

The real housewives of robert browning

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The Victorian era, during which time Robert Browning lives and creates his poetry, witnesses major societal upheaval and intellectual advancements, especially in science. There is a population shift from the rural countryside of England to the cities; many people are now living in cramped housing among strangers, and people feel as though they live in a sea of anonymity and are no longer expected by family, friends, and neighbors to live according to previous high moral standards set by religious beliefs. The new urban Victorian lifestyle is riddled with covert illicit affairs, sex, and violence, which is promoted by the rising number of newspapers available for people to read. The Victorian era newspapers not only serve to deliver the current news and events but act as sources for the torrid details of scandalous happenings. Consequently, Victorian society is overstimulated, and the people are emotionally numb to the sex and violence that permeates their everyday life; in turn, public prudery becomes a backlash to the moral decay of the Victorian society.

Victorian women are metaphors for the traditional, domestic female roles and admirable moral values; but, in reality, Victorian women seek to fight for equal rights with men, and most Victorian men continue to great lengths to dominate and objectify women. Many Victorian era writers assume that in order to evoke an emotional response to their works, they must shock their readers with sensation. The poet Robert Browning, himself, is troubled by Victorian society's competing interests in sensation and morality; guided by his own conflicting views of Victorian life and gender roles, Browning uses women as the subjects of his poems to reveal and challenge the dichotomy between the publicly accepted proper Victorian social mores with the

Victorians' private obsessions with male chauvinism, sex, and violence. Male chauvinism pervades Victorian society and is marked by male dominance and possessiveness; and Browning, in his poetry, repeatedly reflects overweening and possessive males by employing seemingly unconventional Victorian women, who are expectedly portrayed as passive and silent subjects, to perturb the Victorian male speakers in order to highlight their arrogance and self-importance (Dickinson 3070). Browning utilizes the dramatic monologue to only give a voice to the speaker, who is always a male in his poetry, while the woman subject remains silent, as Victorian women conventionally are. Given the marked difference between the public actions and private thoughts of the Victorians, the dramatic monologue is an effective literary tool to convey the true inner emotions of the speaker since the speaker readily discusses a dramatic experience or occurrence in his own words with a silent listener ("Porphyria's Lover" 156).

In the poem "My Last Duchess," the duke, namely the poem's speaker, in his dramatic monologue egocentrically waxes and wanes on about the former duchess's beauty; but the duke wants the reader to not only understand the beauty of the poem's subject, the last duchess, but also his excellent taste in beauty. The duke implies that he wants to own and control the beauty, and he is distressed with the last duchess's unwillingness to be owned; so the duke arranges for the last duchess to be murdered ("Porphyria's Lover" 168). Thus, with a diatribe of complaints about the last duchess, the disturbed duke justifies the murder of his former duchess. The murder of the of the duchess serves two purposes. First, the murder permits Browning to shock his audience and raise an emotional response to male

chauvinism and horrific murder; and, secondly, the deceased duchess functions as the absolute, conventional, passive Victorian woman.

The duke explains his conflict with the last duchess's outgoing nature, as he states, She thanked men—good! but thanked Somehow—I know not how—as if she ranked My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name With anybody's gift. (Browning 31-34). The duke is especially offended by the duchess not placing him above all else and not appreciating his value. The “ final characterization the duke gives of his former duchess reveals his obsessive possessiveness and jealousy” (Marchino 2593). The duke lastly declares, “ Oh, sir, she smiled, no doubt,/Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without/ Much the same smile?” (Browning 43-45).

Likewise, in Browning's poem “ Porphyria's Lover,” Browning presents an unconventional, forward Victorian woman, Porphyria, who takes it upon herself to seduce her lover, who is also the male and only speaker of the poem. Furthermore, in the poem “ Porphyria's Lover,” Browning turns around and shocks the reader by abruptly revealing that the lover is deranged. The deranged lover, like the duke in “ My Last Duchess,” kills the young woman. Porphyria is brutally strangled with her own long tress of hair, so that her lover can possess her forever, as the speaker disturbingly declares, “ That moment she was mine, mine” (Browning 36)). The male speaker believes that he has absolute control over Porphyria and unabashedly states, “ Happy and proud; at last I knew/ Porphyria worshipped me” (Browning 32-33). As in “ My Last Duchess,” the murder of Porphyria serves to offend the sensibilities of the reader and silence the voice of the woman in order to appreciate the dominance and possessiveness of men over women.

