

A Beloved or A Devil?: Toxic Masculinity in Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess" and "Porphyria's Lover"

Ahmet Uruk¹

Gumushane University, Faculty of Letters, English Language and Literature

ABSTRACT

Research Article

Coinciding with the years between 1837 and 1901, The Victorian period witnessed the dramatic growth of the reading public and the increasing significance of the novel genre in accordance with the circulating libraries and weekly magazines through which a great number of Victorian novels were published. Although these realist novels, characterized by an impetus for social realism in order to portray the negative impacts of industrialism and capitalism upon the Victorian life, prevailed over any other genre through their critical imagery of contemporary issues, there was a group of poets such as Alfred Tennyson, Matthew Arnold, and Robert Browning who contributed to the blossoming of poetry and its distinctive characteristics. Considered as a threshold between Romanticism and Modernism, Victorian poetry has a tendency to depict religious uncertainty, science, morality, and social reform, thereby leading it to incorporate both social and political issues into the realist lens of poetry. In view of its moralist outlook of Victorian poetry, Robert Browning (1812-1889) produced, essentially, a great number of dramatic monologues, based on a fictitious speaker and a listener, so as to epitomize women's repression and patriarchal domination, consolidated by the growing male authority in the Victorian era in opposition to the country's female ruler named "Victoria". Thus, this article aims to analyze the objectification and victimization of women by the patriarchal society and toxic masculinity in the Victorian period through the male gaze of such poems as "My Last Duchess" and "Porphyria's Lover".

Received: 22.03.2021

Revision received:
27.04.2021

Accepted: 30.04.2021

Published online:
30.05.2021

Key Words: Victorian Poetry, Robert Browning, Toxic Masculinity, "My Last Duchess", "Porphyria's Lover"

Corresponding author:

Res. Asst.

ahmet.uruk@gumushane.edu.tr

Orcid: 0000-0002-8545-8920

Sevgili mi Şeytan mı?: Robert Browning'in “Son Düşesim” ve “Porphyria'nın Aşığı” Şiirlerinde Toksik Erkeklik

Ahmet Uruk¹

Gümüşhane Üniversitesi, Edebiyat Fakültesi, İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı Bölümü

ÖZ

Araştırma Makalesi

1837 ve 1901 yıllarını kapsayan Viktorya dönemi, ödünç kitap veren kütüphanelerin ve birçok Viktorya romanının yayımlandığı haftalık dergilerin sayesinde okuyucu kitlesinin ve romanların öneminin ani bir şekilde artmasına tanıklık etmiştir. Sanayileşmenin ve kapitalizmin negatif etkilerini resmetme amacıyla toplumcu gerçekçilik dürtüsüyle okurlara ulaşan bu gerçekçi romanların, çağdaş sorunları betimlemesi nedeniyle dönemdeki diğer bütün edebi türlere üstün gelmesine rağmen Viktorya şiirinin gelişimine ve belirgin özelliklere kavuşmasına katkıda bulunan Alfred Tennyson, Matthew Arnold ve Robert Browning gibi bir grup şair vardı. Romantizmin ve Modernizmin eşliğinde bulunan Viktorya şiiri, sosyal ve politik konuları gerçekçi bir mercekten incelemelerine sebep olan dini belirsizlik, bilim, ahlak ve sosyal reform gibi konuları tasvir etmektedir. Diğer şairler gibi Robert Browning (1812-1889) de Viktorya dönemi şiirinin ahlakçı bakış açısıyla kadın baskısı ve ataerkil egemenlik gibi birçok unsuru dramatik monolog üzerinden örneklendirmektedir. Böylelikle bu çalışma “Son Düşesim” ve “Porphyria'nın Aşığı” şiirleri üzerinden Viktorya dönemindeki toksik erkeklik olgusunu ve kadınların ataerkil toplum tarafından objeleştirilip kurbanlaştırılmasını incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Alınma

Tarihi: 22.03.2021

Düzeltilmiş Hali Alınma

Tarihi: 27.04.2021

Kabul Edilme Tarihi:

30.04.2021

Çevrimiçi Yayınlanma

Tarihi: 30.05.2021

Anahtar Kelimeler: Viktorya Şiiri, Robert Browning, Toksik Erkeklik, Son Düşesim, Porphyria'nın Aşığı

¹Sorumlu yazar iletişim bilgileri:

Arş. Gör.

