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## Demon Lovers Versus Damsels in Distress: An Archetypal Reading of Robert Browning's *My last Duchess* and *Porphyria's Lover*

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**ABSTRACT.** Each literary work has a world of its own and discovering this world may seem undemanding and straightforward. By contrast, the realm of a literary work might be loaded with hints for a reader who has established a harmonious relationship with that world. The world depicted by the work may well encourage this reader to pass from the surface meaning toward the heart of the idea. This paper tries to reveal the secondary layer of meaning in two poems by Robert Browning, *My Last Duchess* and *Porphyria's Lover*, by focusing on the archetypal elements implemented in them. The recent study explores the archetypal characters playing their roles in the poem by focusing on old archetypes such as the Soul Mate, Damsel in Distress, Innocent youth and Demon Lover. Then it elaborates on the archetypal motifs or patterns such as immortality and scapegoat. Furthermore, the last part of discussion elaborates on Jung's principal archetypes (shadow, persona, and anima) and his theory of individuation.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Archetypal literary criticism is a type of critical theory that interprets a text by focusing on "recurring myths, narratives, symbols, images and character types in a literary work". Such recurrent items are "the result of elemental and universal forms or patterns in the human psyche" because the reader "shares the psychic archetypes expressed by the author" (Abrams 13). These universal symbols are held to be fundamental since they are regarded as "the dramatic representation" of man in the universe (Guerin et al. 183). Jung (1875-1961), one of the prominent contributors to myth criticism, believed in racial memory, primordial images or archetypes. In Gray's words, Jung used the term "*primordial image* to describe patterns of meaning that seemed to reappear consistently in myths, dreams and legends, independent of cultural transmission" (38). Jung expanded Freud's theory of unconscious and elaborated on some principal archetypes such as shadow, persona, and anima in his *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* (1954). As he further asserts, "repression, fixation, identification, or denial of those aspects of psychological process, leads to the ills which modern society suffers from", the same failure the sufferers in *My Last Duchess* and *Porphyria's Lover* are doomed to face (Eisendrath and Dawson 74).

"When Browning published the first dramatic monologues in January 1836, he placed them under the combined heading "Madhouse Cells" ... which marks his attempt to educate his reader concerning the centrality to his genre of ... "abnormal mental states"" (Pearsall 73). In his *Porphyria's Lover* and *My Last Duchess*, both the Duke and the lover of Porphyria have mental conflict and are not psychologically healthy; that is why they suppressed, misbehaved, and even killed their couples. Browning was against such a cruel behavior of men towards women and "...had a special aversion for domestic tyrants" the roots of which can be traced in his own life (Donaldson et al. 2036). Browning had a possessively tyrannical father-in-law who did not allow his children to marry without his consent and tried to have absolute authority and control over them. Consequently, these poems are interpreted through Archetypal approach to explore the way Browning tried to depict the male's tyranny and dictatorship towards women.

## 2. ARCHETYPAL CHARACTERS

The recurring character types in a wide variety of literary works are archetypal characters such as innocent youth or lovers, Damsel in Distress, the Soul Mate or the Jungian anima and demon lover. On the surface, these two couples, Porphyria and her lover, the Duchess and the Duke seem to be archetypes of ideal lovers, undertaking quest to be united with each other, but deep down in comparison to the bravery of the traditional heroes, the male figures are as passive as the female ones portrayed as having no voice throughout the poem.

The Soul Mate (or Jungian anima) is represented in the poems in the characters of the Duchess and Porphyria. The “beautiful lady” sometimes turns to be the archetypal innocent youth who is inexperienced and vulnerable. These innocent youths desire to remain in safety, so they become dependent upon others, which is in line with the Duchess and Porphyria’s naivety and dependence. They are represented as Damsels in Distress in need of the help from their Prince Charming, but they do not receive the needed help and in a surprising contrast to the archetypal Prince Charming who comes to rescue his Damsel in Distress, they are murdered for their dependence and nativity. The Damsel in Distress might be one of the most traditional female archetypes in popular literature, who is always vulnerable, and in need of rescue. When disappointed, a Damsel must go through a process of empowerment and learn to take care of herself in the world. The shadow side of this archetype mistakenly teaches old patriarchal views that women are weak and teaches them to be helpless and in need of protection. It leads a woman to expect to have someone else who will fight her battles for her (Myss).

