

Robert Browning's Exploration of the Dark Side of Human Nature Through the Dramatic Monologue

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Nineteenth-century poet Robert Browning is well known for both his use of the dramatic monologue and his “extraordinary...gallery of villains”; in fact, “few writers...seem to have been more aware of the existence of evil” (Greenblatt 1251). Browning combines the literary form of the dramatic monologue and his interest in evil to create intriguing “psychological portraits in verse” in which stories are told only through the words of villainous male speakers (“Robert Browning”). Browning uses these works to explore and perhaps to better understand the dark or evil side of human nature. Furthermore, he accomplishes this exploration in remarkably similar ways; that is, most of his dramatic monologues share the following similarities: the indirect provision of details about the speakers’ personalities through their own words, the revelation of the speakers’ flaws through their criticism of their victims, the speakers’ irrational states of mind, and the speakers’ motivations of jealousy and control. Three of these works that are best known include the poems “Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister,” “Porphyria’s Lover,” and “My Last Duchess.”

One of the similarities found in Browning’s dramatic monologues is his use of the speakers’ own words to provide clues, both subtle and more obvious, about their personalities. It is important to realize that the way in which the speakers describe themselves and others may not be entirely accurate—in other words, many of Browning’s speakers are unreliable narrators. The tendency to skew details is a common characteristic of human nature in general, and, after all, these speakers are villainous characters—“murderers, sadistic husbands, mean and petty manipulators” (Greenblatt 1251). Therefore, Browning’s readers must interpret the speakers’ words carefully in order to obtain the author’s meaning and discern the difference between it and the speakers’ meanings.

An example of this technique is found in “Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister.” The speaker in this poem lives in a monastery and is describing his hatred for one of his companions named Brother Lawrence:

At the meal we sit together:
Salve tibi! I must hear
Wise talk of the kind of weather,
Sort of season, time of year:
Not a plenteous cork crop: scarcely
Dare we hope oak-galls, I doubt:
What's the Latin name for "parsley"?
What's the Greek name for Swine's Snout? (9-16)

From the title of the poem, the reader would think that the characters in the poem should get along with each other because they are supposed to be deeply religious people living together in a religious community. However, the reader discovers in the first line—"G-r-r-r—there go, my heart's abhorrence!"—that the speaker does not think highly of whomever he is addressing (1). In the second stanza, the speaker tells us that he and his companions, including the abhorred Brother Lawrence, sit together while they eat. The speaker uses sarcasm to mock Brother Lawrence by repeating some of his words, insincerely calling his talk "wise," and imagining inappropriate replies to his comments about the plants. Instead of making his enemy appear annoying and distasteful, the speaker makes these qualities reflect back on himself through his negative attitude toward someone in whom the reader cannot find any wrong.

Another example of an unreliable narrator indirectly revealing his true nature to the audience through his own words is found in "Porphyria's Lover":

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. No pain felt she;
I am quite sure she felt no pain. (36-42)

These lines contain one of Browning's more obvious indirect descriptions of a speaker. The man is a murderer, and he is either insane or just evil. There is no question that the speaker is a murderer because he confesses and describes entirely possible circumstances; the real question comes into play when the reader tries to determine his state of mind: is he insane or evil? The fact that the speaker wants to have Porphyria all to himself and wants to keep her "perfectly pure and good" might lean a little closer to the insanity explanation because these desires exhibit intense obsession, although many of Browning's villains display a strong desire for control. However, the calmness with which this speaker describes the violent act that he has carried out could point toward either insanity or pure wickedness.

The duke speaking in "My Last Duchess" is also an unreliable narrator who indirectly informs the reader about himself:

...she liked whate'er
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.

Sir, 'twas all one! My favor at her breast,
 The dropping of the daylight in the West,
 The bough of cherries some officious fool
 Broke in the orchard for her...
 ...all and each
 Would draw from her alike the approving speech,
 Or blush, at least. 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. Who'd stoop to blame
 This sort of trifling? (23-35)

The duke reveals much about himself in this passage. He spends several lines complaining about his dead wife liking everything too much and showing too much approval toward beauty and others' kindness. This shows the duke's petty jealousy, and one can assume that he displays jealousy and similarly unpleasant traits in other areas of his life as well. These lines also show just how deeply his jealousy runs. He is not only jealous of someone (presumably a man) giving his wife a branch of cherries, but he is also jealous of inanimate objects like the sunset; he does not wish for his wife to find much pleasure in or show much gratitude for anything except him. Near the end of the passage, the duke says that his dead wife acted as if any gift she received, such as the cherry branch, were as important as his "nine-hundred-years-old name" (33). This shows that the duke believes that he is a very important, highly regarded man who has done the young woman a favor by allowing her to marry him. Finally, the duke shows the reader that he denies or disregards his own flaws by saying that it would be beneath him to criticize his wife as "trifling" or failing to adequately appreciate the gift of his name when, several lines later, he subtly confirms that he did in fact take angry, vengeful action against his wife by killing her: "I gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands / As if alive" (35, 46-48). He seems "oblivious to the negative impression [he] create[s]" (Gardner 36).