ahmet.uruk@gumushane.edu.tr

ORCID: 0000-0002-8545-8920

Introduction

The Industrial Revolution in the Victorian Period, which shattered the unity of private and public, as well as the concept of "home" as a place where the production is maintained, especially by women, ended the gynocentric order, which relied on the skills and labour of women such as clothing, medicine, dairy work, production of fruit and vegetable. The new world, resulting in the increase of wealth and prosperity, ignored the presence and significance of women within the production sphere, and they had to, as a result of the patriarchal order, be nothing but invisible fellows to their husbands, who were allowed to enter into the market and to join the production process. The replacement of the household by the factory regarding the space of production, therefore, brought about the emergence of the "*woman question*", a question investigating the role of women in the society, along with the question of "how would women survive?" and "what is to become of them?" in a world defined by patriarchal codes. "Middle-class women represented the emotions, the Heart, or sometimes the Soul, seat of morality and tenderness. Women performed these functions as keepers of the Hearth in the Home, and here we find a body/house connection which figured widely in the Victorian world view" (Davidoff, 1979, p. 89). Accordingly, the Victorian Period advocated the attitude that a woman should embrace the features of a homemaker, a subservient wife, a nurturing mother. Thus, they were considered as an "angel in the house" providing her husband with their emotional support, who was torn within the outside world full of economical competition.

Following Queen Victoria's fundamental views corresponding to moral propriety, strict upbringing, and repressive Victorian family, women of the period were left with no choice but to devote themselves to domestic responsibilities, since they were bereft of education, working conditions, and sufficient wages. Considered as a secondary sex in comparison to biased and active situation of men within both political and social area in the nineteenth century, women were, therefore, forced to be passive, feminine, and inferior due to the fact that their education forced them to embrace an inactive and maternal life. Therefore, the patriarchal order was consolidated in every layer of social and cultural organization. It was, for women, inevitable and excessive. The women who rebelled against them were said to be beaten or condemned in front of every villager by "fathers", and women who were able to maintain their lives on their own would be punished through male violence (Ehrenreich and English, 2005, p. 217). The patriarchal order, which was reinforced by the growing male authority in the labour force and public organization, forced males to maintain their constant masculinity towards both their work and wife, which means that they had to be always a man of pride with a violent direction. Likewise, an early nineteenth century American minister gave an obvious insight into how the brides of the period should behave stating that they should keep in mind always that their actual position is constantly carved within their heart. Their submission is the only genuine mastery of their life. Obedience and attendance will bring forth bliss and comfort as a reward. Their husband is determined by a divine law as more superior than they are, which should not be ever reminded to him (Ogburn and Nimkoff, as cited in Ehrenreich and English, 2005). In addition to what women suffer from their so called "superior", which accordingly victimizes and dominates them as an object of sexual, emotional, and domestic comfort, men were, also, sacrificed, voluntarily or reluctantly, for the continuation of social and political power. Men, accordingly, were compelled to consolidate their dominance over women in accordance with what is supported by religious, economical, and cultural order of the day.

The hegemonic supremacy constructed upon the repression and humiliation of women was, ostensibly, a man-made body of rules. Connell (2001) states that "hegemonic masculinity is hegemonic not just in relation to other masculinities, but in relation to the gender order as a

whole. It is an expression of the privilege men collectively have over women. The hierarchy of masculinities is an expression of the unequal shares in that privilege held by different groups of men". The portrayal of these masculinities was a leading force or an impetus for the Victorian writers and poets, who embraced social realism as an analytic framework of their society in order to raise awareness regarding the inequality of sexual hierarchy and the empowerment of womanhood. Jane Eyre, which, for instance, was written by Charlotte Brontë in 1847, establishes a ground by which the unfair and cruel treatment of Jane Eyre by her brutal cousin, John Reed, could be distilled into the women's repressive position in the cosmos by hegemonic masculinity. Through his class superiority and privileged sex, John Reed becomes, fundamentally, able to assert his patriarchal domination over Jane Eyre, which creates a traumatic childhood for her following years. John's monstrous self and his appalling cruelty prove how women were treated tyrannously at the hands of men of the nineteenth century in England. Robert William Connell and James W. Messerschmidt (2005) argue, in *Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept*, that "because the concept of hegemonic masculinity is based on practice that permits men's collective dominance over women to continue, it is not surprising that in some contexts, hegemonic masculinity actually does refer to men's preoccupation with toxic practices - including physical violence - that stabilize gender dominance in a particular setting" (p. 840). Apart from Victorian novels as might be detected in Jane Eyre, Victorian poetry has also an inclination which articulates the adversary effects of toxic masculinity and the victimization of women in an era characterized by male authority and women's subordination, one of the most pioneering representative of which could be considered as Robert Browning, known, primarily, for his dramatic monologues endowed with social commentary and ironical statements. It can be seen that "Browning's method in the dramatic monologue is grounded in a system of objectification which allows the poet to remove himself as a personality from the poem. This is accomplished through a process of double masking...There exists a secondary creation, a mask, which the speaker uses in dealing with the dramatic situation in the poem" (Garratt, 1973, p. 115). Resembling a concept of "*mask lyrics*" in structure and content, these dramatic monologues penned by Browning provided himself with a discreet poetic discourse so as to articulate his critical opinions corresponding to the reception of both manhood and womanhood in the Victorian era. Such circumstances demonstrated by his poetic persona intersect, intrinsically or extrinsically, with gender matters regarding female silence, objectification of women, or toxic masculine behavior.

