

Insanity and Murder in Robert Browning' and Robert Lowell's *Dramatic Monologues*

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Abstract

The study aims at fathoming Robert Browning' and Robert Lowell's intentions of choosing the dramatic monologue as a means of exploring human psyche. Significantly, the themes of insanity and murder are not ideal from an esthetic perspective, but for Browning and Lowell it provides the key to probe into human character and fundamental motives. This study examines Browning' and Lowell's dramatic monologues that address crime and the psyche of abnormal men. Browning' and Lowell's poetry in this regard unravels complicated human motivations and delineates morbid psychologies. Their monologues probe deep down into the mind-sets of their characters and dissect their souls to the readers. The main character of each of Browning's dramatic monologues, *My Last Duchess* and *Porphyria's Lover*; discloses his true self, mental health, and moral values through his monologue in a critical situation. Ironically, each monologue invites the reader to detect the disparity between what the character believes the story to be and the reality of the situation detected through the poem. In Lowell's *The Mills of the Kavanaughs*, the monologue is delivered by the victim herself. Yet, the fact that the poem reflects Lowell's individual experience and trauma indicates that the monologue is delivered by the poet-victimizer as well.

Keywords: Dramatic Monologue, Insanity, Murder, Trauma, *My Last Duchess*, *Porphyria's Lover*, *The Mills of the Kavanaughs*

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In a letter addressed to Robert Lowell, January 1 (1948), Elizabeth Bishop wrote the following: "I re-read a little Browning & if that is the kind of poem he wants to do I think he should, too. How do you feel about Browning and why don't the critics ever mention him in connection with you?" (Travisano & Hamilton, 2010, p. 23) Lowell replied to Bishop in another letter, January 21 (1948), stating his opinion regarding Robert Browning:

Browning had all the right ideas about material—new ones at that. But what does he do? Invents a language, ties himself up in metrical knots—often ingenious, but which have nothing to do with what he's saying. Then all his cheap simplifications! He should have been the great poet of the 19th century, but he constantly amazes and never seems to get anything really right. I suppose his best are "Caliban," "The House Keeper," "Mr. Mudge," "The Bishop Orders" and *The Ring*—this probably above all, if I could ever get through it. (Travisano et al., 2010, p. 25)

Lowell writes the same opinion regarding Browning in a letter addressed to George Santayana, February 2 (1948):

I think Browning had all the right ideas about what the poetry of his time should take in—people and time. But (this is presumptuous) how he muffed it all! The ingenious, terrific metrics, shaking the heart out of what he was saying; the invented language; the short-cuts; the hurry; and (one must say it) the horrible self-indulgence—the attitudes, the cheapness! I write strongly, for he should, with patience, have been one of the great poets of the world. Anyway, he was on the side of the angels a lot of the time. (Lowell, 2005, pp. 81-82)

However, Bishop's note concerning the influence of Browning on some of Lowell's poetry triggered me to write this paper. The study includes one of Lowell's dramatic monologues, titled *The Mills of the Kavanaghs*, and two of Browning's dramatic monologues; *My Last Duchess* and *Porphyria's Lover*. All three poems are about unhealthy relationships and the psyche of abnormal characters. The current study attempts to explore the dramatic monologue in the context of insanity and murder to shed light on Browning's and Lowell's notion of madness as a theme in poetry.

Browning is juxtaposed with Lowell in regard to their dramatic monologues otherwise; Lowell is known as a confessional poet after the publication of his book *Life Studies* (1959); which had a marked influence on American poetry. Ironically, Browning had an opinion similar to that expressed in *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, where Eliot (1963) wrote: "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion (. . .) it is not the expression of the personality but an escape from personality" (p. 29). Further, according to Sinha. (1994):

It must be noted that what Browning set himself against is the uninhibited exposure of personal feelings, and not objectified (however perfunctorily) affirmation of beliefs that would have some value for mankind in general. Browning's contempt is reserved, not for those who revealed themselves through their poetry, but for those who made of poetry a

confessional rather than a dramatic art. To Browning this meant all the difference between a concern for the self and its own point of view, and the higher concern of fitting the infinite into the finite. (pp. 96-97)

Browning criticises confessional poetry in the sense that the confessional poet treats his art as a trade rather than nourishment to the spirit. However, Browning composed his best poetry when he remained in disguise.

