste expression and attitude was calculated to awaken the highest emotions of the soul for the pure and beautiful.”

The Greek Slave in a Museum



Her naked body shows fine details and the beauty of the female body. Over time as our culture has developed, the way people view women has also developed to fit how our culture has changed. It became a very well respected piece of art despite the fact that it showed a nude woman. Some said it even had respectable taste. It was like a classy way of showing the female body and people said it was “so undressed, yet so refined.”

The religious, cultural, and sexual power struggles communicated through the sculpture to its audience, and evidenced in the implied juxtapositions of captor and captive, piety and infidelity, as well as Christianity versus Islam and West versus East. *The Greek Slave* possessed such an incommunicable mystery and power over her audience that permitted the men and women to engage their fullest imagination, engendering a fantasy-interaction scenario in which individual viewers would exchange places with the girl and imagine themselves in, quite literally, her shoes. Some of the well-documented reactions of American women – in poetry, letters, and journal entries – reveal a desire for an intense,

Romantic, tragic situation, much like the struggle that Powers' *Slave* was assumed to be experiencing. Linda Hyman notes, “On a more subconscious level, however, it is possible that some women actually identified with *The Greek Slave* as a sex object. But whereas men fantasized on the sculpture as a possible sexual partner, some of the women fantasies involved an actual identification of themselves with the statue.” Equating themselves to the *Slave* suggests not only these women's subconscious feelings of being repressed and vulnerable, but also their powerlessness in society. When confronted directly with images of sexual vulnerability and control, American women were drawn into a dream world in which they could fantasize about having power – or relinquishing it. Her milky skin and allusions to Classical sculpture make sure the viewers were in no doubt about the racial purity of the heroine.

The idealized figure of the female slave was hailed as the pinnacle of female purity. Displayed on a pedestal in the main court pavilion, the statue received as much adulation as it had previously when in the 1840's it had been exhibited in twelve cities throughout America.

Exhibited unpainted, the sculpture was revered and described by Elizabeth Barrett Browning as passionless perfection... thunders of silence. The values attributed to sculpture and the way in which the debate about its inherent properties was cast; tell us much about ‘pure’ forms and their link to moral and ethical issues about purity, suturing, reifying, setting in stone, the analogies between wholeness and perfect hardness, critics in and of nineteenth century Anglo-American culture commented on the connection among whiteness, beauty and purity.

Henry James recalled that the figure's so undressed, yet so refined, even so pensive, in sugar- while alabaster exposed under little glass covers in such American homes as could bring themselves to think such things right. Charles Dickens and George Eliot spoke about spoke about the beauty of sculpture---- of its pure white forms, smooth unblemished surfaces, and its unchanging solid structure they spoke simultaneously of an idealized form of white beauty that denoted not only specific artworks but also a nationalistic ethos, in which the whiteness of the statuary was used as an emblem of purity.

The statue of Mr. Powers is entirely free from this objection. She who walked in the bowers of primeval innocence, had never thought of apparel—had not yet been ashamed to find herself devoid of it; and she is clothed with associations which scarcely permit others to think of the possession or want of it. She is represented in this work as standing. Her left hand hangs negligently by her side; her right holds the

apple: and upon this, with the head a little inclined, her countenance is fixed; and in this countenance there are beautifully blended, a meditation, sadness, and eagerness. She meditates upon the point before her; and she is sad at the thought of erring." There is expression of eager desire which doubtless fills up the true ideal of the character.

The Greek Slave is clothed all over with sentiment; sheltered, protected by it from every profane eye. Brocade, cloth of gold, could not be a more complete protection than the vesture of holiness in which she stands. For what does she stand there? To be sold; to be sold to a Turkish harem! A perilous position to be chosen by an artist of high and virtuous intent! A perilous point for the artist, being a good man, to compass. What is it? The highest point in all art. To make the spiritual reign over the corporeal; to sink form in ideality; in this particular case, to make the appeal to the soul entirely control the appeal to the sense; to make the exposure of this beautiful creature foil the base intent for which it is made; to create a loveliness such that it charms every eye, and yet that has no value for the slave-market, that has no more place there than if it were the loveliness of infancy; nay, that repels, chills, disarms the taste that would buy. There she stands in the slave-market, with a charm as winning as the eye ever beheld, and every sympathy of the beholder is enlisted for the preservation of her sanctity; every feeling of the beholder is ready to execrate and curse the wretch that could buy such a creature! There she stands, with a form less voluptuous than the Venus de' Medici, manacles clasp her wrists and a chain unites them; her head is turned aside a little; and then her face—it is the finest imaginable union of intellectual beauty, touching sadness, and in the upper lip, the slightest possible curl, just enough to express mingled disdain and resignation. The thought of a fate seems to be in her face, and perhaps nothing could better bring to its climax the touching appeal of innocence and helplessness.

She became the single most celebrated work of sculpture in nineteenth-century America. Its pose—inspired by the well-known Medici Venus—represents a Christian girl captured by the Turks during the Greek War of Independence for sale in the slave market of Constantinople. The first nude statue by American artist, it provided both ecstatic praise and puritanical concern when first exhibited in the United States. Its combination of noble sentiment and unprecedented nudity challenged conventional notions of “decency” in high art. Overnight, the expatriate Power became one of the most famous

sculptors of his day. By proving that ideal beauty could be used as a symbol of virtuousness, Powers opened the way for the depiction of the female nude by other American sculptors. The Greek Slave inspired an outpouring of prose and poetry and became an anti-slavery symbol for abolitionists.

Thus his choice of this white crystal clear sculpture not only portrayed the condition of America but also the slavery spreading all over it. It became a means through which a woman could know about herself in her inner as well as outer self. Moreover, it defines the spiritual, pure and divine beauty of a woman.

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