The construction of male identity as a fictitious speaker, a mask of Robert Browning, helps constitute an imagery of women's subordination in his poem, intersecting with a microcosm of gender ideology in the nineteenth century. Jan Marsh (1987) addresses, in *Pre-Raphaelite Women: Images of Femininity in Pre-Raphaelite Art*, that the portrayal of such female characters as the Duchess and Porphyria symbolizes both social commentary on the repressive and strict norms corresponding to the Victorian women and the consequences born out of the rebellious acts of them (p. 152). Browning's sexual attributions through a series of verbal connotations and direct or indirect violence towards female characters with the features of beauty symbolize how women's rebellious behaviors are contrasted with the toxic masculinity of Victorian men, who emerge as a male gaze objectifying their female companions within the mask of a dramatic monologue. Thus, Browning's "*My Last Duchess*" and "*Porphyria's Lover*" incorporate the poetic persona's toxic masculinity concerning the depiction of violence and victimization of women in order to criticize Victorian society in terms of patriarchal authority and women's suffering through a subtle portrayal of gender intercourse present between fictitious lovers or spouses.

The Victimization of Women in “My Last Duchess”

Penned, by Robert Browning, in 1842, a year when the Victorian period started influencing the society both in cultural and political way, ‘‘My Last Duchess’’ is, primarily, considered as a part of Browning's dramatic monologue, a monologue taking place between a speaker and an imaginary audience. Based on a conversational tone and a rhetorical speech, the poem is constructed upon a pre-marriage negotiation between the Duke of Ferrara and an envoy of a Count, whose daughter with a huge dowry is intended to be a future bride for the Duke. Coyle (1984) states that dramatic monologue emerges as *“a poem in which an imaginative speaker addresses a silent audience, usually takes place at a critical moment in the speaker's life and offers an indirect and unconscious revelation of his or her temperament and character”* (p. 26). In addition to its form as a dramatic monologue, ‘‘My Last Duchess’’ could be, essentially, said to be an ekphrastic poetry, since the verbal representation of an artistic portrait establishes a ground by which an intrinsic analysis of the poem might be fulfilled. Ekphrasis, also known as a verbal description of a visual art such as painting, sculpture, and architecture, therefore, emerges as a rhetorical device providing a portrayal of an art work's form and content in relation to the piece of literature. Valentine Cunningham (2007) argues that ekphrasis is executed by a poet, who bases the poem on a sentiment or pauses the narration to direct his own gaze, the reader's gaze, or his characters' gaze at an artistic work or things (p. 57). Given its role in terms of ekphrastic demonstration of a thing or a subject, the aim of ekphrasis is, in accordance with the author's conveyance, to revive the work of art physically, some patterns of which can be detected in such works as Homer's Shield of Achilles and ekphrastic poetry called ‘‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’’ by John Keats.

