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A Perspective on Murder of the Beloved in Browning's Poems: "Porphyria's Lover" and "My Last Duchess"

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the idea of the beloveds' murder in Robert Browning's poems "Porphyria's Lover" and "My Last Duchess," focusing on the psychological complexity of the speakers and Browning's distinctive use of the dramatic monologue. Although Browning often presents life, death, and love through an apparently optimistic lens, these two poems reveal darker and unconventional dimensions of passion, possessiveness, and control. The study begins with a brief overview of Browning's life and his contribution to the development of the dramatic monologue before moving to a close analysis of the selected texts. In "Porphyria's Lover," the speaker justifies the murder of Porphyria as a means of preserving a perfect moment of love, transforming death into an eternal union, while in "My Last Duchess," the Duke's calm yet revealing speech exposes jealousy, pride, and an obsessive desire for authority that culminates in the Duchess's death. Through dramatic irony, Browning allows readers to perceive the moral and psychological distortions of the speakers more clearly than they perceive themselves. Ultimately, the paper argues that Browning redefines love by presenting it as both elevating and destructive, where devotion intertwined with ego and dominance results in the silencing—and ultimate annihilation—of the beloved.

Introduction

Robert Browning, one of the most significant poets of the Victorian era, is renowned for his mastery of the dramatic monologue and his exploration of human deep psychology. Writing in a period marked by both moral rigidity and social transformation, Browning explored beneath surface respectability to expose the complexities of passion, pride, and inner conflict. Just as "Henry Fielding and Samuel Richardson represent the same age; however, their understanding of morality widely differs from each other" — with "Fielding's work embodying the idea that man is

susceptible to weakness" while "Richardson's characters define and epitomize morality as a fixed idea" (Riaz, Jan, Hammadi, and Ahmed 135) — Browning, too, challenged the moral certainties of his own era by revealing the inner contradictions of his speakers.

His poems often present speakers who reveal more than they intend, allowing readers to witness the intricate workings of disturbed or conflicted minds. Among his most compelling dramatic monologues, "Porphyria's Lover" and "My Last Duchess" stand out for their portrayal of love intertwined with dominance and violence. In both poems, the male speakers recount circumstances that lead to the death of their beloveds, yet they attempt to justify their actions through personal logic shaped by love, jealousy, ego, and possessiveness. As Riaz, Zoha, and Jan demonstrate in their psychoanalytic study, "Drawing on Freudian psychoanalysis," a critic can analyze a character's "mental state" and examine how cultural and psychological forces "closely linked to feelings of guilt" shape an individual, and how "traumatic experiences and associated guilt hinder his ability to cope and recover from anxiety, leading to further psychological distress" (3668).

In a similar vein, the speakers in Browning's poems are driven by deeply internalized guilt, possessiveness, and psychic disturbance that they cannot consciously acknowledge. Through irony and psychological depth, Browning challenges conventional notions of romantic love and requires readers to confront the darker instincts that can inhabit beneath words of love.

Browning incorporated optimistic views amid the enigmas of the Victorian Era in his dramatic monologues. Though life, death, loss and old age all have a positive colour when seen from his prism, the poems share the depth of characters' psychology and temperament. His concept of love is not only optimistic but also shares the ultimate victory even if the main characters are losing the battle in the love affair. However, there are characters who are dark and unconventional. Much like Fielding, who "creates an atmosphere wherein the characters are neither good nor bad but have human-like traits" and whose work "reflects on the ideas relating to morality including chastity, hypocrisy and vanity" (Riaz, Jan, Hammadi, and Ahmed 136). Likewise, Browning refuses to reduce his characters to simple moral categories; his speakers are morally ambiguous figures whose self-justifications expose their deepest failings. This essay attempts to encapsulate the writer's promulgated idea of the beloveds' murder in the two selected poems. An introduction to Browning's life and a brief overview to the dramatic monologues will precede the analysis.

