

The insanity of
blindness: the
narrators in
browning's
"porphyria's lover"
and "s...



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With “ Porphyria’s Lover” and “ Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister,” Browning provides two dramatic monologues of madmen in which the narrator’s sheer ignorance of his own insanity is a basic premise integral to the work.

Throughout both these poems, the narrator is consistently unaware of the hypocrisy, absurdity, misunderstanding of others, and cruelty that his tirade belies, while the reader is constantly barraged with these realities. As the narrator in each work reveals more and more of his thoughts, his character reaches unrealistic and absurd levels of insanity for the reader to behold. By their mere inability to declare, recognize, or even behold the painful lunacy of their own actions and thoughts, Browning’s flawed madmen narrators condemn themselves. In “ Porphyria’s Lover”, the deliberate violence of the narrator upstages Porphyria’s willingness to commit an illicit act by visiting him that night. Up to the climax of Porphyria’s murder, the narration indicates a romantically sullen yet otherwise well-adjusted narrator. On line 5, he “ listened [to the wind] with heart fit to break.” Following Porphyria’s arrival, he remains despondent, yet eventually marvels at her love for him. The fact that the sharp turn created by the murder of Porphyria is recounted nonchalantly, unexpectedly, and as a supposedly logical consequence of this romantic love is an early indicator of the true depth of the narrator’s insanity. As if very little has happened, the narrator’s monologue continues, and he recounts the rest of the romantic scene. He fondles her body and treats her as if she were still animate, claiming on line 52 that she smiles, even. There is no doubt that the narrator registers Porphyria’s death, yet his perverse sense of righteousness casts doubt on his sanity. In lines 41-42, he declares that Porphyria felt no pain, indicating that he sees his act as a form of euthanasia, as well as his belief that he is empowered to take such

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measures. In the closing lines of the poem, the narrator indicates his belief that by entombing Porphyria, he fulfills her desires, that she “gained instead” (55) him in death. In one interpretation of these lines, the narrator speaks of Porphyria’s “darling one wish” (57) with deliberately sadistic irony and selfishness. In another possible reading, the narrator has only the purest of intentions with his mercy killing. Both potentialities would indicate the presence of an abnormal mind. The closing line fits into both conceptions, as well. If the narrator had committed his act with evil intentions, the implication would be that since he had not faced divine retribution for his acknowledged vicious action, he possessed a divine power of his own – thus, the reader would be led to recognize the narrator’s hubris. If the narrator had committed his act with pure intentions, however, the implication would be that God had condoned the murder by virtue of His lack of retribution – thus, the reader would be led to recognize the narrator’s flawed sense of self-righteousness. In “Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister”, rather than narrating a full scene as the narrator of “Porphyria’s Lover” does, the speaker delivers a purely self-addressed monologue of his innermost thoughts. There is no plot or climax in this soliloquy, only a patchwork of recollected scenes. Additionally, unlike in “Porphyria’s Lover”, this poem contains no plot turn to drastically warp the reader’s perception of the narrator. Instead, the monk delivering this soliloquy is presented from the start as a hypocritical and insane figure. This element of Browning’s dramatic irony – the narrator is totally unaware of his own shortcomings – is cultivated from the very first stanza. Already, the idea of a brusque, revenge-hungry monk is inherently flawed and naturally ironic. Thus, the monk doesn’t become more desperate as the poem goes forth, nor does the tone become

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darker – he remains extremely desperate, and the tone stays remarkably morose throughout the entire soliloquy. As each stanza passes, the damning indicators of the narrator's hypocrisy, cruelty, insanity, and ignorance pile up. In the first stanza, the reader is introduced to a monk consumed with hatred for another man of the cloth, innocuously named Brother Lawrence as a contrast to the nameless, faceless narrator. Already, the narrator is portrayed as ridiculous and mildly insane. The narrator's anger indicates impiety, and the introduction of this acrimony towards a gardening monk before any sort of justification is offered signifies the illogical nature of this hatred. The next stanza gives a weak explanation of the narrator's hatred. The narrator introduces us to Brother Lawrence's conversation, which, although painfully innocuous, drives the monk into a frenzy. In stanza five, he takes issue with Brother Lawrence's supposed impiety in his inability to follow the ridiculously elaborate table manners supposedly practiced by the narrator. The forceful delivery of the reasoning indicates that this inane material is the best justification the narrator has, and signifies a continuing lack of logic and the persistence of an all-consuming animosity. The hypocrisy and false piety of the narrator is further revealed throughout the rest of the poem. In the fourth stanza, the narrator's own extensive description of a girl whom he accuses Brother Lawrence of glancing at indicates his own prurient focus. The dramatic irony of the narrator's inability to recognize his own hypocrisy borders on the absurd. In stanzas seven and eight, the narrator's revelation of a plan to expose Brother Lawrence to heretic thought or pornography inadvertently, yet clearly, reveals the fact that he himself dabbles in both sins. When introducing his plot, he refers to his item as "my scrofulous French novel" (57). The hypocritical implications

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of his plan to plant his own pornographic novel in Brother Lawrence's items is pathetically obvious to the reader, yet somehow completely unrecognized by the narrator. Likewise, the narrator is unable to realize that he is being consumed in part by his jealousy, which is made fully salient to the reader in stanza six. The narrators of both works share the absurd inability to recognize the overt implications of insanity and hypocrisy that their own words belie. Discussing their insane machinations in tones of powerful frenzy leads both men to overlook these clear interferences, and this same ignorance further condemns them in the eyes of readers as insane, and ultimately wicked characters.