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,

Looking as if she were alive. I call

That piece a wonder, now: Fra Pandolf's hands

Worked busily a day, and there she stands. (Browning, as cited in Loucks, 1979)

Considering the opening lines of the poem, the poetic persona, who is the Duke of Ferrara himself, introduces her deceased wife to the envoy. The painting as an ekphrastic material, which stands for the last duchess, becomes a silent object to gaze on and a passive entity. Whilst the speaker and the listener are turned into an assertive subject, a male gaze, his last duchess appears to be objectified, thereby providing the male with an ability to dominate and to prevail over the ‘‘submissive’’ and ‘‘silent’’. The term ‘‘scopophilia’’, suggested by Freud, coincides, successfully, with what Browning claims by means of his poetry based on an artistic representation of a duchess on the wall. Considered, essentially, as ‘‘the love of looking’’, which causes women to be objectified and to be deprived of their subjectivity as mere sexual objects, scopophilic nature allows the Duke of Ferrara to establish a male supremacy over the silent object of the Duchess. Likewise, Laura Mulvey (1975) suggests, having analyzed scopophilic instinct in cinema, that ‘‘the image of woman as passive raw material for the active gaze of man takes the argument a step further into the structure of representation, adding a further layer demanded by the ideology of the patriarchal order as it is worked out in its favorite cinematic form—illusionistic narrative film’’ (p. 843). The objectification of the previous dutchess symbolizes, in a way, how the women of the Victorian era were repressed by their male peers and proves, accordingly, the idea that women of the period were characterized by such notions as ‘‘inactivity’’, ‘‘femininity’’, and ‘‘sexuality’’. The characteristics attributed, by Victorian society, to the ideal female were submissiveness, innocence, purity, gentleness, self-sacrifice, patience, modesty, passivity, and altruism (Zedner, 1991, p. 15). As can be seen within the neutral and muted structure of the portrait of the Dutchess, a woman in the nineteenth century was supposed to follow social norms corresponding to her fragile and feminine identity. Nina Auerbach (1982) claims, in her *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth*, that a Victorian woman was ‘‘a

monument of selflessness, with no existence beyond the loving influence she exuded as daughter, wife, and mother" (p. 185). As opposed to women's ideal imagery of femininity, men were endowed with a series of masculine duties, an idea consolidated by their belonging to the public sphere and patriarchal authority. Having his last wife's portrait done, the male speaker is able to assert his masculinity, and the portrait is kept as a reminder stating that the woman who cannot comply with the social norms attributed to them are doomed to put in a cage bereft of their freedom and subjectivity:

...Sir, 't was not
 Her husband's presence only, called that spot
 Of joy into the Duchess' cheek: perhaps
 Fra Pandolf chanced to say "Her mantle laps
 Over my lady's wrist too much," or "Paint
 Must never hope to reproduce the faint. (Browning, as cited in Loucks, 1979)

Despite his toxic masculinity, coinciding with a number of his aggressive, dominant, and violent characteristics, the Duke speaks, ironically, through a polite and modest language to the envoy. Adler (1977) argues that *"the works of art to which he draws his hearer's attention in the aesthetic frame are pointed out not so much for their intrinsic beauty as for the fact that they are evidence of their owner's fine connoisseurship and ability to commission the most skillful artists"* (p. 220). Instead of his fair and gentle wife, the Duke strives to fulfill his constant need to praise his own honour and maleness as the possessor of power and wealth through an expensive painting reproduced by Fra Pandolf. Spencer (2010) similarly argues that the Duke, patronizingly, diverts both the intercourse and interest of the fictitious listener towards the painting, and strives to show off his supremacy over his last duchess through verbal expression (p. 136). The poetic persona, as a man of pride, argues how the look in her portrait would be interpreted by such a stranger, and he refers, implicitly, to his jealousy corresponding to the atmosphere between the painter and the lady based on a sensual conversation in accordance with the *"spot of joy"*, an implication of his duchess' blush. He comes to be humiliated by her intimate glances aimed at other men in opposition to his expectation to be the sole owner of these so called "flirtatious" and "coy" implications:

Half-flush that dies along her throat:" such stuff
 Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough
 For calling up that spot of joy. 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. (Browning, as cited in Loucks, 1979)

Bothered by the last duchess' expressions and feelings, portrayed as those of an independent flirtatious woman, the Duke of Ferrara utters, primarily, his complaint regarding the duchess' active and unfaithful lifestyle. His honor as a man in the Victorian era is, successively, damaged by his wife's courtesy directed towards other men as a response to their compliment or any favour. The speaker believes that he should be the only man worth his lady's gratitude and her source of happiness. The Duchess' countenance, which might be said to mirror her self-willed and coquettish manners, is contrasted with a highly arrogant identity of the Duke, since he, as a Victorian man, considers himself the authority of the house and the sole provider of their prosperous and flamboyant existence. The Duke thinks, therefore, that he is entitled to direct his wife's feelings and behaviours in accordance with the fact that an ideal woman of the Victorian era is to obey whatever her husband says and to become an object for her superior's pleasure and comfort. Furthermore, the ekphrastic description of the painting occurs to be a significant device due to the fact that the body and autonomy of the woman are determined and shaped by those words of the patriarchy, thereby leading the actional being of the woman to stop. Her self-esteem and existence become a clay to be moulded by a masculine entity. He wanted the last duchess to be more interested in him