Browning, an English poet, was born in Walworth, a village in Camberwell, Surrey, south of London. On June 14, 1812, he was baptized at the Lock's Fields Independent Chapel on York Street in Walworth. He was the son of Sarah Anna and Browning, who were well-off; his father was a well-paid clerk for the Bank of England, while his mother was from a ship-owning family in Germany. He lived with his family till the age of 34, and his father paid for the publication of his poetry collection. He also had the opportunity to peruse his father's extensive collection of 6,000 books, many of which were rare. His mother, on the other hand, was a committed nonconformist and an accomplished musician. Because of his home's rich literary atmosphere, he published his first book of poetry at the age of twelve and was proficient in French, Greek, Italian, and Latin by the age of fourteen. (Freeman 35) At first, romantic writers and their inclinations had an impact on Browning. It is interesting to note that he became a devotee of Shelley and embraced his vegetarianism and atheism, but both beliefs were short-lived. In his later years, he became overly engrossed in religious concepts and beliefs. Browning began his career as a dramatist but eventually abandoned it to focus on his poems. His greatest contribution to the field was Dramatic Monologues: According to Hawlin, the core of Browning's accomplishments are the dramatic monologues found in Dramatic Lyrics (1842) and Dramatic Romances and Lyrics (1845). These poems, which have been widely anthologized and analyzed, are his most irreducible. These early

monologues may be more impressive despite the fact that Men and Women (1855) and Dramatis Personae (1864) exhibit greater inventiveness and a wider emotional range. Their combination of brevity, sparkling freshness of description, and involved irony is in some ways un-replicable, even by Browning himself. (6)

The difficulties of Browning's theatrical personae's psychology are mostly present in his dramatic monologues: among the many themes he employed in his works are internal turmoil, his philosophy of life and death, and God's love for humanity. He is referred to by Thomas Hardy as "the literary puzzle of the nineteenth century." (Norton Anth. 928) According to Preminger & Brogan, "Browning's dramatic monologues represent the most significant use of the form in post-romantic poetry" (799). The dramatic monologues offer a variety of perspectives on the emotion of love. When a character in a work of literature expresses his feelings and thoughts aloud, it is known as a dramatic monologue. It is employed because it provides a glimpse into the psyche. The poem seems more lifelike because of Browning's monologues. Browning's characters are largely defined by dramatic irony; readers are more familiar with them than the characters are.

Intense love that goes beyond a physical relationship is reflected in Porphyria's Lover. Sitting in front of a fireplace in a cottage are two characters who are much in love. The boyfriend is captivated by the girl's beauty and love, but it appears that she has a condition that compels the man to kill her: “And call’d me. When no voice replied, / She put my arm about her waist” (15). The man caresses her cheeks and unwillingly chooses to kill her. “And, stooping, made my cheek lie there, / And spread, o’er all, her yellow hair” (20-1). She is “too weak, for all her heart’s endeavor, to set its struggling passion free from pride, and ties dissever, and give herself to me forever” (22-5). By establishing various social divides and structures around the women, the speakers in the two poems are attempting to exert authority over them.

Why would a lover murder their beloved? The male partner's choice appears to be crucial since she is unable to survive (23–5). The murderer appears to be engaged in an ongoing discussion about murder, and both parties have reached an agreement on this course of action. By portraying the lover as the murderer, the author thereby redefines the idea of love. Browning presents the reader with a case to evaluate. Her suffering while she is still alive lessens their intense love, compelling the man to choose between the peaceful death and the sacrifice of the physical being. For her love, Porphyria worships him, yet it is all in vain. (29), but the murderous act on the lover’s part is justified when he describes the dilemma “Made my heart swell, and still it grew/ While I debated what to do.” (35-37) The reader may find it excruciating to submit to the lover's will, but the girl does not protest when he smothers her with her own hair: “Three times her little throat around” (40-44) and later proclaims that “I am quite sure she felt no pain” (41-42). Even after death the stances of love exist with more vigour as he goes back to the shared memories “Laugh’d the blue eyes without a stain. / And I untighten’d next the tress.” (45-46). This behaviour not only characterizes a maniac, but also a man who is experiencing pure sadistic trauma as a result of the events. When he says that her head still droops onto it, he understands why she smiles:

> The smiling rosy little head,
>
> So glad it has its utmost will, (51-53)

These lines do not confirm any resistance on the part of the beloved: “So glad it has it utmost will” (52) That Porphyria’s assassination is the outcome of voluntarily euthanasia is further obvious from the succeeding lines close the poem’s end:

> Porphyria’s love: she guess’d not how

Her darling one wish would be heard. (56-57)

Seeking death "darling one wish" is her cherished request. This is the miserable body demanding the emancipation from the sufferings. The implementation of the desire and the speaker's true and substantial love for Porphyria is exemplified by him sitting with her in his arms "all night"

And all night long we have not stirr'd,

And yet God has not said a word! (59-60)

At the same time, the cold-blooded killing of the beloved is the most moving part of the poem. The male partner may have concluded that since he would never be able to achieve the girl's high status, he should kill her in order to appease his impulsive individuality. He seems so at ease, and the surroundings seem so serene, in contrast to a murderer's perspective. While the character finds it thrilling, the reader perceives it as a clear murder.