This denial or disregard of flaws is common in Browning's dramatic monologues. All three of the aforementioned villains point out flaws in the people against whom they commit or wish to commit violent acts, yet the reader is unable to find evidence that the victims are anything other than good people or that they deserve what they receive. Instead, the reader sees the speakers' flaws through their criticism of the flaws that they find in others—the opposite of the speakers' intentions, but the author's exact intention. This is also intended to reveal the speakers' "vanity and hypocrisy" (Gardner 35).

Examples of the speaker revealing his flaws through the criticism of his victim can be found throughout "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister." In one stanza, the speaker accuses Brother Lawrence of lusting after women:

Saint, forsooth! While brown Dolores
 Squats outside the Convent bank
 With Sanchicha, telling stories,

Steeping tresses in the tank,
Blue-black, lustrous, thick like horsehairs... (25-29)

The speaker accuses Brother Lawrence of watching women while they are washing their hair, and possibly bathing, but does not realize that, by doing this in such detail, he is incriminating himself. He seems to be referring to a specific incident because he names specific women, and he would not know whom Brother Lawrence was watching unless he had been close enough to overhear or see them himself. The accusation includes other details that make the speaker look guilty. He calls one of the women “brown” and says that she was squatting, that the other woman was washing her hair, and that the two of them were telling stories. Again, these details are specific for a tattle-tale accusation in which he was supposedly not involved. Finally, the speaker lingers on the woman’s hair with such sensuous language that it is clear who is lusting after Dolores and Sanchicha.

The most extreme case of hypocrisy in this poem comes in the last stanza:

Or, there’s Satan!—one might venture
Pledge one’s soul to him, yet leave
Such a flaw in the indenture
As he’d miss till, past retrieve,
Blasted lay that rose-acacia
We’re so proud of! (65-70)

The speaker—a member of a religious order who lives in a monastery—actually expresses the idea of selling his soul to the devil in order to harm Brother Lawrence but then somehow having an “escape clause” and narrowly escaping a terrible fate while his rival unjustly suffers—arguably, both Brother Lawrence and his carefully tended plants, not just the plants, are implied by the phrase “that rose-acacia / We’re so proud of!” (Greenblatt 1255, “Spanish Cloister” 69-70). The fact that a religious man (at least in appearance) would even bring up an idea like this one over a matter as simple as envy shows the man’s extreme hypocrisy and even brings into question his mental state. While it is clear that the speaker in “Porphyria’s Lover” may be insane, the mental state of the speaker in “Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister” is more ambiguous. Either way, there is something “off” in this speaker’s mind, and he is a strong personification of the dark side of human nature.

Whether or not the speaker in “Porphyria’s Lover” is insane, he reveals his flaws when he criticizes Porphyria. He says that she is

Too weak, for all her heart’s endeavor,
To set its struggling passion free
From pride, and vainer ties dissever,
And give herself to me forever. (22-25)

This complaint of pride and vanity preventing a lover from fully committing herself to her partner might be valid coming from a more “normal” person. In fact, it might be valid in this situation, but the murder of the woman and the lack of remorse later in the poem make the validity of the speaker’s complaint irrelevant. When this criticism of

Porphyria's pride and vanity is considered together with the following lines, the combined passages reveal the speaker's desire to possess Porphyria and his possible jealousy:

Be sure I looked up at her eyes
Happy and proud; at last I knew
Porphyria worshiped me: surprise
Made my heart swell, and still it grew
While I debated what to do. (31-35)

The speaker reveals his desire to possess and control, not to mention his emotional instability, when he interprets her loving gesture of placing his cheek against her bare shoulder as her worshipping him. He continues to reveal his true nature when he describes how happy Porphyria's extreme feelings, exaggerated by his irrational mind, make him. It is difficult to find hypocrisy in the poem, as opposed to the obvious hypocrisy in both "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister" and "My Last Duchess," which further supports the idea that the speaker in "Porphyria's Lover" may be insane instead of just evil.

The speaker in "My Last Duchess," as previously discussed, reveals his flaws of extreme jealousy and desire for control when he complains about his wife being too easily pleased by everything and expressing too much gratitude to everyone. Yet the danger and the acuteness of his jealous and controlling nature are best expressed near the end of the poem:

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. There she stands
As if alive. (43-47)

The duke criticizes his dead wife yet again, then wishes to display his power by stating that he stopped the behavior that displeased him. The reader already knows that the duke likes to demonstrate the power that he holds because in the beginning of the poem he "enjoys the power he accrues by deciding when and for whom to reveal the portrait of his duchess" (Gardner 37). Through his vanity and his love of displaying power, the duke reveals the extremity of his emotions and his inhumanity. Instead of praising the duke and looking down on the dead woman, as the duke himself does, the reader has only negative feelings toward the duke and feels pity for the next woman he is about to marry.