Less violent but none the less shocking is another example of male dominance in Browning's poem "Meeting at Night," whereby the male speaker is headed to a remote island for a scandalous, illicit affair. In the poem "Meeting at Night," Browning effectively utilizes personification to convey the theme of male chauvinism as the active male speaker is seen to be dominate over the featureless landscape, nature, and the waves of water, all of which are metaphors for women (Ives 2432). The women's voices, just as in the actual Victorian society, are muted in all three poems by Browning because the message of male dominance is heard loudly in their silence. Women play a role in Browning's poems to not only put male dominance on display but also to reveal the fascination with sex, the objectification of women, and the inequality between the two genders in Victorian society. Victorian women are considered so subordinate to men that they are viewed to be tainted and are made social outcasts for the rest of their lives if they take part in any form of sexual transgression ("Porphyria's Lover" 157). The inequality between the genders in the Victorian era affects practically every aspect of the Victorian's public and private lives and significantly impacts the literary works of the time (Brown 660).

The outward repression of sexuality in Victorian society leads to an increased number of discourses on sex, which are amplified by the rising literacy rates and the increasing number of newspapers in Victorian England. Printed stories of sex are inexpensive and widely available despite the fact that public sexuality is taboo; the Victorian public has a voracious appetite for illicit and salacious sex ("Porphyria's Lover" 157). Subsequently, Browning captivates his readers as he focuses explicitly on an illicit love affair in the

poem “*Porphyria’s Lover*” with the unexpected, atypical aggressive behavior of a Victorian woman (Dickinson 3068). The upper-class Porphyria, after leaving a lavish party, arrives at her lower-class lover’s simple cottage, where she dominates the sexual encounter. Browning presents this uncustomary sexual encounter in his poem “*Porphyria’s Lover*” with great, scintillating detail, as he writes, She put my arm about her waist, And made her smooth white shoulder bare, And all her yellow hair displaced, And, stooping, made my cheek lie there, And spread, o’er, her yellow hair, Murmuring how she loved me — (Browning 16-21). In the noted passage above, Browning directly details Porphyria’s forward, seductive actions to push the envelope in order to quench the Victorian’s thirst for erotic sexual encounters (“*Porphyria’s Lover*” 153).

However, in his other poem “*Meeting at Night*,” Browning subtly creates the idea of a woman involved in illicit sex with figurative language and imagery. As the title implies, the poem “*Meeting at Night*” treats the reader to a nighttime rendezvous between the poem’s male speaker and his lover; and the sexually curious Victorian audience is carried along with the speaker to a remote location, which by its remoteness intimates the illicit nature of their meeting (Ives 2432). The male speaker crosses a sea, a beach, and three fields to reach the remote farmhouse of his lover. Browning metaphorically objectifies the speaker’s lover as he figuratively links her with the natural world (Ives 2432). In “*Meeting at Night*” suggestive, sexual overtones are conveyed to highly engaged readers through Browning’s words when he writes, “As I gain the cove with pushing prow, / And quench its speed i’ the slushy sand,” suggestive, sexual overtones are conveyed to highly engaged

readers (Browning 5-6). By the same token, the distance that must be traversed for the meeting of the two lovers is symbolic of the distance between the two genders; and the physical distance between the lovers mimics the distance between the two separate worlds of men and women in Victorian society (Ives 2444).

Out of convention, Victorian men work outside the home, while Victorian women typically are limited to the domestic sphere; and while Victorian women fight for equality with men, Victorian men vehemently struggle to maintain the status quo between the genders. By creating women, such as the last duchess and Porphyria, who do not symbolize the traditional mores of the Victorian woman, Browning is able to explore the violence that besets Victorian society in his poems; in fact, the violent deaths of these two unconventional women seemingly serve as metaphors for the death of traditional values in Victorian society. The two male speakers in “My Last Duchess” and “Porphyria’s Lover” feel the need to contain the last duchess and Porphyria, respectively, in order to preserve the traditional values of Victorian society; and, subsequently, the two speakers appear justified in their brutal actions because Victorian societal customs gives a man “the legal right to beat and lock up his wife” (“Porphyria’s Lover” 158). Therefore, the duke does not show any repentance, and he is secure in his dominance over his last duchess and his perspective wife (Marchino 2595). Likewise, the speaker in “Porphyria’s Lover” is comfortable with his desire to strangle Porphyria, so he can capture her in the moment when she is worshipping him as a traditional Victorian woman should (Dickinson 3069 – 3070).

