

# Psychological Self-Exposure and the Politics of Voice: A Study of Narcissism, Silencing, and Moral Complexity in Robert Browning's Dramatic Monologues

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## Abstract:

Dramatic monologue is a unique poetic form. From the very term it is evident that the poem consists of a single person's speech and there must be dramatic elements in it. In this monologue there is a persona or a speaker who is not the poet but from his narration the main fact of the poem is revealed. There is another silent interlocutor or a listener who does not converse but his constant presence is revealed by the narrator's expression. The speaker through his narration reveals several things- the story; he even unknowingly reveals his own psyche. Dramatic irony often takes place in these poems when the speaker expresses one thing but just the contradictory situation takes place in the reality. The listener remains silent throughout the poem but his constant presence is felt by the speech of the speaker and with the advancement of the poetry. The poetic form is exclusive due to its richness of content, psychological depth, moral complexity of the character and seriousness of the situation. The celebrated English poet Robert Browning is essentially associated with this genre. He has immensely contributed for the perfection of this dramatic lyric. He is regarded for his uniqueness and innovative content for the poems. Browning's love of life, his wife and constant companion throughout his life and moral enthusiast of his art and poetry, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, is another eminent Victorian English poet.

**Key Words:** monologue, dramatic, speaker, irony, psychology, hidden, reality, contradictory, silent, listener, Robert Browning, dramatic lyric, erratic, complexity, violence, erratic, Victorian era

**Introduction:** The dramatic monologue is an innovative and highly interesting literary creation. It has emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> c England. In the Victorian period this form has flourished widely. Robert Browning has popularized this poetic technique and has greatly contributed this poetic form to achieve perfection. In some of the dramatic monologues the speakers boastfully present their speeches but through their words their psyches express themselves. The speaker unknowingly reveals the hidden truth. His actions and motives all are exposed through his words. In the Victorian period the dramatic monologue

gains its popularity and perfection. It is an inventive technique and is very rich for its dramatic flavor, psychological depth and presentation of the poem to the silent interlocutor and the curious readers. Religion is a constant theme in Browning's dramatic monologues.

**Methodology:** The study follows close reading of all the dramatic monologues. The textual, analytical and interpretative study helps in the deeper understanding of Robert Browning's dramatic lyrics. The theoretical approaches of the Theory of Dramatic Monologue, Psychoanalytic

theory, Feminist Theory, Foucauldian Theory of Power, New Historicism, Marxist Theory and Existential Ethics provide this analytical methodological research a profound gravity, clarity and detailed understanding of Browning’s literary works. The secondary sources, scholarly articles and critical writings have assisted in the enrichment and precision of the dramatic monologues.

**Salient Features of Dramatic Monologue:**

1. The poem is actually a speech of a single person—monologue.
2. There is the constant and silent presence of a listener to whom the narrator unfolds the story.
3. The situation is often tensed
4. The poem is full of psychological depth.
5. The speaker unknowingly reveals his psychology, his inner desire, the hidden and ironic truth.
6. The entire poem is based on a dramatic situation and the speaker narrates the full poem in a dramatic way making the listener and its readers amazed and enchanted.

**Resemblances:**

1. In both the dramatic monologue and soliloquy there is a single speaker.
2. Both of these literary forms involve dramatization.
3. In both these literary techniques there are revelations of fact, character and psychology.
4. Both of them worked as a tool for the deeper understanding of the theme,
5. Both these literary devices lay bare the reality in highly dramatic ways.

7. It deals with a serious and grave subject matter.
8. In most of the dramatic monologues of Browning, the speaker is an erratic and narcissistic personality.

**Dramatic Monologue and Soliloquy: Comparison**

**Differences:**

Dramatic Monologue	Soliloquy
1. The speaker narrates the story	1. The character reveals his inner most thoughts.
2. A silent listener is present throughout	2. The character pours his heart out alone
3. Psychological revelation of the self, dramatic unveiling of the core theme	3. Expressing the inner most thoughts directly
4. Reader scrutinizes the speaker, his speech and actions.	4. Audience can understand the character and his mental makeup.
5. Poetic form	5. Essential part of a drama
6. It is expressive and reflective	6. It is meditative and reflective
7. Prominent poet – Robert Browning	7. Prominent playwright- Shakespeare

6. There is enormous gravity in the delivery of these speeches.

**Some major Dramatic Monologues of English Literature:**

- **My Last Duchess (1842): Robert Browning-** the poem first appears in Dramatic Lyrics. The poem is written in Iambic Pentameter. In this lyrical poem the Speaker, the Duke of Ferrara shows hospitality to the emissary of his future wife. With pride he displays the artistic creations of his

palace. While unveiling the portrait of his last duchess he unknowingly exposes his own psyche, his character and the whole theme of the poem and the pathetic journey of the innocent Duchess from a lively, cheerful woman to a lifelike portrait.