"My Last Duchess" tells the tale of a deceased Duchess whose portrarit is "painted on the wall" following her husband's death. As the speech progresses, the depressing tale of love is revealed. In addition to being unsettling, it raises concerns about how possessiveness in love might result in extreme measures. The discourse of the main character exposes the depth of love that permeates his heartless nature; in certain situations, love is not only questioned but also depicted as disastrous.

It seems that the lover's inability to stop his wife from smiling at everyone is what led him to murder her. When she is living, she does not follow her husband's instructions, but when she is dead and painted on the wall, she is completely under his control. Even the spouse covers her artwork with a curtain so she may only smile when he desires (10). The authority over his wife is symbolized through the presentation of the painting which looks alive, (2) ensuring submission to the will of the master. Similarly, his authoritative style is reflected when he says that he has a nine-hundred-year-old title (4), and the power. He is unable to deal with his culturally and psychologically conditioned character; he is unable to face the world and be in love with his wife, as demonstrated by the tragic irony.

In order to highlight the lover's experiences, the author places a psychologically complex figure in the heart of the historical setting. According to Browning, the way the aesthetics and people are shown blends the physical and emotional aspects of love. It enables the author to intertwine themes of violence, sex, love, and beauty. The charisma for the Duchess becomes the cause of her untimely death as The Duke feels that the people get attracted to her too easily. The Duke tries to fix the feminine sexuality, as there appears to be sins everywhere in society, he perceives.

The Duke's psychology is progressively revealed in the words, which helps the readers comprehend the context of the events. His approach completely negates Auerbach and gives the impression of being murky and criminal. "Most dramatic monologists are not criminals or charlatans, only searchers after some transformation, whether spiritual, professional, or personal for all their removal from any norm, they collectively present adherence to certain patterns, making up a confirmation of nonconformists" (73). Though the love relationship is dead, the speaker feels it his victory over the Duchess. Browning leads the readers to question the feelings of love and tempts to continue investigating the cause of her death and the Duke's mentality who wants her to smile only in his presence. (14) Therefore, the poem depicts the beauty of the composition and the dramatic development working in a parallel mode. Blooms believes that Browning's monologists tell us more than they mean to disclose and frequently reveal what they themselves do not consciously know. The Duke, speaking in "My Last Duchess," is perfectly

candid in observing that he had his "last Duchess" murdered—"I gave commands;/ Then all smiles stopped together"(45)—but presumably is not aware that he conveys clinical madness as well as family and personal pride. (9)

The poems depict evil as a fundamental aspect of human nature in a realistic manner. When we consider that the authorized model for the dramatic monologue favours the depiction of failure and corruption rather than sainthood and heroism, which are less frequently observed on the street, we can see why Browning had purportedly more expertise at presenting failed artists and corrupt politicians. (773) Auerbach argues "the dramatic monologue celebrates self-creation, but it is a self -creation enforced by the power of skepticism over the insecurity of being. Other listeners would probably dictate other poems. In its essence, the dramatic monologue asks of us neither sympathy nor judgment. Rather, it strikes home to us the impurity of our own tale-telling, how our own truth has been adjusted, not to a remote and acquiescent audience, but to our intimates who do not believe us" (167).

The both poems share that death is a mere temporary sleep between this worldly love and the eternity. Like in the poem "My Last Ride Together" the central figures seem to be content with the feeling of love "Who knows but the world may end tonight (23)". "Browning's "Porphyria's Lover" and "My Last Duchess" are concerned with female subjectivity, including and perhaps especially the modes of consciousness of women whom we do not hear speak. As Bristow says the speaker of "Porphyria's Lover" not only draws his name from his intimate relationship to her but also claims that the actions he describes, including that of murdering her, are based on his apprehension of her desires, her "one wish" (74). Similarly, the bishop is a lunatic in the real sense who believes his beloved to be put behind the curtains. Though affection is optimistic, it embodies the tragic elements based on unconventional ideas—the lovers are bold enough to face death and other troubles on the way of love. These poems deal with intimacy in different demeanors — where the death of the lovers emerges as a support to their consummation. Both poems portray gloomy male murderers, murdering to satisfy their own culturally male oriented stigmas.

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