The ideal man whom the young woman longs for is the Prince Charming who rescues the Damsel in Distress in traditional stories. But, in these two poems, instead of being protective towards their innocent beloveds, the supposed-to-be Prince Charming surprisingly kills them. The first person narrators in these two poems recount a vivid story of love and violence. Regarding this idea, Carter and McRae (265) believe that *My Last Duchess* (1842), probably the most widely known of Browning’s poems, is also a tale of love and violence, as the speaker reveals to a diplomatic emissary the true situation behind the facade of polite words: he had his previous wife murdered by means of strangulation; “I gave commands/Then all smiles stopped altogether” (*My Last Duchess* 45-6). It is the same way the lover of Porphyria utilized to kill his beloved; “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” (*Porphyria’s Lover* 37-41). These two characters, the Duke and the lover of Porphyria, can be seen as the devil incarnated since instead of rescuing their Damsels in Distress, they commit brutal murders. Regarding lovers’ behavior toward their beloveds, Allingham considers the lovers as “the monster(s) out of fairy tale and myth, a compound of the legendary youth-devouring Minotaur and the wife-collecting murderer Bluebeard from the popular Victorian fairy tale”. As he further asserts, Browning’s Duke is the Devil incarnate, “inured to murder and ignorant of Christian virtues, a creation intended to be a symbol of pride, materialism, and viciousness of Christian evil, blind to his own probable damnation” (2). As Hawlin further asserts, both of these poems are studies of disturbed, alienated mindsets:

*In both cases the male speakers murderously transform a live woman into a dead object. The speaker in ‘Porphyria’s Lover’ does this quite literally by strangling his lover and keeping her corpse beside him, and the Duke of ‘My Last Duchess’ does it by giving orders for the murder of his first wife (his ‘last duchess’), and then, having ensured her physical death, by paradoxically celebrating her ‘living’ presence in the portrait he commissioned from Frà Pandolf. Both poems involve men staring at women and then sadistically controlling those women, so it is small wonder that they have attracted psychoanalytic and feminist readings (155).*

The archetypal jealous lovers want to dominate and control their beloveds, which seems to be the principal aim of the lovers in the mentioned poems. In the case of the Duke, Allingham gives the example of “Neptune taming a sea horse”; “The statue of Neptune” is a psychological projection of the Duke himself as both “enjoy dominating what is beautiful, delicate, feminine, and natural”

(3). Like a jealous and emotionally insecure child, he wants to show complete possession of the Duchess's smile. It seems probable that the only thing these demon lovers demand is controlling their animas as a way of gaining identity by their everlasting presence. In other words, in the case of the Duke, the image of emotion or the "passion" in the "glance" seems more valuable to him than genuine emotion.

### 3. ARCHETYPAL MOTIFS OR PATTERNS

As Simone believes, by closely comparing and analyzing the images in dreams and fantasies of individuals, Jung showed that certain motifs recur regardless of each culture, experience and education. These motifs and symbols called archetypal motifs, "serve to safely bring common unconscious into consciousness" (2). The dilemma of time and immortality is considered to be an age-old archetypal motif, representing human being's preoccupation with the passage of time, abandonment and death. Escaping from time, is one of the "basic narrative forms" of immortality connoting "return to paradise, the state of perfect, timeless bliss enjoyed by man and women before their tragic Fall into corruption and mortality (Guerin et al. 190).

Although the poems at the first glance seem to be love poems, in a deeper sense, they are poems about time and are concerned with immortality. Both lovers desire immortality of their love and are afraid of the passage of time. They unconsciously suffer from fear of abandonment. Hence, they endeavor to immortalize the moment they are united with their lovers. The duke stagnates the love and beauty of his lover in the form of a picture to bestow an everlasting liveliness upon her; "That's my last Duchess painted on the wall/ Looking as if she were alive" (*My Last Duchess* 1-2). Likewise, porphyria's lover turns her into an absolute passive being and stops her life in a moment when he thinks she is deeply in love with him; "That moment she was mine, mine fair/ perfectly pure and good" (*Porphyria's Lover* 36-7). The idea is also supported by Maxwell who asserts that "the moment in which the lover witnesses the woman's apparently wholehearted love is also the moment that he attempts to preserve by killing her" <sup>1</sup> (28).

