

Good example of name essay

[Sociology](#), [Women](#)



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

‘ Instructor’s Name’

The Narrators of ‘ Porphyria’s Lover and My Last Duchess’ – Similarities and Differences

Unlike comics or fairy tales, villain characters are not a common occurrence in modern adult literature, especially in poetry. In the literary works aimed for the grown up or matured reader segment, the authors more often than not, refrain from portraying a character which explicitly exposes villainous nature, or coal-black personifications of evil. Mostly characters who exhibit villainous traits are not easily located in such literary works, but their persona is revealed only after a deep scrutiny of the said work.

Particularly in the nineteenth century, as literary works were based more and more on the themes of psychological exploration, where every human emotion had to be justified and explained, portrayal of a villain characters became even more trickier. But in poems or stories which feature such characters, the villain mostly holds the key to the plot and literally controls the flow of the story and he is more often than not empowered with knowledge and sexual dominion. The aim of this essay is to compare the traits and motives of the villainous narrators in the poems, ‘ Porphyria’s lover’ and ‘ My last Duchess’, written by Robert Browning, and establish how this negative characterization enabled the poet to effectively convey the theme of gender oppression suffered by the women of that period.

The important theme conveyed by Browning in these two poems, is the predicament of women who were considered as mere possessions by their husband/lover, rather than a living, breathing human being. To better understand the characterization of the narrators of these poems, it is

important to analyze the context in which the poems were written. Through the cold blooded murder of the women in both the poems, the poet has tried to bring focus on the gender oppression that was commonly witnessed in the Victorian society of the nineteenth century. The mid nineteenth century British society, witnessed a wave of Urbanization, thanks to the industrial revolution. This phenomenon had a serious effect on the family ties, and the rehabilitation process of people living within close proximity to each other brought to light the sexual oppression, poverty and violence that existed in the society.

The newspapers of that era were full of scandals which depicted the carnality that prevailed among the people. The new busy life of the city was too much to take in for the people, who for so long lived in small communities and there was a resultant numbness that was felt in the societal attitudes of that period. So, many writers of that era took upon themselves, to shock the audience into reality and Browning, who belonged to the group, achieved his shock effect by portraying sex and accompanied violence in his works.

One of the attitudes common to the Victorian era, is women being confined to the role of ‘ preparing a nice home for the men’ rather than live for themselves, and this is the attitude Browning has targeted through his poems. The narrators of both the poems consider their women as objects – an object that exists to make them happy. This characterization of the narrators, whereby they assume themselves innately supreme to the women, is common in both the poems. In ‘ My Last Duchess’ the narrator says,

Oh sir, she smiled, no doubt, Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without Much the same smile? (Browning, 1842)

Here the narrator is angered because his wife, bestowed the same smile, which she had when he passed her, on every passing person and this according to him is a crime. He opines, a woman has to have her best reserved for her husband, be it a gentle smile or small gesture. Once married to him, her happiness should comply with his moods and necessities and not with her personal feelings. He is completely at a loss, as to how she could find joy in anything else except him. He for not a single moment doubted his self worthiness or whether he deserved her love and affection or not. Throughout the poem he rambles on about the shortcomings in the personality of his late wife, all the while assuming that he had the righteousness and the superiority to judge her.

In the same way the narrator of the 'Porphyria's lover', has an air of supremacy over his lover. When his lover expresses her feelings for him he does not just feel loved or wanted, but he feels, 'worshipped'. He happens to know what is best for both of them, without even wanting to know what she desires out of her life. In exchange for her selfless love, he gave her death, that too without an iota of remorse. Thus it is explicit that he assumes that, he has the authority to take decisions on her life (literally), and that she would meekly surrender to his decisions however deadly they might be.

Other point of similarity is the usage of the dramatic monologue, by Browning, which accentuates the negativity of the narrators. As Chapman opines, in Browning's works the monologue and the usage of 'I' is more to denote that speaker's internal turmoil rather than those external to him.