than the praise of others. The male violence is, therefore, derived from internal and contradictory emotional anxiety directed towards the female (Spencer, 2010, p. 135), the only subject of her love and attention as a male authority. Through ekphrastic portrayal, the Duke, who has a possessive and patriarchal nature, enunciates his superiority over the Duchess, since his male gaze governs how the imagery of women is seen within an artistic work created by also a male painter:

...Who'd stoop to blame
This sort of trifling? Even had you skill
In speech—(which I have not)—to make your will
Quite clear to such an one, and say, "Just this
Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss, or there exceed the mark" (Browning, as cited in Loucks, 1979)

The Duke, not delighted with the Duchess' illicit and emotional reactions towards other men, desires to control her manners and femininity; however, his fragile masculinity prevents himself from warning his duchess regarding her unconstrained manners because of the fact that he believes it would reduce him to state of succumbing as a man before a woman and injure his manhood. That he warns her about the so called "infidelity" or "unfaithfulness", despite its ambiguity, would mean that the Duke turned a blind eye to her independent nature and nasty behaviours in terms of Victorian morality. Therefore, The Duke is highly reluctant to yield to the active and tender nature of his former wife, which is a humiliating act for a man characterized by toxic and fragile effects of Victorian masculinity:

...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... (Browning, as cited in Loucks, 1979)

His obsession with control of the feminine and dominance of the masculinity leads him, ostensibly, to commit a murderous crime in an implicit way by giving commands and having his last duchess killed. Masculinity is generally vindicated through disordered structures. Ranging from sex offenders to violent offenders, violence is totally constructed upon the representation of the element of masculinity (Edwards, 1987, p. 153). Likewise, The Duke illustrates his wife as a bad model not to be envied by the future wife; otherwise, he implies that the new wife will, also, encounter the same fatal outcome as the former, inevitably, did (Keach, 1996, p. 624). In order to consolidate his masculinity and reputation full of honour, the Duke chooses to embrace an active personality, which coincides, essentially, with patriarchal codes of the era, reducing the duchess to passivity by means of a brutal act. Victimized his last wife owing to the growing repression of toxic masculinity within the period, The Duke strives to disguise his implicit crime through a polite language and does not want to accept his cruelty as a man of nobility:

The Count your master's known munificence
Is ample warrant that no just pretence
Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;
Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed
At starting, is my object... (Browning, as cited in Loucks, 1979)

With regard to social codes requiring the subservience and passivity of the femalehood in the nineteenth century of England, the Duke of Ferrara speaks, publicly, to the messenger of the Count of his intentions about his future wife. In opposition to immense dowry which will be transferred to the Duke himself, he focuses, mainly, on servility of the Count's daughter saying that her identity will be an "*object*" of me through a wordplay, an objectification which could be seen in his aim to have his last duchess objectified within a portraiture. The repression of women is derived from not biological aspects but the societal

norms; from the institutions governed by males, not patriarchal individuals; from the production of cultural organization, not the physical occurrences between women and men; from the social and cultural construction of gender such as masculinity and femininity as a boundary. The male is thought to be subject and active, but the female is object and other (Edwards, 1987, p. 16). The Duke's tendency to possess woman's self and autonomy is revealed through his use of "my", possessive pronoun, helping him establish a control and supremacy over his wives as a matter of object:

...Nay, we'll go
Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though,
Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me! (Browning, as cited in Loucks, 1979)

Here, at the end of the poem, the poetic persona speaks, again, of an artistic work, Neptune taming a sea-horse. King (1968) argues, in *The Focusing Artifice: The Poetry of Robert Browning*, that "the artistry of the object suggests a certain perverse beauty in the Duke and explains partly why we have been temporarily captivated by him. Upon reflection, he is likely to seem repugnant" (p. 69). It is quite clear that the Duke symbolizes himself as Neptune, a Roman God of the sea and water known for his disciplined and combative nature. As opposed to masculine and mighty features of Neptune, a sea-horse, which can be associated with his future wife, is, on the other hand, depicted as a creature tamed by Neptune, thereby showing how he reinforces his strength and dominance over his female peers embracing the role of a God emphasizing his "control" with the last words of the poem "for me". The end of the poem occurs, therefore, as a possible warning for the future wife corresponding to the yoke of marriage ruled by the Duke himself.

