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**INSIGHT MEETS JUDGEMENT: EXPLORING DISTORTED SUBJECTIVITY IN
BROWNING'S DRAMATIC MONOLOGUES**

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Abstract

Dramatic monologues stand unique in the arena of poetry. This perhaps becomes more intense when it comes to Robert Browning's dramatic monologues. They are particularly interesting as they act like the mirror of both inner and outer image of an individual. This research paper will try to delve deeper into the complex understanding of Speaker's persona. The first section of the paper will thus evidence that how dramatic monologue of the Victorian age has gradually developed from the poetry of romantic age and then gradually establish that how Browning's comes up with own concept and purpose of writing dramatic monologue. The second section will further move to explore that how the subjectivity of the speaker is distorted which will be again evidenced through different ways. The paper will also try to indulge into the crucial factor of insight and judgment where they cross their paths at various situations. The research paper will thus cater mainly to "My Last Duchess" and "Porphyria's Lover" during thematic discussion.

Keywords: Robert Browning, Dramatic Monologue, Subjectivity, My Last Duchess, Porphyria's Lover

Whenever we come across the name dramatic monologue, the name Robert Browning never stops ringing. It is not that he has invented the genre; rather he is the one who has given deeper level of meaning. And such meaning always incorporates double meaning at the heart of the poem. Even though the poems of Browning reflect the usual definition of dramatic monologue by M.H. Abram's in his eponymous work *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (1956) yet the poems mysteriously explore that how self in Browning is critically judged both in its interior and exterior form. And strangely within such critical judgement of insight often a distorted portrait of subjectivity is revealed. The current research thus mainly intend to start with the development of Browning's poetry which is a way farther than his predecessors from Romantic age

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and then gradually move to Robert Browning's concept of distorted subjectivity in his dramatic monologues. And then taking cue from there the paper will thus elaborately discuss that how there is exploration of such distorted subjectivity and also how insight meets judgement, mainly pertaining to two case studies: "My Last Duchess" and "Porphyria's Lover".

Dramatic monologue has its influences from Romantic poetry like Tzvetan Todorov mentions in his 'The Origin of Genres', "a new genre is always the transformation of one or several old genres: by inversion, by displacement, by combination" (161). This very line seems to support the study of development of dramatic monologue which is also the hybrid between lyric, drama and narrative. As such it makes dramatic monologue as a transitional genre from the lyrical poetry of Romantic age and also a variation of later modernist experimentations. So, the Romantic lyric subjectivity often becomes the direct expression of the poet's feelings and thoughts. This give a situation where there is elevation and autobiographical identification of the lyric poet and thus "gradually produces" an emotion, similar to the original in his mind (756). This further allows the lyric speaker face the tragic loss wherein he either makes a moral decision, or resolves an emotional problem. Thus 'I' moves inward by engaging with exteriority and thus finally subjecting the sameness of

the self inwards towards assimilation with the inner self. Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" (1798), Coleridge's "The Eolian Harp" (1796), Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" (1820), Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" (1819) are such poems where lyric speaker appear descriptive or meditative and thus presents,

"... a determinate speaker in a particularized, and usually a localized, outdoor setting, whom we overhear as he carries on, in a fluent vernacular which rises easily to a more formal speech, a sustained colloquy, sometimes with himself or with the outer scene, but more frequently with a silent human auditor, present or absent"(Abrams, 527-60)

However, unlike in lyric poetry, the dramatic monologue foregoes the unitary bond between the poet and the speaker. A break from the romantic poetry is visibly clear where there a clear line between the personal and subjective lyric. The focus is mainly an attempt to establish a relationship between self and historical/social contexts. Secondly, there is also a clear distinction between the speaker's character and that of the poet's. It is the outpouring of the words of the speaker that enables the listener/reader to perceive or get a psychological insight of the speaker as well as his social nature. And this has been taken

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altogether to a new experimental form by Robert Browning.