- This grew; I gave commands;
- Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands  
As if alive.

The Duke through his speech discloses his own heinous character. He is a proud and power lusty aristocrat. He is highly dominating and domineering husband who always intends to control his wife. His cynical nature, complexity, vanity and showmanship are evident throughout the poem. He is fascinated by her beauty and is extremely possessive of her. Even after her assassination none can unveil the curtain of her portrait except the Duke. He has objectified women who will always submissive to him. Domination, lust for power, and demonstrating their 900 years family reputations are the most expensive things for him.

Notice Neptune, though,  
Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,  
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!

His dual nature is expressed through his speech. He has inclination for beauty; aesthetics in one hand on the other hand he possesses extreme pride to control and conquer this beautiful object. He is unable to control his previous lady love but he captures her beauty by making her lively portrait. Fra Pandolf is the painter of the marvelous portrait.

She had  
A heart—how shall I say?— too soon made glad,  
Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er  
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.

Sir, 'twas all one!

The last Duchess on the other hand possesses totally different characteristics. She is an innocent, down – to-earth, cheerful woman who used to please in small things. She was a pious lady devoid of any pompousness, artificiality and complexity of character.

- **Andrea Del Sarto or The Faultless Painter (1855)** - is another dramatic monologue of Robert Browning. It is published in his poetry collection Men and Women. The dramatic lyric is written in blank verse and iambic pentameter is used in it. Renowned Italian Renaissance artist Andrea d'Agnolo is the main source of inspiration for the poem. For his flawless painting he was called as Andrea senza errori or the unerring artist. The reverend artist was the disciple of Piero di Cosimo and was highly motivated by the works of Raphael, Leonardo da Vinci and Fra' Bartolommeo et.al. Browning collected material from the works of Giorgio Vasari. In this poem the artist Andrea Del Sarto is the speaker and his shallow wife Lucrezia is the listener whose silent presence is felt by the readers. Here in this poem the speaker is very much aware of his own poetic talent His artistic genius can be compared with the legendary artists' like-. Michelangelo, Raphael. He has not accepted as art for art's sake rather he has used art for his material comfort, mundane gain and to make her wife happy.

Meted on each side by the angel's reed,  
For Leonard, Rafael, Agnolo and me  
To cover—the three first without a wife,  
While I have mine! So—still they overcome  
Because there's still Lucrezia,—as I choose.

Again the Cousin's whistle! Go, my Love.

He is completely dependent on his wife Lucrezia. He has completely surrendered to his wife and has tried his utmost to please his wife. His artistic talent has not achieved the divine height despite his talent as he prefers material comfort and wife's happiness rather than artistic greatness and magnificence.

Only let me sit  
The grey remainder of the evening out,  
Idle, you call it, and muse perfectly  
How I could paint, were I but back in France,  
One picture, just one more—the Virgin's face,  
Not yours this time! I want you at my side  
To hear them—that is, Michel Agnolo—  
Judge all I do and tell you of its worth.  
Will you? To-morrow, satisfy your friend.

He has wasted his potential and painting capability only to live a peaceful and happy marital life with his beloved wife but unfortunately his unconditional and selfless love is not reciprocated by his shallow, manipulative and avaricious wife. His life has become grey and uninspiring though his painting is flawless. His art lacks the soul like the other sublime artists. Due to his family oriented mind set and his material comfort he has not achieved the stature for which he has enough capability. He has compromised with his excellence only to have a happy love life.

- **Porphyria's Lover (1836):** This dramatic Lyric was first published in Monthly Repository in 1836 with the name Porphyria, later on it is republished in Dramatic Lyrics in the year 1842. The poem gets its final title in 1863. This poem is unique in theme. The persona here is a lover and a lunatic. The eccentric lover exercises his masculine power to his lady love. He wants to freeze a moment of her devotion

forever. He thrice strangles her tender throat with her own hair to have a complete possession of the lay. The dramatic lyric is a vivid portrait of cruelty, violence, perversion, objectification of women, patriarchal dominance and extreme possessiveness of the insane lover. Though they have differences in their social and financial standards but the lady was completely loyal to him.