(Chapman, 2003) The narrators do not represent a social phenomenon of

their time (though their actions indirectly do), but speak for themselves. This, allows the poet to step back, and permit the reader to interpret the poem in his own way. They are able to step in the shoes of the narrators and judge their characters by witnessing the events through the eyes of the narrator. Thus, in both these poems, this tactic has allowed the reader to fully understand the shortfalls of the characters, and their grotesque views on the women of their lives. Porphyria's lover says,

**“No pain felt she; I am quite sure she felt no pain.”
(Browning, 1836)**

It is obvious that the narrator here assumes that Porphyria welcomed her death, and hearing this in his own perspective multiplies the terror, than a third person narrating the incident. This monologue format which enables the reader to peep into the hearts of the narrators highlights, the darkness of the characters, and thus has a profound effect on the reader's understanding of the larger subject dealt, which in this case is the gender oppression.

But the most important similarity between the narrators is their inability or unwillingness to distinguish a non living thing with a living person. (Fraistat, 1986) The Duke in 'My Last Duchess' considers the portrait and its living representation to be more of the same, saying to his listener that the smile in the portrait could not be seen by others unless he allowed them to by drawing the curtains away from it, just like he had the power to erase her smile when she was living. In the same way Porphyria's lover, while sitting with her corpse conveys that they are sitting together now and that all night they have been together. Thus, the common aspect in the relationship of the narrators towards the women in their life is their improper and excessive

possessiveness they exhibit towards them. The women were viewed by the narrator not as their emotional companions but as objects, who can be disposed off if they fail to meet their standards. Their treatment of the corpse/picture is used by the poet, to imply the negative elements of these characters.

The difference in the narrators is mainly seen in the motive of the murders committed by them and the solutions they intended to find through these murders. While the Duke's motive is a combination of jealousy and anger, Porphyria's lover wanted to freeze the perfect moment he encountered. Porphyria though wants to be with her lover and is willing to discard the barriers that prevented her from doing so, yet she seems to possess a dilemma in her mind and this indecision is the cause of her lover's decision to kill her. The dissatisfaction Porphyria's lover had towards her is reflected in his indifferent attitude towards her when she first comes in, and throughout the poem it is Porphyria who reaches out to him rather than the other way around.

Both, the Duke and Porphyria's lover, are threatened when the female gender seems to have the upper hand on them. While in the Duke's case this is revealed by his anger towards his wife treating everyone the same way, in the disgruntled lover's case it is revealed when Porphyria's explicit sexuality puts him in a weaker position. The Duke had tried to solve his problem by ending his wife's life and by replacing her with some other girl who will submit meekly to his wills and whims. The other narrator, who obviously has a mental health problem, has tried to find solution by trying to preserve their love, so that Porphyria will be with him always, albeit as a corpse.

The murders in the poems are not Browning's metaphorical solution to the problems that prevailed in the Victorian era, but his attempt to shock the society to the realism of gender oppression. His two narrators have common characteristics such as arrogance, inflated egos and violent behaviors. These similarities are significant as they act as symbolisms for the characteristics of the male dominated society in which Browning lived in. The society saw women as inferior to the men of the period, and men though might not have murdered their wife for lack of subjugation, yet killed their individuality and identity. The 'prudish' attitudes which was one of the main moral principle that guided the Victorian society, whereby by women were condemned for exhibiting sexual lust is another main concept Browning has chosen to denounce, particularly through Porphyria 's lover. The domestic violence, which was prevalent in the era, has also been allegorically represented through the violent behavior of the narrator.

Their difference where one kills his wife for non-subjugation and the other kills his lover to preserve her as it is, is important because, this difference highlights the hypocrisy surrounding the gender roles of that period. This highlights how women were punished either way, for taking initiative in love/relationship(Like how Porphyria did by reaching out to her lover) and not taking initiative to convey her love (like the Duchess who obviously did not treat her husband special enough). In conclusion it may be said that Browning did epitomize the voice of reasoning, which was resonating during the nineteenth century in various forms of arts, which questioned the established rules and morals, and paved way for a new path of enlightenment and personal liberty.

References

Robert Browning. (1836). Porphyria's Lover. Web. Accessed on November 7, 2013. Retrieved from [http://www. poetryfoundation. org/poem/175584](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/175584)

Robert Browning. (1842) My Last Duchess. Web. Accessed on November 7, 2013. Retrieved from <http://www. poets. org/viewmedia. php/prmMID/15701>

Alison Chapman. Victorian Women Poets. Cambridge: DS Brewer. Print. Pg. 87

Neil Fraistat. Poems in Their Place: The Intertextuality and Order of Poetic Collections. USA: UNC Press Books, 1986. Print. Pg. 283