As we move towards the next section of the development of the genre of dramatic monologue, one will gradually come to terms that how Robert Browning has come up with his own recipe of distinct and perhaps own variation of the dramatic monologue form. A closer look at early works of Browning, similar to that of Alfred Tennyson will clearly associate that his works are reflection of Victorian concerns and uncertainties where the speaker become the mouthpiece of changing social conditions.

The confessional poem, “ Pauline: A Fragment of a Confession” (1833), Byronic closet drama in “Paracelsus”(1835), Shakespearean tragedy “ Strafford”(1837), epic narrative “ Sordello”(1840) and even the closet drama, narrative and lyric in “ Pippa Passes” (1841)attempt to highlight various Victorian uncertainties. However, it is Browning’s experimentation with the genre which attempt to dissect the relation of the modern poet to the audience who is aware of “The vaunted influence poets have o’er men”. This self-mocking statement of the speaker in Pauline also reveals Browning’s concern over the tyrannical nature of poetic imagination which “make/All bow enslaved”. His “Pauline” can also serve as the first attempt of Browning who intends

to question the authority and value of the Romantic egotistical sublime. Even though the speaker in the poem boasts of his desire for knowledge yet there always remains a gap where this poetic genius remains “Existing as centre to all things/Most potent to create and rule” (NP, ND). In his “Paracelsus”, Browning almost succeeded to maintain a distance from the central speaker. This is successfully done by introducing other speakers thereby reducing the speaker’s voice to one voice among many. By doing this, he successfully establishes a connection between the poet and the reader. This eventually reveals Browning’s purpose as he mentions:

“It is certain. . . that a work like mine depends more immediately [than acted drama] on the intelligence and sympathy of the reader for its success—indeed were my scenes stars it must be his co-operating fancy which, supplying all

chasms, shall connect the scattered lights into a constellation—a Lyre or a Crown” (Woolford, 55-75)In his next project “Sordello”, Browning appears to clearly forego the authoritative coercive role of the poet. However, there was failure in this shared meaning making process. Perhaps he has found that the real concern is not its obscure plot but rather its mediations on poetic authority. His onstage dramas like *Strafford* (1837), *King Victor and King*

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Charles (1842), *The Return of the Druses* (1843), *A Blot in Scutcheon* (1843), *Colombe's Birthday* (1844) all failed on stage because they were deficient in action and clarity. Perhaps the reason of such failure is his interest more in subtle and complex motivations of individual character than dramatic action. This single pattern of Browning's "incidents in the development of a soul" (772-787) merges with his famous thought of 'Action in character' (Petch, 37) and finally finds its way in his dramatic monologues. This again calls for the distinction between objective and subjective poet. In a letter to Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Robert Browning mentions his intention of separating poet nature from subjective to objective, "*You speak out, you, - I only make men & women speak - give you truth broken into prismatic hues, and fear the pure white light, even if it is in me*" (7). So, for Browning, subjective poet which is also a through romantic ideal "digs where he stands,- preferring to seek them in his own soul as the nearest reflex of that absolute Mind, according to the institutions of which he desires to perceive and speak" (King, 138-139). However, Browning opted to remain as objective poet as "one whose endeavour [was] to reproduce things external (whether the phenomena of the scenic universe, or the manifested action of the human heart and brain)" for the "better apprehension of his fellow men" (King, 137-139). So his speakers are way

different from the poet's choice and organization. Speakers are thus presented at the moments of their self-depiction and unconscious self-revelation. So this leaves us with egoist, jealous, possessive Duke in "My Last Duchess" (1842), a jealous lover of Porphyria in "Porphyria's Lover" (1842). We also have a failed painter in "Pictor Ignotus" (1845) who suffers identity crisis. The dying Bishop uses his final moments to brood over his animosities and his petty vanities in "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church" (1845). Roland is projected as an exhausted, lonely, impotent character in "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" (1855). The crux of the discussion here is to highlight that the speakers not only voices from outside but from the inside as well. The double meaning of the speaker often reveals his state of loneliness, fearfulness, futile aspirations and difficulties. Perhaps the main intention is to expose the distorted image of the speaker who finds it hard to hold their complex status. And even Walter Bagehot in his essay "Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Browning, or, Pure, ornate, and grotesque art in English poetry" (1864) talks about the difficult speaker, awkward situations and even ugly elements in Browning's poetry in contrast with the pure and ornate style of Wordsworth and Tennyson.