Murmuring how she loved me — she  
Too weak, for all her heart's endeavour,  
To set its struggling passion free  
From pride, and vainer ties dissever,  
And give herself to me for ever.  
But passion sometimes would prevail,  
Nor could to-night's gay feast restrain  
A sudden thought of one so pale  
For love of her, and all in vain:  
So, she was come through wind and rain.  
Be sure I looked up at her eyes  
Happy and proud; at last I knew  
Porphyria worshipped me; surprise  
Made my heart swell, 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. No pain felt she;  
I am quite sure she felt no pain.

The eccentric lover tries to have complete grasp over her and thus had made this living beauty into a lifeless and still thing by assassinating her. The lover is so arrogant and shameless in his act that even he has lost his conscience, ethics and reverence for God.

And all night long we have not stirred,  
And yet God has not said a word!

- **Resemblances between My Last Duchess and Porphyria's Lover:**

- In both My Last Duchess and Porphyria's Lover the speakers are eccentric, they are extremely obsessive and possessive for their lady loves.
- They are adamant to have complete possession and grasp over their charming ladies.
- Their obsession ceased only in converting their lively, innocent beautiful beloved into lifeless, still and silent beauty.
- Both the Duke and the lover are psychologically ill or psychopath.
- They are not repentant of their evil deeds.
- Narcissistic, merciless characters.
- **Fra Lippo Lippi (1855)** - This is another celebrated dramatic monologue by Robert Browning. The poem is published in the poetic collection, Men and Women (1855). The poem is written in non rhyming iambic pentameter and uses blank verse. This dramatic lyric is modeled on Filippo Lippi, a real life painter and monk of Italy of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The backdrop is Florence, Italy. The painter is captured in a red –light area.

I am poor brother Lippo, by your leave!  
You need not clap your torches to my face.  
Zooks, what's to blame? you think you see a monk!  
What, 'tis past midnight, and you go the rounds,  
And here you catch me at an alley's end  
Where sportive ladies leave their doors ajar?

The church and the monastery demand a pious and austere life-style. The painter- priest is compelled to enter in the monastery from his early childhood to get rid of starvation. The church and strict religiosity to paint something related to the soul, something spiritually and divinely inspired.

Paint the soul, never mind the legs and arms!  
Rub all out, try at it a second time.

On the contrary Fra Lippo Lippi has his own ideology. He is of the view that painting or art has ample material in the real world human body is a wonderful artistic subject. Valuable artistry and painting can be drawn from realistic things. The lush side of nature is full of vivacity and vitality. The surrounding physical world is pervaded with aesthetic beauty and is a rich source for artistic creation.

However, you're my man, you've seen the world  
—The beauty and the wonder and the power,  
The shapes of things, their colours, lights and shades,  
Changes, surprises,—and God made it all!  
—For what? Do you feel thankful, ay or no,  
For this fair town's face, yonder river's line,  
The mountain round it and the sky above,  
Much more the figures of man, woman, child,  
These are the frame to? What's it all about?  
To be passed over, despised? or dwelt upon,  
Wondered at? oh, this last of course!—you say.  
But why not do as well as say,—paint these  
Just as they are, careless what comes of it?  
God's works—paint any one, and count it crime  
To let a truth slip. Don't object, "His works  
Are here already; nature is complete:  
Suppose you reproduce her—(which you can't)

The poem displays the domineering influence of church on art and painting and strict restriction on the freedom of the painter.

- **The Ring and the Book (1868-1869)** - This is a verse novel, an extensive poetic collection comprising of 12 dramatic monologues and containing 21000 lines.

