



# The Miserable condition of women in the poems of Robert Browning

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**Abstract :** Robert Browning's poetry often portrays women in complex and multifaceted ways, exploring their lives within the restrictive and oppressive societal conditions of the Victorian era. While Browning sometimes idealized women or presented them as figures of strength and resilience, his poems also frequently delve into the miserable conditions women endured due to patriarchy, emotional manipulation, and social conventions. Robert Browning, a prominent Victorian poet, is known for his dramatic monologues that often delve into the complexities of human psychology. While he didn't exclusively focus on the "miserable condition of women," several of his poems offer insightful commentary on the restrictive roles and tragic fates that women could face in that era. Many of Browning's female characters are confined by societal expectations and patriarchal structures. They often lack autonomy and are subject to the control and judgment of men. In "My Last Duchess," the Duke's possessive nature and his need to control his wife's behavior ultimately lead to her demise. The poem highlights the objectification of women and their treatment as possessions. "Porphyria's Lover" presents a disturbing scenario where the speaker, obsessed with preserving a perfect moment, murders his lover. This reveals the extreme consequences of male dominance and the inability of women to escape such control.

**Keywords :** Patriarchy, Oppression, Objectification, Silencing, Possessiveness, Control, Subjugation, Victimization, Autonomy, Agency, Misogyny, Dependency, Violence, Power imbalance, Psychological exploitation, Social constraints, Economic vulnerability, Jealousy, Despair, Erasure, Tragic fates, Male dominance, Emotional torment, Critique of gender norms, Female suffering, Victorian society, Idealization, Manipulation, Gender inequality, Cultural critique

**Article :** Much of Browning's poetry reveals his concern for women's liberty, freedom of action, their concern for patriotic achievements, and of course, their ability to undertake masculine roles with the aim of forging a more progressive society. This paper examines a masculine action taken by a female character, women and patriotism, and how Browning's use of language reveals his feminism. Lastly, the paper examines some autobiographical facts in these two related epic poems : "Balaustion's Adventure Including a Transcript from Euripides 1871" and "Aristophanes' Apology Including a Transcript from Euripides Being the Last Adventure of Balaustion 1875". The second poem "Aristophanes' Apology" is a

continuation of “Balaustion’s Adventure” as the title indicates. Briefly the poem “Balaustion’s Adventure” tells the story of how the Greek leader fell from power and the gradual rise of Balaustion to power in the Greek world. In this poem Browning tells us how Balaustion, a young Greek girl from Rhodes using Euripides as her idol and weapon, refuses to betray Athens by siding with Sparta after the defeat of the Greek leader Nikias by the Syracusans. She uses Euripides’ play *Alkestis* to persuade the Syracusans who want to prevent them from going to Athens and also to liberate Athens from Spartan occupation. The poem “Aristophanes’ Apology” describes Athens under the rule of Sparta when the comedian Aristophanes is at the apex of his career and fame. Balaustion sees the fall of Athens in the abandonment of tragedy in preference to the comedy of Aristophanes by the Athenians. The night of the death of Euripides, Aristophanes meets Balaustion and International Journal of English Robert Browning’s poetry intricately examines the miserable conditions of women in a patriarchal society, showcasing their emotional, physical, and psychological suffering. His dramatic monologues, while often narrated by male speakers, highlight the deep-rooted power imbalances and injustices faced by women. Through vivid and often disturbing depictions, Browning critiques the societal norms that silenced, objectified, and victimized women, inviting readers to reflect on the oppressive structures of his time. While he does not offer solutions, his works serve as a powerful commentary on the plight of women in the Victorian era and beyond. here is a confrontation between the two of them. Aristophanes knows that she is a disciple of Euripides whom he does not like and respect. This confrontation between Balaustion and Aristophanes is a conflict between the uses and greatnesses of tragedy and comedy. Just like it is a conflict between Balaustion and Aristophanes, it is also a conflict between Euripides and Aristophanes. During the confrontation between Balaustion and Aristophanes, Balaustion in order to show the greatness of Euripides reads a transcript of Euripides. This time it is not *Alkestis* in the first poem “Balaustion’s Adventure” but *Herakles* another play of Euripides. At the end of the conflict between the two, we are told by Balaustion that Athens has been liberated from Spartan rule through the action and influence of her husband, Euripides and above all Balaustion herself. In an unsigned review in *The Saint James Magazine* one critic wrote :“Take Balaustion herself, for instance, she was a legend, a pretty old tradition, that was all. Now she is, she exists, she has an individuality, a personality that can never be obliterated, or taken away from her...”. Browning remained faithful to his dead wife Elizabeth Barrett Browning by not remarrying. J. M. Cohen writes :“The colour of the poem is not Greek but of nineteenth century. Admetos’ action in accepting *Alcestis*’ sacrifice is excused and explained not by the fact that he was obeying the instruction of Apollo, but by his promise to remain faithful to *Alcestis* after her death and to take no other wife : a justification very far from the spirit of Euripides” .“His feelings also dictate the form of Admetus’ speech over his dead wife, into which Browning puts all his own grief and resignation”. “There was a parallel, as he saw it, between his own loss of Elizabeth and the widowed condition of Admetos, whose wife has gone down into Hades, leaving him with her whole soul entered into his”.

## **Women as Victims of Male Possessiveness**

### **"My Last Duchess"**

- The Duke is an emblem of male entitlement and authoritarian control over women. He perceives the Duchess not as a person with agency but as a possession. Her

lively, kind nature—appreciating simple joys and treating everyone equally—offends the Duke because it diminishes his sense of superiority.