Before moving further with the distorted subjectivity in Robert Browning's dramatic monologue let us first elaborate

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the distinction between the subjective poet and objective poet. A simple definition by William A. Cohen (2009) might clear us with subjectivity as “literary writing [that] gives voice to ideas about the correspondence between an interior self and outer form, [and which] describes the internal experience of the self” (6). He further adds “when interiority itself is taken as a subject of cultural studies, it is often treated merely as a synonym for subjectivity” (146). However, unlike a subjective writer who is mainly concerned with the internal world of his own self rather than the external world of other people, an objective writer as Jacob Korg (1977) says, “has a superior perception of externals and deals with them ... in a way that is accessible to a broad public, concerning himself with its response rather than with the expression of his own attitudes” (155).

Now taking cue from here, one can deduce that Browning’s chose to remain objective but portrays his speaker as subjective in nature where the speaker gives voice to his inner self. The point which makes it more remarkable is the individual identity which clashes with the prevailing system of belief and emotional needs. The individual mind and its workings are more prominently revealed under unbalanced state of mind and under awkward situations. So this gives us mad lover in “Porphyria’s Lover”, egoist and jealous husband in “My

Last Duchess ”, thwarted monk in “Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister” (1842), subhuman reasoning of Caliban in “Caliban upon Setebos”(1864) and even delusional knight in “Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came”. The point is that how subjectivity is influenced by own personal feelings, tastes and opinions so much so that each individual is owner of his own choice, feelings and actions even it is against the prevailing norms of the society. This ultimately lead the individual or the speaker into a state of dilemma between the interior self and outer representation to the extent that, “as if we all existed from birth as separate, isolated individuals already containing ‘minds’ or ‘mentalities’ wholly within ourselves, set over against a material world itself devoid of any mental processes” (Shotter,136). This in turn results in exploring the disembodied and distorted world of subjectivity in its own individualistic way.

Robert Browning’s uniqueness lies in the fact that he is shrewd enough to step into the troubled mind of the speaker yet detaches himself from the subject. This in turn facilitates the revelation of subjectivity of the speaker and thus disclosing the ironic mannerisms and motives of the speaker. The three mantras that he follows is “expose” (Armstrong, 13), “distance” (Knoepflmacher, 141), and “reveal” (Langbaum, 85). It helps to explore the way the individuals project their subjectivity

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which dwell in the world of dualisms. For instance, the Duke in “My Last Duchess” reveal his desire to marry for the second time yet he does not fail to show his egoism, vanity and jealousy. Even “Porphyria’s Lover” justifies the murder yet there lurks the hint of complex and jealousy. The purpose serves as ideal medium to serve the dark and distorted side of human nature. Browning achieves this by revealing a number of ways in the exploration of such grisly image of individuals. Hence, will deal with mainly two Dramatic monologues “ Porphyria’s Lover” and “ My Last Duchess” where we will get know that how Browning explore the distorted mind through a number of ways.

Firstly, Browning attempts to explore the irrational state of mind of the speakers. This means that the dramatic monologues reveal the disturbed and alienated minds of the speakers, here; Duke and Porphyria’s lover. Here, both the speakers do not hesitate and regret the cold blooded murders of the live women and thus turn them into a dead object. Duke in “My last Duchess” reasons with,

“...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? ...” (32-
35)

The same tone is located in the irrational lover of Porphyria in “Porphyria’s Lover”, where a working class man strangles his woman of love to keep her truthful and faithful. He reasonably justifies his act is to preserve her “Perfectly pure and good” (37). Such irrational subjectivity leaves no room for reciprocity. The primal focus of both the speakers is the desire to possess and control. Psychopath Duke and madman Porphyria’s lover indeed reveal the alienated and disarrayed minds.

