

# Robert Browning and the representation of desire



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The idea of desire is represented in several different forms in the poetry of Robert Browning. Certain poems communicate a selfless brand of desire expressed by the speaker, particularly directed towards a lover. Other poems, often directed toward a lover, embody a more selfish desire. The interpretation of desire within Browning's poetry is a process that requires the ability to look beyond the surface. Although some of his poetry can be easily appreciated through a quick, shallow reading, the more subtle nuances that require a bit of further study are worth the extra time and effort. In particular, in *Any Wife to Any Husband*, published in 1855, the speaker is, as the title suggests, a wife, and she is speaking to, or more often about, her husband. The poem begins with a sort of lament that she will not always be with him, as they will someday be separated by death. She then expresses a desire not to 'fade'. This word can and should be interpreted as having two meanings. The most obvious meaning is that the wife desires to keep her beauty for the sake of her husband, so that he might always find her attractive. A deeper meaning betrays her anxiety about death. She wants beauty so that her husband might find her lovely, and she wants eternal life so that this love might be enjoyed forever. " Oh, should I fade—'tis willed so! Might I save,/Gladly I would, whatever beauty gave/Joy to thy sense, for that was precious too." The speaker longs for unfading beauty and life, but also realizes the impossibility of these and so laments her own mortality. As the poem progresses, a distrust and insecurity regarding the relationship with her husband appears, changing her desire from a longing for time to stop so that she might enjoy love forever, to a wish that time might stop because she feels unable to trust her lover to be faithful after her death. She struggles with her wish to always be with him and also a

somewhat irrational fear that he might not remember her and find solace in the arms of another woman once she has died. I. Armstrong explains that “the mingled grudging, and elegiac, distrustfulness of ‘Any Wife to Any Husband’ springs from the knowledge that the man’s imagination will not sustain a living memory of her when she dies.” As Browning writes, “So must I see, from where I sit and watch,/My own self sell myself, my hand attach/Its warrant to the very thefts from me—/Thy singleness of soul that made me proud,/Thy purity of heart I loved aloud,/Thy man’s truth I was bold to bid God see!” The woman dreads the day when she will, from the afterlife, have to observe the unfaithful actions of her husband as he is stolen from her by another woman. This will, in her mind, challenge all of the good qualities she has loved about him in their time together, namely his devotion to her. The poem *My Last Duchess*, published in 1842, portrays a slightly different kind of desire than *Any Wife to Any Husband*. It is a poem in which the speaker, a duke, is explaining a portrait of a woman on his wall to his guests. The portrait is one painted of his last, late duchess and the guests are the representatives of a wealthy man whose daughter the duke wishes to marry. Through his explanation of the portrait, the duke expresses the possessive desire he had for his wife’s complete attention, similar to, though more intense than the sentiment of the wife in *Any Wife to Any Husband*. The duke suspected his duchess’ disloyalty; as Browning writes, “Sir, ’twas not/Her husband’s presence only, called her that spot/Of joy into the Duchess’ cheek.” He did not say whether he considered her infidelity to be mild or severe, but he found even the slightest indications of it to be a constant irritation. “Too easily impressed; she liked whate’er/She looked on, and her looks went everywhere./Sir, ’twas all one! My favour in her

breast,/The dropping of the daylight in the West,/The bough of cherries some officious fool/Broke in the orchard for her." He found her to be ungrateful to him and too easily taken with things, so that his own, superior gifts were degraded. To ease his frustration, he has her killed. The duke expresses his own belief that the killing was a result of her own passions that led to her death, and not his. " Oh Sir, she smiled, no doubt,/Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without/Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;/Then all smiles stopped together." Since her death, he has found her portrait much more to his liking as it is almost as lovely. Furthermore, he can have the control over it that he could never have had over its subject. *Porphyria's Lover*, published in 1842, is a piece that is similar to *My Last Duchess* in many ways. It is written from the perspective of an insane man about a certain situation involving his lover, Porphyria. Because the man is mad, the concepts of truth and reason are muddled, leaving only the skewed perceptions and desires of the speaker to be interpreted. The speaker, after receiving his seemingly supernatural love from the stormy night into his home, realizes that she, despite their mutual love, will never be a permanent fixture in his life; she will leave and this torments him. As Browning writes, " A sudden thought of one so pale/For love of her, and all in rain:/So, she was come through wind and rain." He, like the duke, finds the continuation of her life unbearable because he cannot control her; he cannot make her stay. Thus, " her continued life would mean a falling away from the moment of perfection." The insane speaker knows that Porphyria loves him and so, when the idea enters his mind to kill her to keep her from leaving, he sees it as a deed for her good, as well as his own. As he says, " Porphyria worshipped me; surprise/Made my heart well, and still it grew/While I