Yet Lowell's confessional poetry is closely linked to his mental illness and psychological trauma. In *Manic Power: Robert Lowell and his Circle*, Meyers (1987) mentions, concerning insanity, that "personal madness seemed to the poets an appropriate response to what Eliot called 'the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history.' Only disaster could offer a new experience" (p. 13). Lowell felt he should pursue affliction rather than consolation. He lurched from delusions to madness, and consequently ruined his marriages and wellbeing. He used his mental breakdown as the basic material for his poetry, believing that this makes his art more authentic. Lowell's monologue chosen for this study is delivered by the victim rather than the one who attempted to commit the murder. The monologue concerns the poet's manic depression and his attempt to strangle his first wife, Jean Stafford. This frightening experience inspired Lowell to handle the inherently threatening feature of his temperament through addressing it in his poetry. Ultimately this came to be known as his confessional poetry. Lowell was destined by hereditary to carry out his family's fate. His madness also became a reflection of the intense hardship, agony, and traumatic stress of his generation and community.

Another important element that links Browning and Lowell together is that the former's techniques in writing poetry were far more developed than his contemporaries. The characteristics of Browning's poetry – the everyday idioms, speech accent, and verse-forms matching the emotional situation of his characters – have become some of the salient features of modern poetry. "Much of Eliot's poetry and drama, indeed, is foreshadowed in Browning's ironic use of the *persona*. These various voices pre-echo those of Prufrock and of Pound's Hugh Selwyn Mauberley" (Willy, 1968, p. 91). Browning is the most modern of all the Victorian poets. He predicted experiments in modern poetry.

Theatre had exerted a powerful and lifelong influence on Browning, yet his career as a dramatist was a failure and he ultimately abandoned writing plays. Browning's lack of success was "due to the defect he shared with the earlier Romantics when they turned from poetry to drama. All seemed unable to externalise the inner human conflict they attempted to portray" (Willy, 1968, p. 6). Consequently, Browning concentrated on writing dramatic lyrics that revolve around the conversation of one character in a critical situation. "This form was peculiarly suited to the limitations as well as the strength of Browning's natural gifts" (Willy, 1968, p. 7). Browning was no longer obliged to deal with the conflicts of many characters or consider a suitable denouement as the plot unravels on the stage. He addressed the psychological conflict within one

character rather than having to deal with the external actions of different characters of the play. This he achieved “by means of his acute awareness of sounds and the associations of words, and thus to make his statement indirectly” (Williams, 1967, p. 108). The dramatic monologue, also,

satisfied the instinctive pull of his inclinations towards the dramatic rather than the lyric utterance. It offered an ideal vehicle for the exercise of his exuberant fertility of invention, his lively historical imagination – especially for the knowledge gained from his reading about unusual characters and passages from the past – and for the vigorous colloquial idiom and conversational speech-rhythms of which he made himself one of the great masters. (Willy, 1968, pp. 7-8)

Browning, however, “did not invent the dramatic monologue, which had been utilized by Chaucer and by Shakespeare, but he concentrated his poetic powers in its form to such an extent that he made of it something essentially his own” (Grosskurth, 1967, p. 13). The dramatic monologue differs from the soliloquy in that it requires the presence of a listener, and consequently the speaker selects his words to influence him. Unwittingly, though, the speaker unveils his deepest motives and desires to the listener and the readers of the poem. Therefore, the “dramatic monologue brings out the presentation of a situation more accurately and graphically because it is three dimensional, whereas the narrative poem is two dimensional” (Pandey, 2014, p. 3). The dramatic monologue, as a poetic expression, gave Browning the opportunity to explore human nature and drives without having to directly confront the reader with a moral lesson that may undermine the merit of his poem. In a letter addressed to Elizabeth Barrett, Browning writes the following: “You speak out, *you*,—I only make men and women speak—give you truth broken into prismatic hues, and fear the pure white light, even if it is in me” (Karlin, 1984, p. 5). Browning presents himself as a practical and experienced man who composes poetry about real life through adopting imaginary men and women. Their voices are compared to the ‘prismatic hues’, while the truth which Browning is attempting to present is ‘the pure white light’, that the reader is left to grasp from the poem.

The setting of Browning's *My Last Duchess* is Renaissance Italy, and the speaker is the Duke of Ferrara. The Duke is negotiating with the emissary of the neighbouring Count, whose daughter he wants to marry. He cunningly conveys his message to the emissary while showing him his portrait gallery and a painting of his last Duchess. He aims at pointing out the flaws in the last Duchess's character, so his future wife would avoid them. However, Browning's aim of the poem is to demonstrate the difference between life and art, which the last Duchess true character and her portrait stand for respectively. The Duchess's sense of being alive is strongly stated by the Duke:

Sir, 'twas all one! My favour at her breast,
The dropping of the daylight in the West,
The bough of cherries some officious fool
Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule
She rode with round the terrace—all and each
Would draw from her alike the approving speech,

Or blush, at least. (Browning, 1949, p. 172)