Secondly, Browning explores the motivation and also the state of mind. A closer study of the dramatic monologues will reflect that the evil in all develop in similar minds with similar motivation. Interestingly, this is often revealed through the speaker’s own words. It is while displaying the flaws and faults of other people they in turn divulge their own cruel intentions. However, this happens exactly to the speaker’s own intentions. Duke, even though he possess as a dominating strength of will yet he does not fail to reveal his narcissist and insecure state of his own self-image- “nine-hundred- years-old name” (33). Duke’s assertion of his wife’s infidelity -“her looks went everywhere” (24) somersault back again on Duke’s actual motive. He in a way prefers his Duchess to live, love, laugh and have “that spot of joy” in “Her Husband’s presence only” (14-15). Similarly, we have Porphyria’s lover whose intentions are equally devastating in nature. Story of a

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rich girl in love with poor guy takes a twisted turn by the speaker's complex and imbalance state of mind which cooks up with jealousy, insecurity, and fear to lose his beloved. 'Porphyria worshipped me' is perhaps not enough so much so that his 'his heart swell' and 'debated what to do'. Consequently, in order to preserve her 'blue eyes', 'blush', 'smooth white shoulder', 'yellow hair', the lover find it apt to 'wound Three times her little throat around and strangled her' (32-40). This incidence also complements Duke's action which further determines a common thread of jealousy, control, possessiveness, inferiority complex between the two states of mind. It is thus striking to note that both the speakers may be irrational yet are very much stable. Porphyria's lover and Duke, both are well aware of what they are doing, what they did and what they are speaking. The question is Porphyria's lover is lunatic but is he evil? Is it not his sin of jealousy which caused him to kill his lover? Duke in "My Last Duchess" is again altogether on a different scale. He is both sane and evil at the same time. Browning portrays him as one character who is undoubtedly alienated yet he does not confess his cruelty, vanity and also murder of his own wife. This reminds Gardner's comment that the Duke is "monomaniacal sociopath" (36) who is motivated by his extreme jealousy towards his wife and also by his intense desire to control her actions and behaviour so much so the defiance puts his wife to death.

Robert Browning's Dramatic monologues replete with jealous husbands, murderers, mean, manipulative, sadistic characters. This is pretty interesting because all information about the speaker comes from the speaker himself. It is also important to realize that it is also through the speakers one comes to know about the speaker's personalities where some appear accurate and some under suspicion. This in turn puts the speaker under the scanner of 'unreliable' narrator. Point to note is that the speakers are here to justify their own set of actions which in turn reveal the villainous nature of the speakers. Throughout "My Last Duchess", it is Duke who indirectly informs the reader about himself which is distorted in every possible ways:

 "...She liked whate'er
 She looked on, and her looks
went everywhere.
 ... 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 keeps complaining and pointing out the flaws of his wife. But on the flip side it is the Duke and his jealous, distorted

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mentality which forbids even his wife's love for inanimate objects. Everything that his wife loves is a sight of disgrace for the Duke. His unpleasant traits and disliking towards wife's charming attitude compels him to take dire action of silencing his wife forever,

"I gave commands/ Then all smiles stopped together" (45-46)

Even the similar attitude is observed in Porphyria's lover who is no saint. He is a murderer who is either insane or like Duke a cold blood murderer. Yet, the unnamed lover does not fail to justify his actions,

"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)

And now a glance at the line interestingly raises a question. How can he be so sure that she felt no pain? Is it not the sense of betrayal, betrayal of true love and trust put to end in those 'three times'? This at once establishes the speaker as one who exhibit intense obsession which can either

be by an act of insanity or pure wickedness. And even if he is insane then it is his irrational, disturbed mind which made him to choose evil. The Duke and Porphyria's lover display their inefficiency to tolerate goodness, love and faith. And this is only possible when one stops thinking rationally and is dominated by own selfish concerns. And this is further sought by distorted subjectivity in a world of moral ambivalence. The discussion until now mainly caters to distorted subjectivity which is aberrant and socially marginal. All the perverse attributes of jealousy, hatred, murder, madness, failure reveal the speaker's true self. This in turn gives ample room to the readers to confront and also reveal the speaker's distorted subjectivity.