As in the poem “ My Last Duchess,” Browning, in his poem “ Porphyria’s Lover,” again feels obligated to shock his audience so that he may elicit an emotional response to the horrific violence to which the Victorian society has become numb and immune (Dickinson 3068). Browning, appallingly writes, As a shut bud that holds a bee, I warily oped her lids: again Laughed the blue eyes without a strain. And I untightened next the tress About her neck; her cheek once more Blushed bright beneath my burning kiss: (Browning 43-48). In addition, Browning takes the opportunity to disturb his readers even more when he adds the element of insanity to the speaker in “ Porphyria’s Lover,” which is exhibited when the speaker stops addressing himself as “ I” and states that he is not able to reply to Porphyria’s call (Dickinson 3069). Therefore, the speaker’s actions are not only justified by the standards of Victorian society but are then rationalized by his madness. The speaker at the end of the poem in “ Porphyria’s Lover” even points out, “ And yet God has not said a word!” (Browning 60).

The speaker feels vindicated because God has not passed judgement on his actions (“ Porphyria’s Lover” 153-154). By depicting the sordid details of erotic and illicit love, Browning does not merely quench his Victorian readers’ thirst for scandal; but rather he puts a violent and deranged twist on a scandalous subject to titillate and horrify, so his readers reevaluate their attitudes towards sexuality, propriety, and morality (“ Porphyria’s Lover” 157). Besides pushing his readers to rethink their unbecoming attitudes, Browning is subtly conveying his own perspectives on violence, sex, and male chauvinism. Browning does not necessarily hold the same views as his contemporaries in regard to women, violence, and sex; his personal view of

women and the debauched interests of Victorian society are depicted in his female characters who are the antithesis of the classic Victorian woman. Browning's heroines have fortitude, loyalty, idealism, intelligence, and insight; unlike his peers, Browning finds that the woman is usually right (Johnson 6). Furthermore, in contrast to his female subjects, Browning creates remarkable male characters, such as a Renaissance aristocrat or a deranged lover, to reveal the possessiveness, haughtiness, and love of power that offend him ("Porphyria's Lover" 171).

Browning heavily relies on the dramatic dialogue to skillfully put a question, which challenges the Victorian appreciation for sex, violence, and male dominance, into the reader's mind; yet, he is able to delineate the voice of the fictional speaker from his own personal emotions and views (Dickinson 3068). Browning's personal life largely influences his view of women and is vastly different than his peers: Browning, on the other hand, challenges the sexual morality of the Victorians at nearly every point. His interest is in the fulfillment of passion, rather than in the preservation of domestic proprieties. In no way are his convictions less conformable to accepted theories than in his refusal to recognize any basis for social inequality between men and women. His adoration of Elizabeth Barrett no doubt explains a good deal in this connection; but while Browning yielded to no other Victorian in his idealization of womanhood, his thinking had very little in common with the contemporary concept of the womanly woman (Johnson 6). Uncharacteristic of men during the Victorian period, Browning shows no signs of male dominance, and he is willing to play a passive role with his wife, Elizabeth Barrett, in their famous romantic relationship; subsequently, literary critics

note that Browning's literary career may have indeed been hindered by their relationship, as Barrett is much more successful as a poet during their marriage while Browning is not recognized until after Barrett's death, and they indicate the "Love Among the Ruins" is a self-revealing rationalization by Browning (Delaney 2338).

In the poem "Love Among the Ruins," Browning writes about a glorious king in his remarkable tower stating, "With their triumphs and their glories and the rest! / Love is best," leaving the reader to sense that Browning is pondering his choice of love over his career, which is highly unusual for a Victorian man. Browning unconventionally places his wife and their marriage above his own interests, as realized in Browning's soul-searching poem "Love Among the Ruins," and he does not feel the need to dominate or possess women as other Victorian men; similarly, he questions the Victorian society's concomitant belief in moral righteousness and salacious scandal, involving sex and violence. Browning lives in a time when not only were people becoming more literate, there is also movement away from religion and a push toward scientific theories as explanations for life events.

Literature and newfound ideas are more readily available to the Victorians, so poetry provides an outlet for Browning to challenge the Victorians to rethink their obsession with male dominance along with gratuitous sex and violence, as seen in "My Last Duchess," "Porphyria's Lover," and "Meeting at Night." Browning attempts to shake the Victorians free of their new perverse obsessions; however, Browning adeptly disguises his own beliefs in literary techniques, such as figurative language and the dramatic monologue. By giving his woman subjects, such as the last duchess and

Porphyria, strong and provocative characteristics that are atypical for the public persona of Victorian women, essentially creating the real housewives of the Victorian era, Browning is able to capture the moral decay that is rampant in the Victorian society.