Women as The Victims of Male Violence in "Porphyria's Lover"

Written in 1836, six years before the publication of "My Last Duchess", *Porphyria's Lover* is, too, a piece of poem belonging to the tradition of dramatic monologue, a poem taking as its subject matter the abnormal and toxic relationship between the poetic persona and Porphyria, a Victorian woman, who does not primarily comply with the moral propriety of the nineteenth century. Jennifer Gribble (2003) claims, in *Subject and Power in Porphyria's Lover*, that like *My Last Duchess*, a discourse of adoption, in *Porphyria's Lover*, is unraveled through which the male gaze reinforces the supremacy and dominion. However, the adoption is, in *Porphyria's Lover*, eventually fulfilled through the dissolution of a sexual intercourse from moral propriety and social norms regarding the sexual repression (p. 28). Coming into existence in 1836, a year which can be considered as a threshold between the Romantic period and the Victorian era, the poem shows, intrinsically, how both romantic impulses and societal norms clash within a psychological depth. Porphyria seems to represent what is advocated by the Romantics with her subjective feelings bereft of any repression of the society, but the male speaker, on the other hand, is haunted by social expectations and convention of the nineteenth century related to the extramarital sexual intercourse and to the femininity. As Barnhill (2005) suggests, "...In contrast to the Victorian ideal, the woman who contravened the idealized conception of womanhood, whether by sexual misconduct or criminal act, was viewed as deviant and unnatural. She represented an unsettling anomaly that both repelled and fascinated the Victorians" (p. 4). Accordingly, Porphyria, a seductive woman compared to the term "angel in the house" characterized by her chastity, could be depicted as a counter argument to what a Victorian man expects from his beloved. Considering her independent and sensual nature, which contrasts with the ideals of the Victorian period, Porphyria becomes victimized and murdered by her lover, a violent act reinforced by a fragile or toxic masculinity:

The rain set early in to-night,

The sullen wind was soon awake,
It tore the elm-tops down for spite,
And did its worst to vex the lake:

I listened with heart fit to break. (Browning, as cited in Loucks, 1979)

Beginning with an atmosphere harsh and eerie, an atmosphere resembling those of the Gothic and Romantic, the poetic persona might be argued to set his poetic discourse in a mood characterized by its contradictory features such as "sullen wind" and "rain", a series of Romantic impetus, against the Victorian period. Therefore, it might be a psychological reflection of what is repressed in the speaker's psyche, his repressed desires, and cultural anxieties concerning him and the intercourse with his lover, an illicit rendezvous in the midst of a Gothic atmosphere. Their wild and so called "anomalous" feelings, when compared to the taboos of the era, are represented through a symbolic weather. Moreover, the opening of the poem, associated with a dark and gloomy mood, might be interpreted as the prophecy of what would happen throughout the monologue as a matter awakening both "terror" and "horror". The speaker could, inevitably, refer to the contradiction present between the nature and society, a contrast torn between the Romantic impulses and Victorian ideals:

When glided in Porphyria; straight
She shut the cold out and the storm,
And kneeled and made the cheerless grate

Blaze up, and all the cottage warm; (Browning, as cited in Loucks, 1979)

After her arrival at the cottage resided by the speaker, Porphyria, a woman expected by the society to embrace the ideals of an "angel in the house", makes the place more home-like, warm, and cheerful. In the Victorian era, women are expected to commit themselves to the private sphere through which she is concerned with the order of housework, child-bearing, and comfort of her husband. Porphyria, similarly, creates both a physical and mental hearth at which the speaker feels delighted as a male:

She put my arm about her waist,
And made her smooth white shoulder bare,
And all her yellow hair displaced,
And, stooping, made my cheek lie there,
And spread, o'er all, her yellow hair,
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 forever. (Browning, as cited in Loucks, 1979)