debated what to do./That moment she was mine, mine, fair,/Perfectly pure and good: I found/A thing to do, and all her hair/In one long yellow string I wound/Three times her little throat around,/And strangled her." The speaker, like the duke, believes that his own taking of her life is a result of her actions and emotions. He believes to have interpreted and fulfilled her desires by his actions. He explains, "' No pain felt she;/I am quite sure she felt no pain... And thus we sit together now./And all night long we have not stirred,/And her God has not said a word!" In both *My Last Duchess* and *Porphyria's Lover*, the speakers have become extraordinarily concerned with female subjectivity, to the point that they believe their lovers either should or would rather die than act against the wishes of their male counterparts. It is also interesting that Browning has chosen to make the works one-sided arguments, as the women are unable to defend themselves. The reader is blind to objective truth and is forced to see each situation through the desire of the speaker, leaving the actual events and situations open to speculation. Another theme common between the two poems is that the desires of the women are viewed by the speakers as the cause of their own death. The men see themselves as pursuers and lovers of the women and have had no choice but to act in the ways that they have; namely, murder. The *Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister*, published in 1842, is another poem in which the speaker expresses a selfish sort of desire. In this poem, however, there is no façade of love. The speaker, a monk in a monastery, possesses a powerful, seemingly unwarranted hatred for Brother Lawrence, one of his colleagues. This hatred most likely stems from jealousy that the speaker harbors regarding the piety of Brother Lawrence. He says, " Gr-r-r—there go, my heart's abhorrence!/Water your damned flower-pots, do!/If hate killed men,

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Brother Lawrence, /God's blood, would not mine kill you! /What? Your myrtle-bush wants trimming? /Oh, that rose has prior claims— /Needs its leaden vase filled brimming? /Hell dry you up with its flames!" Unusually strong language is used against Brother Lawrence, considering that his tending to his garden, it appears, has triggered this particular rant. The speaker's hate for his fellow monk is so vehement that he wishes him to falter and to offend the moral code, even attempting to bring this to pass himself. " Or, my scrofulous French novel /One grey paper with blunt type! /Simply glance at it, you grovel /Hand and foot in Belial's gripe: /If I double down its pages /At the woeful sixteenth print, /When he gathers his greengages, /Open a sieve and slip it in't?" he says. This quote suggests the jealousy of the speaker, as he wished Brother Lawrence to stumble upon the lewd reading material upon which the speaker does himself. This is indicated by the description of the book; scrofulous, or well-worn by its owner. The Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister, along with many other pieces by Browning, is a part of a genre named ' dramatic monologue.' The most basic meaning of the phrase can be deciphered from the included words, but there are more subtle characteristics; indeed, " a dramatic monologue works actively to accomplish something for its speakers, perhaps the something they are overtly seeking...but also something infinitely more subtle, some other kind of dramatic transformation of situation or self." The immediate, obvious goal of the narrator in this particular piece is the failure of Brother Lawrence to maintain his piety. The ultimate goal is a bit more unclear. The speaker may seek only the damnation of Brother Lawrence. He could, however, if a more redemptive perspective is applied to the interpretation, be seeking the piety that the unnamed monk observes and despises in Brother Lawrence for

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himself. Regardless of the interpretation of *The Soliloquy*, or any other of Browning's poetry, it is clear that the author exercises an uncanny ability to communicate desire in his poems, be it selfish, selfless, mad or sane. The sentiment is portrayed and represented in various scenes, and mixed with a plethora of other emotions, each instance being equally quite effective.