To argue further, they apparently want to remain in the state of Utopia while they have their Soul Mates with them everlastingly and want to be immortal with the help of their love. By stopping the growth of their love and keeping it at the time when it reaches its climax, the lovers desire to use "the alchemy of love as a way of defeating the laws of naturalistic time" (Guerin et al. 201). This way of gaining a "mystical submersion into cyclical time" unfolds the depth of philosophical elaborations of the power of love which reminds the reader of an archetypal character who transcended the boundary of mortality with the aid of love: Psyche. Hawlin considers the passage of time, inner emptiness, and fear of the lovers as the cause of turning the beloveds into objects to gain immortality:

*Human love must take place in time, must develop and change through time, and is vulnerable to diminishment and death: it is founded upon trust, intimacy, spontaneity, and physical warmth. But the Lover and the Duke are so afraid of loss or abandonment, so afraid at a deeper level of the fullness and warmth of love, that they actually kill the women who might love them, reduce them to objects, and so (apparently) hold at bay their own overwhelming fears of emptiness (155).*

As discussed, the lovers cannot accept their passive role in the universe and their incapability to defeat the passage of time. Consequently, instead of entering a doomed struggle with Time, they think of sacrificing the beloved for their own fear of abandonment. Therefore, the female characters being oppressed by the male figure turn to be scapegoats, not in the traditional sense of guaranteeing the welfare of a country, nation or even a family but being sacrificed for the welfare of just one single person: the lover. As Gray believes, "people who play the part of victims in the scapegoat psychology are the ethically inferior" and in the case of the mentioned poems, these "people" are the subjugated female lovers (170). By transferring the corruption and mental disturbance to the innocent young beloved, then by killing this scapegoat, the lover pretends to gain enough mental stability. It can be concluded that the lovers, who are obsessed with the ownership and control of beauty, by turning the beloveds to scapegoats, can control them as objects.

#### 4. JUNG'S THEORY OF ARCHETYPES

Jung's contribution to myth criticism is his theory of racial memory and archetypes. In developing this concept, Jung expanded Freud's theories of the personal unconscious. He also theorized that archetypes do not derive from external factors but the projection of innate psychic phenomena (Guerin et al. 202-203). Eisendrath and Dawson, regarding Jung's major contribution, consider "Jung's insistence on the symbolic and creative function of unconscious material, and the psyche's prospective tendency toward regression during stress and growth" which results in an everlasting struggle with the shadow side to remain oppressed (73).

According to Guerin et al. "the shadow, the persona, and the anima are structural components of the psyche that human beings have inherited". The shadow is "the darker side of the unconscious self, the less pleasing aspects of the personality" that is wished to be suppressed (205). In Jung's terms, "shadow is made up of all of the personal tendencies, motives, and characteristics that have been barred from consciousness, whether deliberately or not" (Hart 98). In *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, Jung wrote: "The shadow is a living part of the personality and therefore wants to live with it in some form" (20). The idea is also supported by Myss who claims that people who are extremely intellectual or emotional frequently have a close link to this archetype, because they struggle to balance these powers. The Duke and the lover of Porphyria cannot resist confronting their shadow side and endeavor to project it. They, as immature characters, do not accept their defects such as jealousy as a part of their personality and by murdering the beloved out of jealousy, this "unwelcome side of the nature" overcomes the rest of their nature (98). In *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, Jung asserted: "What drives people to war with themselves is the intuition or the knowledge that they consist of two persons in opposition to one another; The conflict may be between the sensual and the spiritual man, or between the ego and the shadow" (242). Such a conflict between ego and shadow exist in the character of the Duke and Porphyria's lover and since they cannot make a balance between them, according to Jung, they are doomed to have "... a real double life with two personalities existing side by side or in succession, each continually striving for mastery" (*Psychology and the Occult* 21).

The persona mediates between the ego and the external world. It is the mask that is shown to the world, the social personality, a personality that is sometimes quite different from the true self. Jung explains that to achieve psychological maturity, the individual must have a flexible viable persona (Guerin et al. 206). In clarifying the definition of Jung's theory of persona, Hart claims that:

*Reinforcing a purely external image of oneself is the "mask" known as the "persona" – the personality which, wittingly or unwittingly, one presents to the world. This external picture can be, and often is, vastly different from the inner reality of the person, with his or her hidden emotions, attitudes, and conflicts. The persona is an essential and unavoidable means of adapting to and living in the human world; but if the image it presents is too far removed from the person within, there will be a fundamental instability, manifested, for instance, in a man who plays a controlling "masculine" role in his job but gives way to the anima's possession in his intimate relationships (100).*

In case of the poems, as they unfold it is realized that the prestige attached to the "nine-hundred-years-old name" of the Duke is an artificial one. The mask that he shows to the world is that of a respectable Duke but one who is "plain-spoken", while by moving toward the end of the poem, his skill in speech is revealed. He further pretends that the dowry the future wife will bring is not a matter of importance for him, but it seems that it is the generous dowry of the bride that interests him not the bride herself. He pretends to be a good, ideal husband who suffered from marital infidelity but as the poem progresses his true self is revealed. The mask or his public persona that he shows to the world is in sharp contrast to what his true "self" is. Therefore, it can be realized that his persona is not flexible enough. In Jung's technical terms "a persona that is too artificial or rigid results in symptoms of neurotic disturbance" (Guerin et al. 207). The same neurotic disturbance can be noticed in the behavior of the lover of Porphyria, who at the beginning

makes one considering him an ideal lover modestly waiting for the beloved to return from a party, but turns to be a demon lover who killed his beloved exactly the same moment she confesses her love toward him: “Murmuring how she loved me/.... and give herself to me forever” (*Porphyria’s Lover* 21, 25).