As opposed to cultural taboos and social norms concerning the repressed sexuality, passivity, and chastity of womanhood, Porphyria appears to be self-willed and independently active in terms of her passions. She, accordingly, feels herself equal to her male beloved and is endowed with a masculine role starting an intimate occasion with a sexual connotation. Against the proscriptive conventions in terms of sexuality and out-of-wedlock relationship, Porphyria's attitude shows how Robert Browning constitutes a dichotomy between what is expected from women and a contradictory portrayal of female sexuality in the midst of a number of moral values advocated by the Queen herself in the nineteenth century. "Too weak, for all her heart's endeavor, to set its struggling passion free from pride" symbolizes whether she loves him in truth, although she is a bit weak to break the ties from societal expectations or family affairs, forcing her to preserve her pride and virtue. However, Porphyria is, from the beginning, seen as someone with an active role, since she makes the fire and adjusts his arms murmuring how she loves him, unlike the male speaker whose character is not still revealed, which makes him a passive object directed by a female:

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. (Browning, as cited in Loucks, 1979)

It is obvious that the male speaker musters his courage and becomes able to look at her eyes after convincing himself that she loves him really by arguing that she has come through wind and rain. Considered, at the beginning as "passive" and "sedentary", he embraces a masculine role imposed by sexual and conventional codes of the Victorian era. "Men who received the benefits of patriarchy without enacting a strong version of masculine dominance could be regarded as showing a complicit masculinity" (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832). Thus, he strives to decide what to do in return for her subservience and commitment to her love for him in contrast to Victorian norms requiring her to oppress her feelings and self:

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.
As a shut bud that holds a bee.
I warily oped her lids: again
Laughed the blue eyes without a stain. (Browning, as cited in Loucks, 1979)

Besides a shift from Porphyria's active role to passivity, his repetition consisting of "mine, mine" might be believed to stand for a sexual connotation referring to their sexual intercourse against the social codes in terms of nonmarital sexuality. Jennifer Gribble (2003), also, states that the poetic persona vindicates the contradictory notions between a coarse romanticism and class, gender, moral, and religious conceptions of the propriety of the Victorian era. The poem examines the structures of the identity by which the male speaker, as his lover, converts eagerness in obedience through a verbal structure (p. 31). Furthermore, she is reduced to a mere object possessed by the male speaker emphasizing that he owns her eventually. Whether out of his disturbed consciousness repressed by the moralist society or his anomalous psychology, he strangles her and compares her to "a bud that holds a bee". Criticizing the concept of toxic masculinity by means of its stereotypical use in terms of violence and crime, Collier (1998) argues that hegemonic masculinity began to be characterized by such negative features of manhood as unemotional, independent, non-nurturing, aggressive, and dispassionate, a series of causes accounting for the criminal act (p. 21). His cruel behavior, a condition associated with the impacts of toxic masculinity such as domination, aggression, and domination, is derived from his abnormal desire to turn her into a muted object and to possess her love as the mere recipient as a man of pride:

Her head, which droops upon it still:
The smiling rosy little head,
So glad it has its utmost will,
That all it scorned at once is fled,
And I, its love, am gained instead! (Browning, as cited in Loucks, 1979)

His subject and possessive pronouns comprised of "it" and "its" prove to consolidate the fact that she has been turned into an object of the male and of his desire, unlike the beginning of the monologue surrounded by such words as "she" and "her", which means

Porphyria, while she has an autonomous identity at first, loses, gradually, her subjectivity to the dominance and violence of her lover. The speaker's abnormal masculinity victimizes and objectifies his precious beloved as a silent object, a corpse, and achieves a great degree of dominance over her, which is a symbolic representation of how women, as submissive and silent figures, in the nineteenth century were treated at the hands of men:

Porphyria's love: she guessed not how
Her darling one wish would be heard.
And thus we sit together now,
And all night long we have not stirred,
And yet God has not said a word! (Browning, as cited in Loucks, 1979)

The end of the poem establishes, ostensibly, a ground through which Robert Browning criticizes stereotypical codes of the Victorian era in terms of sexuality, women's role in the society, and men's dominance over women. "God" in the last line could be interpreted as the voice of the society and moral values, since the Victorian society is, normally, against the public relationship out of marriage, an illicit convergence symbolized in the lines "and thus we sit together now, and all night we have not stirred". "These lines suggest not so much guilt or defiance, as the expectation that God will not say a word. If God progressively absents himself in nineteenth century discourse, this is perhaps because the religious function is being usurped by the power of other discourses operating on social experience" (Gribble, 2003, p. 31). On the other hand, it might be suggested that "God" is used in its literal meaning in order to imply that the male's violence and criminal act are absolved in accordance with the fact that the masculinity they own deprive them of any accusation or punishment.