The Duke was troubled by the reason of 'the depth and passion' in the Duchess 'earnest glance', which the painter had successfully reproduced in his painting. The Duke's dignity and aristocracy prevented him from trying to correct her, so he – "gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together" (Browning, 1949, p. 172). He had to kill her because he failed to subdue her vibrant nature. The Duke admires the picture of the Duchess, "painted on the wall / Looking as if she were alive" (Browning, 1949, p. 171), more than the real woman. He was unable to subdue her simple and innocent nature in the same manner that the statue of Neptune is 'taming a sea-horse'. The Duke appreciates art, yet life is outside the scope of his appreciation. The moral values of the Duke are revealed through the monologue. The poem itself, however, contains no direct moralizing. The message of the poem is left to the reader's understanding. The Duke's character embodies unusual pleasure in art and severe ruthlessness. He is a Machiavellian Renaissance dictator and oppressor. On a different level, Browning's engagement with a culture and history different than his own enabled him to indirectly attack the social and political debate of Victorian era in the United Kingdom. The Duke's opinions regarding arts and women are Browning's criticism of the darker aspect of Italy's splendid Humanism that enclosed violence against women in the case of the poem in question. The poet questions the extent of truth in historical accounts; he shows the role of imagination and misapprehension in distorting historical facts. He also addresses the social structure of Victorian society in which men exploit and oppress women.

Another case study of abnormal psychology is addressed in *Porphyria's Lover*, where the lover is destructive in his uncontrollable and obsessive thoughts. The lover experiences a moment of intense and unexpected passion, which causes an unforeseen deed. This ultimately brings the moment of crisis and self-revelation that lays his soul bare through the monologue.

The good-looking and inexperienced Porphyria, isolated from her lover due to his lower social rank, runs away from her home to join him on one tempestuous night. The dejected lover gives an account of the weather that night, which matches his inner turmoil before her arrival. The stormy night is a personification of demolition, anger, and malevolence. It damaged the elm trees and disturbed the still surface of the lake. Yet, unexpectedly, and amid the gloom and despair of the situation, Porphyria arrived at her lover's cottage. Her arrival shut the cold out, literally and figuratively. She then took off her wet cloak, shawl, hat, and dirty gloves, untied her wet hair, sat beside him, and started addressing him. Her reaction to his silence discloses their intimate relationship. Porphyria acts according to what is expected of her: the submissive woman, willing to please her lover at any cost. This is Browning's criticism of Victorian society, its social conventions, and expectations of women. The lover mentions that Porphyria told him that she came 'through wind and rain' and gave herself to him because she was "too weak, for all her heart's endeavor, / To set its struggling passion free" (Browning, 1949, p. 282). This is a further emphasis on the way women were regarded in the Victorian era; pressured by social structures, weak, and completely under the control of men. The lover's motivation resembles that of the

Duke of Ferrara. He experienced pathologic jealousy and nervousness of Porphyria's exuberance. He looked into her eyes and was reassured that she worshipped him. His heart swelled with pride and he began figuring out how to maintain the love of the innocent and charming Porphyria forever. He decided to do so by strangulating her. He mentions that she passed away without the slightest pain: "As a shut bud that holds a bee, / I warily oped her lids: again / Laughed the blue eyes without a stain" (Browning, 1949, p. 283). The lover then loosened the string of hair from around Porphyria's throat. 'Her cheeks', he reveals, blushed again beneath his passionate kiss. He continues describing his ruthless glee as he bore her deadhead on his shoulder for the entire night and pointing out that 'God has not said a word.

Browning is indirectly criticizing the wickedness of religious institutions and society's moral conducts that not only assault women but also encourage violence and crime against them. Through the entire poem, Browning is suggesting that the general difference between culture and barbarity and the alleged concept of normality and abnormality are slighter than we are willing to accept.

The issues of a violent and mentally ill lover are also addressed in Lowell's *The Mills of the Kavanaughs*. The poem marks the beginning of Lowell's mental illness, his ultimate rejection of Catholicism, and a turning point in his literary career. It paved the way for his next, more successful and ambitious book of verse titled *Life Studies*. This dramatic monologue, however, unlike Browning's dramatic monologues, is delivered by the victim, not the victimizer. It is a yell of desperate, uncontrollable first-person speech of a woman whose husband was about to strangle her to death. Jean Stafford, Lowell's first wife, tells a friend the occasion that inspired writing the poem. She mentions that while she was asleep, she dreamt of her former boyfriend. That night Lowell had wakened her up to make love, yet she—not fully awaked—uttered the name of her former lover. Lowell was blinded by fury and tried to strangle her. Ultimately, he loosened his grip on her throat and left the room. Lowell's grave problems with his parents led to turbulent marriages, characterized by a nervous breakdown. Lowell's tyrannical mother contributed to his emotional insecurity, and he consequently mistreated his wives in order to assault her. Lowell, however, "would brood hard and long over that night, writing it over and over as the central moment of his long poem, *The Mills of the Kavanaughs*, which he began work on after he and Jean were separated" (Mariani, 1994, p. 130). Lowell's dramatic monologue is written from the wife's perspective of the incident in an attempt to understand Jean's feelings and opinion.