Jung gives anima a feminine designation in the male psyche, pointing out that the “anima-image” or Soul Mate is usually projected upon women. It is regarded to be a kind of mediator between the ego and the unconscious or inner world of the male individual (Guerin et al. 206). According to Elio Frattaroli, “The anima is the unconscious female aspect of a man’s personality (the animus being the parallel unconscious male aspect of a woman’s), with which he is in perpetual conflict but must ultimately come to terms if he is to attain the level of maturity that Jung refers to as individuation” (173). Porphyria and the Duchess seem to be the male character’s anima. Thus, their persona not only could not mediate between ego and the external world, but their anima also fails in relating to their inner world. They do not seem to consider the female figures as their beloved but as someone whose everlasting presence give them the identity they lack. The extreme form of lack of identity is presented in the character of the lover of Porphyria, who gains his identity by being Porphyria’s lover. The Duke and Porphyria’s lover are psychologically ill and have neurotic behavior or as Jung theorizes, it “is the results of the person’s failure to confront and accept some archetypal component of the unconscious. Instead of assimilating this unconscious element into their consciousness, neurotic individuals persist in projecting it upon some other person or object” (Guerin et al. 205). It is exactly in line with the way Porphyria’s lover and the Duke behave throughout the poem. Instead of accepting their defects, they condemn their lovers as unfaithful ones; “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” (*My Last Duchess* 21-24). In Jung’s technical terms, the characters suffer from “failure of personality integration” since they are not courageous enough to confront their shadow and accept it as a part of their personality. The only action they seem to take is to project their shadow side and put the blame on the fidelity of the female figure.

Jung’s theory of individuation is a psychological growing up, a process of self-recognition which demands courage. It is required to be capable of recognizing the true self in order to become a well-balanced individual (Guerin et al 204). Individuation is considered to be different from “instinctive growth or general maturation”; it is known to be “a shift from an idealized and collectively determined ego, to an individuating Self-oriented ego” (Eisendrath and Dawson 73). Whatever is unconscious within us is first encountered in projection; the process involves the withdrawal of projection and the assimilation of its content into that conscious being where it belongs – our own. It involves the ever-growing admission of who we really are (Eisendrath and Dawson 97). In these poems, both the Duke and Porphyria’s Lover experienced the failure of individuation and could not be transformed to mentally mature and healthy individuals. They *seem* to be sane, normal adults on the surface, but deep down they are insane and behave in a mad, violent way. Slinn claims that “this less determinate distinction between madness and sanity, and the notion of an apparently rational, yet dangerously destructive, or comically excessive, mental state, clearly fascinated both Tennyson (‘St Simeon Stylites’, Maud) and Robert Browning” (88). Such mental disorder and double personalities may happen to anyone. Since as human beings, all of us share the same structure of mind or psyche. As Jung claimed: “the collective unconscious, however, as the ancestral heritage of possibilities of representation, is not individual but common to all men .... and is the true basis of the individual psyche” (*The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche* 152).

## 5. CONCLUSION

The Archetypal Approach applied to Browning’s *My Last Duchess* and *Porphyria’s Lover* revealed different layers of meaning in the poems. Seemingly, Browning composed such poems in order to criticize the men who maltreated and suppressed women. Both the Duke and the lover of Porphyria are tyrant and selfish who they try to control and consequently subjugate their female

partners. From an Archetypal perspective, the Duke and Porphyria's lover are demon lovers, while the duchess and Porphyria are damsels in distress. The point is that, as a reader goes through the poems they might experience a feeling of sympathy and judgment at the same time that reflects their own invisible links to the characters. To sum up it can be mentioned that, biographical approach along with archetypal criticism aids the present study to reveal Browning's attitude toward domestic male tyranny, (i.e. his father-in-law) prevalent in that period.

### Note

<sup>1</sup>To keep the beauty of the moment permanent is somewhat like "art for art's sake" in which beauty is longed to be preserved for ever.

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