Conclusion

Based on the violent and oppressive treatment of women by their male lovers, characterized by the characteristics of toxic masculinity, both "My Last Duchess" and "Porphyria's Lover" deploy a poetic framework reflecting the social structure of gender relations in the nineteenth century, a structure manifesting itself in the contradiction between women, silent and passive, and men, active and authoritarian. The Duke of Ferrara and Porphyria's lover construct a male dominance and supremacy over their female partners through the enforcement of toxic masculinity, resulting in the exploitation and homicide of the female figures. Constructing the two poems on the level of misogynist and hegemonic patriarchy, Browning, primarily, criticizes the hypocritical society of the Victorian era in terms of women's role and moralist outlook, since the morality they advocate cultivates in the eventual victimization of women. Suffering from the anxiety of emasculation, the male speakers in these dramatic monologues strive to consolidate their authority and active role within the social sphere by means of criminal and aggressive acts directed towards innocent women. Therefore, "My Last Duchess" and "Porphyria's Lover" emerge, implicitly, as a social commentary on men's violence and women's objectification through the masks of male persona, thereby leading to the exploration of the socio-cultural construction of toxic masculinity.

References

- Adler, J. (1977). Structure and Meaning in Browning's "My Last Duchess". *Victorian Poetry*, 15(3), 219-227.
- Auerbach, N. (1982). *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth*. Boston: Harvard UP.
- Barnhill, G. H. (2005). *Fallen Angels: Female Wrongdoing in Victorian Novels* (Unpublished master's thesis). University of Lethbridge, Lethbridge.
- Collier, R. (1998). *Masculinities, Crime and Criminology: Men, Heterosexuality and the Criminal(ised) Other*. London: Sage Publications.
- Connell, R. W. (2001). Understanding Men: Gender Sociology and the New International Research on Masculinities. *Social Thought and Research*, 24(1/2), 13-31.
- Connell, R. W., & Messerschmidt, J. W. (2005). Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept. *Gender and Society*, 19(6), 829-859.
- Coyle, M. (1984). *Literary Terms and Criticism*. London: Macmillan.
- Cunningham, V. (2007). Why Ekphrasis?. *Classical Philology*, 102(1), 57-71.
- Davidoff, L. (1979). Class and Gender in Victorian England: The Diaries of Arthur J. Munby and Hannah Cullwick. *Feminist Studies*, 5(1), 86-141.
- Edwards, A. (1987). Male Violence in Feminist Theory: An Analysis of the Changing Conceptions of Sex/Gender Violence and Male Dominance. J. Hanmer & M. Maynard (Ed.), In *Women, Violence and Social Control* (p. 13-29). London: British Sociological Association.
- Edwards, S. S. (1987). 'Provoking Her Own Demise': From Common Assault to Homicide. J. Hanmer & M. Maynard (Ed.), In *Women, Violence and Social Control* (p. 152-168). London: British Sociological Association.
- Ehrenreich, B., & English, D. (2005). *For Her Own Good: Two Centuries of the Experts' Advice to Women*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Garratt, R. F. (1973). Browning's Dramatic Monologue: The Strategy of the Double Mask. *Victorian Poetry*, 11(2), 115-125.
- Gribble, J. (2003). Subject and Power in "Porphyria's Lover". *Sydney Studies in English*, 29, 17-29.
- Keach, W., Richetti, J. J., Robbins, B., and Moulton, C. (1996). *Adventures in English Literature*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- King, R. A. (1968). *The Focussing Artifice: The Poetry of Robert Browning*. Ohio: Ohio

University Press.

Loucks, J. F. (1979). *Robert Browning's Poetry*. New York: W.W. Norton.

Marsh, J. (1987). *Pre-Raphaelite Women: Images of Femininity in Pre-Raphaelite Art*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson.

Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema. L. Braudy, M. Cohen (Ed.), In *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings* (p. 833-844). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Spencer, E. (2010). The Ambiguity of Violence in the Poetry of Robert Browning. *Ambiguity and the Search for Meaning: Vol. 1*. In *English and American Studies at the Beginning of the 21st Century* (p. 133-143). Kraków: Jagiellonian University Press.

Zedner, L. (1991). *Women, Crime and Custody in Victorian England*. Oxford: Oxford UP.