- The Duke's solution to his dissatisfaction is chilling: he arranges for her death. This reflects how women were often at the mercy of men, both emotionally and physically.
- Even after her death, the Duke controls her narrative through the painting, highlighting her erasure as an individual and her reduction to an object of display.

### **"Porphyria's Lover"**

- In this poem, the male speaker's possessiveness takes a horrifying turn. Unable to fully control Porphyria in life, he strangles her to preserve her purity and submission in death.
- Porphyria's passive portrayal after death underscores how women are often voiceless in Browning's works, with their stories dominated by male perspectives.
- The speaker's justification for his act—claiming she felt no pain—underscores the dehumanization and lack of consideration for women's experiences and autonomy.

### **Women as Silenced and Objectified Figures**

Browning's dramatic monologues frequently illustrate women being denied a voice:

- The speakers (men) narrate the lives of the women from their perspectives, silencing the women both literally and metaphorically.
- For instance, in "The Statue and the Bust", the woman is unable to pursue her love due to societal constraints, and the speaker implies that her inaction condemns her.

Women are reduced to objects of desire or symbols, devoid of their own individuality:

- "The Bishop Orders His Tomb" portrays women as mere ornaments in the Bishop's fantasies and life, serving to enhance his legacy rather than being recognized for their own merits or individuality.

### **Emotional and Psychological Exploitation**

#### **"Andrea del Sarto"**

- Lucrezia, the wife of Andrea, is a source of anguish for the painter. While Andrea faults her for his lack of artistic and personal fulfillment, it is clear that Lucrezia herself is trapped in an unfulfilling marriage.
- The poem subtly critiques the expectations placed on women to inspire and elevate men while their own needs are ignored.

#### **"The Laboratory"**

- Here, Browning explores the misery and desperation of a woman consumed by jealousy. The speaker, a woman plotting to poison her rival, is driven to madness by societal pressures to secure male attention and affection.
- This poem reflects how women's self-worth was often tied to male approval, leading to destructive emotional consequences.

### **Economic and Social Vulnerability**

In many of Browning's poems, women are depicted as economically or socially dependent on men, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation and oppression:

- In "The Ring and the Book", Pompilia is a victim of abuse and manipulation by her husband Guido. Her attempts to escape and seek justice highlight the vulnerability of women in an oppressive societal structure where their voices were often ignored.



## The Consequences of Patriarchal Expectations

### "Evelyn Hope"

- This poem captures a man's obsessive infatuation with a young girl. Though Evelyn is dead, the speaker claims ownership of her spirit, reflecting the patriarchal belief that women's lives and destinies are determined by male desires.
- Evelyn's lack of agency and the speaker's self-absorbed narrative emphasize the erasure of women's autonomy even in death.

### "Fra Lippo Lippi"

- While this poem focuses on the painter, it also highlights the commodification of women in religious and artistic contexts. Women are often depicted in idealized forms, stripped of individuality, and presented as symbols of purity or sin, based on male interpretations.

## The Critique of Victorian Gender Norms

Browning's poetry often indirectly critiques the rigid gender norms of the Victorian era:

- Women in his poems are frequently punished for stepping outside societal boundaries or failing to meet expectations. For example, Porphyria is punished for her assertiveness in initiating a relationship, and the Duchess in "My Last Duchess" is murdered for her independence of spirit.
- The portrayal of women's suffering calls attention to the inequalities they endured, subtly challenging the moral and social frameworks of his time.

## Women's Tragic Fates

Browning's female characters often meet tragic ends, underscoring the dire consequences of their marginalized positions:

- "The Ring and the Book": Pompilia's brutal murder by her husband epitomizes the vulnerability of women to male violence.
- "Porphyria's Lover" and "My Last Duchess" both present women who are killed by men who seek to control them.

In shorts, Browning masterfully explores the inner lives and psychological states of his female characters. He delves into their desires, frustrations, and struggles within their limited social spheres. In "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point," the speaker, a runaway slave woman, recounts her harrowing experiences of abuse and loss. The poem powerfully portrays the physical and emotional trauma inflicted upon women in vulnerable positions. While some of Browning's poems depict women in tragic circumstances, others present more complex and nuanced portrayals that challenge conventional gender roles. In "Andrea del Sarto," Lucrezia, the painter's wife, is depicted as a more assertive and worldly figure compared to her husband. Although their relationship is flawed, the poem offers a glimpse into a woman who exerts some influence within her marriage.

Browning's use of dramatic monologue allows him to create a distance between the speaker and the poet's own views. This encourages readers to critically analyze the characters' perspectives and draw their own conclusions about the situations presented.

The often unsettling and morally ambiguous nature of the poems forces readers to confront uncomfortable truths about power dynamics, gender inequality, and the human condition.

**Conclusion:** Browning's poems offer a valuable window into the lives of women in the Victorian era. While some of his female characters suffer tragic fates due to societal constraints and male dominance, others display resilience and complexity. By exploring

their inner lives and motivations, Browning challenges simplistic portrayals of women and invites readers to engage in critical reflection on gender roles and power dynamics. It's important to note that Browning's views on women have been subject to varying interpretations. Some critics argue that he reinforces patriarchal norms, while others contend that he offers subtle critiques of societal injustices. Regardless of interpretation, his poems remain powerful and thought-provoking explorations of the human experience, with a significant focus on the diverse and often challenging experiences of women.

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