The monologue is preceded by two epigraphs, quoted from Mathew Arnold's *Dover Beach* and William Carols Williams's *In the American Grain*. Both show disappointment by the fragile bond between human beings and the lack of the potentiality for compassion and virtue. Congruent with the epigraphs, the monologue reflects the abusive words that both Jean and Lowell used to pour into their quarrels together. Jean's "voice is unmistakably the voice he borrows for Anne kavanaugh. And the lines that Lowell's Anne puts in her husband's mouth seem

meant to exemplify the 'calm olympian brutality' which—according to Stafford's repeated accusation—was Lowell's actual posture at the time" (Hamilton, 1982, p. 184):

“Anne,” he teases, “Anne, my whole
House is your serf. The squirrel in its hole
Who hears your patter, Anne, and sinks its eye-
Teeth, bigger than human's, in its treasure
Of rotten shells, is wiser far than I
Who have forsaken all my learning's leisure

To be your man and husband—God knows why!” (Lowell, 2003, p. 80)

The poetry concerns a husband trapped in an unhappy relationship. During their marriage, there was a circulating story that Jean had an intimate relationship with one of Lowell's friends. In this regard, *The Mills of the Kavanaughs* is about Lowell's suspicions and Jean's nervousness. According Al-Zwelef, marriage has been one of the most examined human establishments all through history. Modern poetry, however, mostly addresses the pain and desperation suffered after separation and divorce. In Lowell's poetry, divorce is not only related to matrimony. Divorce could rather

signify the separation of man from his self in mental illness, of the artist from society, of the private from the public, and most crucial is the twentieth century historical disintegration of the old cultural structures in the religious, moral, and political fields (p. 3).

The separation of man from his genuine self by mental disorder is related to the husband's situation in *The Mills of the Kavanaughs*. The poem deals with the husband's attempt to kill his wife, rather than to divorce her.

The poem's central character, Ann Kavanaugh, is a widow sitting in her garden one afternoon. The place is Maine, in the fall of 1943. Ann “pretends that the Bible she has placed in the chair opposite her is her opponent. At one end of the garden is the grave of her husband, Harry Kavanaugh, a naval officer who retired after Pearl Harbor” (Lowell, 2003, p. 73). Harry had suffered from depression, anxiety, and mental disturbance after Japanese planes had attacked the naval base at Pearl Harbor in 1941. The monologue is delivered through the stream of consciousness technique and Ann is addressing her deceased husband. She recalls when Harry once tried to strangle her as he considered her cheating him by mentioning another man in her dream. Sadly, Ann was actually dreaming of making love with Harry the boy, and whom she prefers to the adult and imperfect man. Ann would then recall her husband after the incident sitting in the kitchen in the early dawn, bend down with confusion. The husband is grief-stricken, angry, and perplexed in response to his plight. After savagely attacking his wife, his hostility turns inwards. On a different level, in this private poem, “Lowell has as much difficulty forgiving his mother's coldness, and her manipulation of his feelings, as his father's weakness. He is able to

forgive his mother (. . .) in so far he can see her too as a victim (Williamson, 1974, p. 73). The voice in which Anne abhors Harry is the voice of Lowell's mother speaking of her husband. The criticising female voice of the monologue echoes the poet's uncertainty and despair. The son of the oppressive mother becomes cruel and aggressive himself.

The theme of insanity and murder in Browning's and Lowell's dramatic monologues reveals principle psychological truths about human nature. Both addressed the human psyche through characters reminiscing weird experiences. However, their dramatic monologues present realms of life other and wider than the human psyche. Browning presents insanity through fictional characters, while Lowell addresses it as a reflection of the mental health of the poet. Browning's *My Last Duchess* presents a sadomasochistic Duke who tortures himself by not fully controlling the life and desires of the Duchess, orders her death. He is ravished by the brutal satisfaction of subjection. The Duchess completely belongs to the Duke only through her portrait. The dramatic monologue addresses the difference between art and life and between historical accounts and truth. The monologue of Browning's *Porphyria's Lover* visualizes the complicated mental process of a psychotic lover, who strangled his beloved and then sits placidly with her head on his shoulders. Browning is curious about the peculiarities of different human characters; in their thoughts, desires, motivations, and habits. According to him, knowing the true self requires confronting the shadowy side of our selves and the subdued side of society. Lowell's monologue, however, is delivered by the victim herself. Nevertheless, the fact that it reflects the poet's true experience with his wife makes it a study of the extent of the victimizer's manic state and depression. From this perspective, and given the fact that the monologue is written by the victimizer-poet, it is an expression of the will to heal his mental state and rebuild his relationship with family and friends.

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