When one reads and analyzes these three dramatic monologues, it begins to become obvious that Browning was using them to explore evil in a complex, psychological way. By deciding to write these pieces from the perspectives of the villains, he was also deciding to temporarily put himself in the minds of the villains and to try to think the way they would. Two of the most important aspects that Browning had to consider when doing this were state of mind and motivation. There is much evidence in these and other of his dramatic monologues that suggests that Browning was exploring,

and perhaps discovered through his exploration, the idea that evil in all forms often develops from similar states of mind and shares similar motivation.

There exists a common thread between the states of mind of the speakers in “Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister,” “Porphyria’s Lover,” and “My Last Duchess”: irrationality. However, the causes of these irrational states of mind differ in each poem. In “Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister,” an immoral “religious” man is consumed with the thought of destroying his rival and mentions the idea of selling his soul to the devil, so his source of irrationality can be best attributed to wickedness. But is he truly evil? How much ordinary human nature is at play, and how much actual evil exists here? How sincere is the speaker in thinking up his threatening ideas? These are valid questions which Browning was exploring through his dramatic monologues and for which he probably never found exact answers. His pieces leave much to the reader; there is much thinking to do and many answers to ponder after reading Browning. One scholar believes that this speaker “reveals himself as a patently evil man, one who in an attempt to discredit the piety of his fellow monk...ironically condemns himself to hell” (Dessommes 34). The religious setting and characters in this poem are clues that the speaker could very well be evil, especially if he is at all sincere about the aforementioned idea of selling his soul in order to wreak petty, undeserved revenge upon an innocent man.

In “Porphyria’s Lover,” the source of the speaker’s irrationality appears to be much more obvious. The evidence in the poem suggests that this speaker is insane. That does not mean that he is not evil, but if he is evil, he may not be willingly evil; insanity would imply that he is incapable of making rational decisions and, therefore, would not have chosen to be evil. However, the last lines of the poem bring ambiguity back into the equation: “And thus we sit together now, / And all night long we have not stirred, / And yet God has not said a word!” (58-60). When religion is a factor in a piece of literature, especially in a piece like this one, it is likely that evil and/or a struggle between good and evil will exist somewhere in the piece. However, because of the tone of the poem and the personality of the speaker, the mental state of the speaker appears to be both irrational and unstable.

The mental state of the speaker in “My Last Duchess,” as opposed to that of Porphyria’s murderer, is irrational yet very stable. The duke knew exactly what he was doing when he had his wife murdered, and he knows exactly what he did and is doing as he speaks the lines of the poem. His language and his tone are very precise. There is little to no doubt of the duke being perfectly sane and perfectly evil. Arguably, the duke is the most evil of the three speakers. The speaker in “Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister” is immoral and does mention the idea of pretending to sell his soul to the devil, but he does not physically harm Brother Lawrence; he only harms his plants:

How go on your flowers? None double?
Not one fruit-sort can you spy?
And I, too, at such trouble,
Keep them close-nipped on the sly! (45-48)

The speaker in “Porphyria’s Lover” is probably insane, which creates all kinds of questions about whether or not he is evil or how evil he might be. Also, if he is insane,

he is probably too irrational to make decisions the way a sane person would. The duke in “My Last Duchess,” however, is both sane and evil; he exhibits his “rational” calculation and his cruelty when he indirectly confesses, almost bragging, that he is responsible for the death of his wife.

There are also common threads among the motivations of the three speakers: jealousy and control. The speaker in “Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister” is motivated by extreme jealousy that has turned into hatred. Although it is not exactly clear why he despises his rival so much, he conveys the following idea through his language: despite the fact that he “giv[es] careful attention to the externals of his faith” and performs religious rituals better than Brother Lawrence, his “sensitive but liturgically lax counterpart,” Brother Lawrence is better liked by or receives more praise from others (Dessommes 34). It is important to acknowledge the fact that Brother Lawrence’s excessive popularity and praise may be imagined or exaggerated by the speaker’s irrational mind. Whatever the cause of the speaker’s jealous hatred, the speaker conveys his desire to hurt and to exercise control over his comrade by cutting Brother Lawrence’s plants and plotting to further cause him harm. The speaker in “Porphyria’s Lover” is motivated by his desire to possess Porphyria and have her all for his own. This is a control issue as well as a jealousy issue. He wants to have Porphyria as she is in the moment before he kills her— “mine, mine, fair, / Perfectly pure and good”—and he does not want anyone else to have her (36-37). The speaker in “My Last Duchess,” whom Gardner refers to as a “monomaniacal sociopath” (36), is motivated by the extreme jealousy he feels toward his wife and by the intense desire to control her behavior that drive him to go as far as ending her life.

In conclusion, Robert Browning combines the dramatic monologue, which “proved to be the ideal medium for [his] poetic genius,” and his interest in evil or the dark side of human nature to create entertaining and psychologically complex stories in which he explores the nature of evil (“Robert Browning”). He tells these stories from the perspectives of unreliable male narrators who indirectly reveal their personalities and their flaws through their own words and their criticisms of their victims. By looking into the minds of the villains in order to write his dramatic monologues, Browning had to consider and analyze the state of mind and the motivations of each speaker. Through this process he explores, and perhaps discovered through his exploration, the idea that evil often comes from an irrational state of mind and is often motivated by jealousy and the desire for control.

Works Cited

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