The second part of the discussion will try to establish that how the two factors- insight and judgement are always crossing their paths. Firstly, a closer look at "My Last Duchess" and " Porphyria's Lover" might not leave one surprised that the speakers are in fact having a clear, deep understanding of their stated complicated problem or situation. The Duke and Porphyria's lover desire to possess the lover whom they choose to kill. This in turn gives them both the motive and solution to their situation. It primarily occurs by preserving the moment where they feel 'she' completely surrenders. In Duke's case, wife is killed and her portrait is hung across the wall behind the curtain; a curtain rose only with due permission from the Duke himself.

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And in “Porphyria’s Lover”, the lover finds Porphyria ‘happy and proud’ (32) and thus let accept her fate by strangling with her own lock of hair. Both the act seems “culminating expression’ of the speaker’s love for her, in an attempt to ‘preserve unchanged the perfect moment of her surrender to him” (Langbaum, 88). However, there arises the complex situation of reader who finds speaker as unreliable narrator. Thereby, speaker’s justifications apparently fail to dominate reader’s logical reasoning and their insight and judgments. So, the readers may find Duke as egoist and jealous husband while Porphyria’s lover seems to be driven by insanity coupled with inferiority complex and jealousy. Second emphasis is on the speaker’s ability to subject the listener towards his own logical reasoning. That means the only way to understand, interpret and judge speaker’s nature of subjectivity is through the speaker himself. Both the discussed dramatic monologues mention their actions and emotions. And this expression is in a retrospective manner where they retell in calm and chronological manner the events that led the Duke and Porphyria’s lover kill Duchess and Porphyria respectively. This again brings back to the speaker’s dominion over his narrative which always downplays their concept of insight and judgments. And with this one can also relate the use of irony in Browning’s dramatic monologues. In this context of discussion, “My Last Duchess” and “Porphyria’s Lover” project the ironical

condition of speaker’s insight and judgement. To what extent Duke’s silencing his wife and Lover sealing the love of Porphyria forever is justifiable remains a controversial question. Speakers find their actions best suited for their lovers but if looked from reader’s perspective they project themselves only as evil and mean minded personalities. So, even though women are dead, their portrait or body does no fail to make judgments among people where the human perception can never be restored to whiteness. So, the use of irony creates a complex position between insight and judgment on both sides of speaker and reader/listener. On one side, the reader/listener incessantly is drawn towards speaker’s mindset, own world where speaker’s insight meets his proclaimed judgment. Yet again, on the other side the irony distance the reader/listener away from the speaker and thus renders judgment of the speaker from their own critical insight. That makes elegant, strong willed, sophisticated Duke turn into egoist, possessive and jealous husband. This same criticality turns an ardent lover into insane and disturbed individual. So when Duke tells us of his reasonableness, we see his irrationality; while he implies generosity to his first wife, we see his blind desire to control another human being within the confines of his own will.

As we come to the concluding section, there are certain key points that can

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add more scores to the researched area. A situation of ambiguousness is established at the premise of the insight where it meets judgement while exploring the distorted subjectivity within dramatic monologues of Robert Browning. If one looks closely, there is the factor of realization that self's perception time is transformed; that is the future or present in the poem is simply portrayed as infinite duplication of past. This in turn perhaps ironically brings to surface the fractured self which otherwise create a horrific profundity that the self finds it impossible to contain. The distinction between past self and present self consciously or unconsciously reveals as irrevocable breach. So this again leaves us again with two questions; whether the current self is still caught in the past? As we see that how the Duke is still haunted by the gaze of his last dead Duchess through her portrait across the wall. Question also arises that whether repetitious past ever bygone from the present? Perhaps, this can be observed as self which is either evolving or devolving in Duke's the loss of '900 years old name' (33) and in Porphyria's lover. It appears that this premonition; feeling of something unpleasant happening seems to elude the speaker to their irrational logic where the character of Browning is pit against a situation and which also demand that the character fight for psychological survival (Garratt, 1973)

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