1. The Ring and the Book
2. Half-Rome
3. The Other Half-Rome

4. Tertium Quid
5. Count Guido Franceschini
6. Giuseppe Caponsacchi
7. Pompilia
8. Dominus Hyacinthus de Archangelis
9. Juris Doctor Johannes Baptista Bottinius
10. Pope Innocent XII
11. Guido
12. The Book and the Ring

This literary poetic collection was published in four volumes from 1868-1869. The main theme of this dramatic lyrics series is based on a real life incident- a merciless murder trial. The real life incident takes place in 1698 in the Roman Papal States where a cynical nobleman Count Guido Franceschini ruthlessly assassinates his wife Pompilia and her parents. He has a strong suspicion of Pompilia having an adulterous relationship with the youthful cleric, Giuseppe Caponsacchi. Browning has collected the material of this renowned realistic case from *The Old Yellow Book*. Here in this verse collection Pompilia is a spiritually enlightened lady who is married to a morally complicated, manipulative nobleman Guido Franceschini. To get rid of such intolerable circumstances and from such abusive husband Pompilia yearns for assistance from a courageous young priest Caponsacchi but unfortunately she was remorselessly assassinated by her oppressive husband. A trial continues in Rome Pope Innocent XII ultimately condemns Guido Franceschini and has given him death sentence for his repulsive act in the well acclaimed *Book X*. Extremely morally corrupted Guido's execution follows. Caponsacchi turns out to be not only a pious priest but a courageous moral hero whom the helpless spiritually elevated Pompilia relies.

- **The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church: (1845)** - This is a dramatic lyric poem written in blank verse

and iambic pentameter is used in it. In this dramatic monologue, Browning satirizes the bishop and the hypocrisy of moral character. The Renaissance bishop is a morally corrupted person who is devoted not to his pious profession rather to material prosperity, wealth, vanity and boastful showmanship.

Vanity, saith the preacher, vanity!  
Draw round my bed: is Anselm keeping back?  
Nephews—sons mine . . . ah God, I know not! Well—  
She, men would have to be your mother once,  
Old Gandolf envied me, so fair she was!  
What's done is done, and she is dead beside,  
Dead long ago, and I am Bishop since,  
And as she died so must we die ourselves,  
And thence ye may perceive the world's a dream.

He is unable to adhere to the austerity and discipline of his religious occupation. He has fathered illegitimate sons –‘nephews’ whom he instructs to make an extravagant tomb after his death. He has rival predecessor Gandolf whom he wants to defeat even after his death by making an expensive, luxurious tomb.

Fewer tapers there,  
But in a row: and, going, turn your backs  
—Ay, like departing altar-ministrants,  
And leave me in my church, the church for peace,  
That I may watch at leisure if he leers—  
Old Gandolf, at me, from his onion-stone,  
As still he envied me, so fair she was!

The bishop not only a hypocrite but also has not overcome his moral shortcomings instead of respect he cherishes envy for his predecessor. Even in the dying stage he is not meditative of his spiritual enlightenment and salvation his sole purpose of life is material prosperity and vain display of his

wealth. The bishop is a narcissistic and hypocrite person.

- **Theoretical Approaches:**
- **Theory of Dramatic Monologue (Robert Langbaum)-** The reader first tries to understand the speaker's point of view but after realizing the actual fact apply their own ethical values and judgment.
- **Psychoanalytic theory:** Browning's dramatic monologues are full of psychological analysis, severe moral conflict and self-justification. His speakers are expressing narcissism, ego, obsession, abnormal possessiveness, jealousy, envy, hypocrisy, inferiority complex, death anxiety and several mental perversions.
- **Feminist Theory:** In all the above mentioned dramatic monologues of Browning women (except Lucrezia) are forcefully silenced by the oppressive, tyrannical patriarchal figures. They are relentlessly objectified. Most of the women are truly virtuous, innocent, pious and morally and spiritually elevated. But they are not regarded for their ethical values. Their inner beauty is overlooked and the perverted, egotistic, narcissistic men want to possess and capture their outward beauty forever.

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- **Foucauldian Theory of Power-** Discourse, speech, Duke, religious and legal institutions are playing the dominant roles to establish their power and firmly subjugate those who oppose their control.
- **New Historicism-** Literary texts display the social ambiance of that time. Renaissance settings, religious doubt, art, patronization of art and culture, history are vividly reflected by the literary texts.
- **Marxist Theory-** Economy and financial status control relations, art and social status.
- **Existential Ethics-** The speakers of Browning are dealing with self-justification of their morally questionable deeds.

**Conclusion:** Robert Browning has led the unique poetic form dramatic monologue to its excellence. His poetic themes are unique and original. The dramatic lyrics are full of profound psychological themes, ethical ambiguity and the narration of the speaker is dramatic and highly praiseworthy. He has not invented the subject matter of his own but also has chosen some poetic themes from historical and real incidents. Robert Browning has enriched English Literature with his excellent creation of dramatic monologues. He has created his unique place among other Victorian poets for his poetic genius.

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