

Women's Rights in Love and Marriage in Three Victorian Poems

Asma Alameroo

M.A [English Literature]

Bisha University, KSA

In re-reading the history of Victorian women, we find that women have faced many challenges in the process of advocating for their rights. They faced social conditions and the common law that prevented them from voting, having the freedom to select whom to marry or love, and having the right to sue. The situation of women led some Victorian writers to topics related to women's rights in both prose and poetry. Through these writings, many authors discussed women's issues in an indirect manner.

Another issue related to social conditions that women had to grapple with was class. Women were in practice controlled by their class; a woman who was upper class had to marry someone else from the upper class, for example. In addition, Julie English Early discussed women's status during Victorian age specially "social barriers" throughout the novel [The Divine Fire (1904)]. She clarified that:

Despite social barriers, the upper-class woman and the lower middle class man recognize their love and their mutual exclusion to emerge "as classless and iconoclastic modern individuals" (188). Young concludes: the novel "has opened in the decorous world of the nineteenth-century novel[...] and has ended in the passionate turmoil of early twentieth-century modernism" (186). (Julie 347)

Here we can see that women suffered from "social barriers" that were even found in their private lives. One example of the "social barriers" is the class differences found in the Victorian age. Literature, in its indirect way, was a method for helping women deal with and understand these obstacles.

In the Victorian age, we find that women of that time were controlled by the roles that society allocated to them. In the introduction of "A Widening Sphere—Changing Roles of Victorian Women," Martha Vicinus wrote that:

Women themselves—and particularly middle-class women—were increasingly concerned with what their roles were, and what they should be. Spokeswomen of every political persuasion felt called upon to write about the women question. The stereotypes we formerly thought characterized the "typical" Victorian women

upon closer examination prove to be less rigid—though no less pervasive. (Vicinus ix)

From the passage, we can see that Victorian women were suffering from their experience of their “typical” lives. Women, coerced into following certain roles, are “concerned” about these roles, signifying perhaps that while they did not have the social leverage to instantly change them they did want some way to make them less “rigid” or more fluid in nature. In addition, Vicinus added that “It is difficult now to evaluate how satisfied Victorian women were with their lot...” (Vicinus ix). Underpinning this statement is that Victorian women by and large had to accept their “lot;” they could not do anything to change it even when they were not satisfied.

During the Victorian era, injustice codified by law existed in the treatment of married women. Vicinus clarifies the nature of this injustice:

In the eyes of the common law, married women had no identity apart from their husbands. As the saying went, in law “husband and wife are one person, and the husband is that person.” Where property was concerned, this meant in practice that a husband assumed legal possession or control of all property that belonged to his wife upon his marriage and any property that might come to her during marriage. (Vicinus 4-5)

This quotation indicates how a married woman was treated, and in how little regard she was held when it came to determining property rights. In addition, the quotation clearly defines the difference in treatment between “husband and wife” and in general between men and women from the Victorian era. To return to the concept of injustice, it is unfair to treat a woman as “a private possession.” In addition, if a woman marries a man who does not respect her, does he deserve to own her money as if it were his, or her respect? If he spends her money on drinks or other types of frivolous living, does the law protect her from that man?

Both single and married women had limited rights and had to live within the constraints put up both by their country and by their families. For instance, in the case of lower class families the need for money was overwhelming, and marriage for them is a type of deal (they are able to marry their daughter off rather than support her for the rest of their lives). In these families, they did not ask their daughters to choose someone of their liking and did not care whether the man was good or not; they just needed money in most cases. From the perspective of the Victorian era man, some husbands did not care about the emotions of their wives because there was an idea that women were solely present for child-bearing and housework (Yildirim 46).

These trends were worsened by the fact that, during the Victorian era, some families looked at marriage as a financial arrangement. This idea surfaces frequently in Victorian

literature. Furthermore, Jenni Calder illustrates that “In the Victorian novel it is virtually impossible to get away from the concept of marriage as a financial transaction. The idea of money is there even when the cash is absent...” (Calder 31). This idea (looking to young ladies as a source of money) increased the suffering of Victorian women. In addition, “women were taught to dissemble, and men were taught to encourage and accept this dissembling...” (Calder 32). From this we as readers can confirm that Victorian society does not care about women’s emotions, and their men are taught to “accept” this type of emotion without taking it seriously. Society merely perceived women as being wives and mothers for their husbands and children.

Just as certain elements of their private lives involved living under restrictions, Victorian society also did not allow women in some cases to engage fully in public life. Public life here means going out in the public and do what they want to do such as meeting men who are not their husbands which was not allowed at that time. This is clear when Jenni Calder clarifies that “Married women were the legitimate prey of unattached young men, who tested their sexual prowess...” (Calder 19). The concept here was that Victorian women were thought to be too weak to protect themselves, and accordingly married women were housekeepers for their husbands and children. Their husbands were scared that the young men will see their wives as a “prey” and became involved in “immoral sexual relationships.” Even if one understands the reasoning behind not allowing women to have full public lives, this is no justification to seeing them only as wives and mothers, or for allowing their husbands to use their wives’ money for frivolity or to act against the family’s best interests. These practices were also applied to younger women who were not yet married.

The issue of the “stereotypical” Victorian woman, discussed earlier, is also related to stereotypes surrounding how men were allowed to treat women during the Victorian era. The Victorian era conferred to men the ability to control everything and control their wives. Returning to Martha Vicinus, she notes that “[this] stereotype includes male dominance in the family, strict differentiation of sex roles, separate standards of morality for males and females, female coldness in marriage, and in general silence about sexual matters, all of it tainted by hypocrisy...” (Vicinus 182). From today’s perspective, it is readily apparent that giving Victorian men all the authority and rights within a marriage was a strong differentiator between the genders. This differentiation likely helped make women’s emotions and feelings cold, especially in marriage; it likely explains women’s “silence”. We cannot blame Victorian women if we know their situation according to the law of that time.

On the other hand, a woman’s personal property passed into the absolute possession of her husband. He could use and dispose of it during his lifetime in any way he chose. He could also make a will disposing as he pleased of his personal property, including that which had come to him from his wife. (Vicinus 5)

The passage above clarifies the sacrifices to their husbands and to society that women were forced to make under Victorian law. If we were to agree with the beliefs of Victorian society, we'd have to believe that men had to be just to their wives and maintain a decent lifestyle for their families. Men had to support their wives because they became his "possession" according to the law of that period. The identity of a man's wife belonged to him from the time they got married.

The feminists of the Victorian era aimed to set measures into place that protected women from the rampant injustice of the laws and the wider society. They wanted to reform the status of women and ensure their rights. In her book "Relative Creatures: Victorian Women in Society and the Novel," Françoise Basch indicates that "All their efforts [she means Victorian feminists] concentrated on the plight of single woman, whether unmarried, divorced or widowed, rather than on the position of the wife..." (Basch 37). There is no doubt that the feminist writers address their ideas more toward the "widowed women" than toward married women if we know that "if a husband died in testate, his personal property was divided according to statutory provisions under which his widow never received more than half, the remainder going to his children or other near relatives or, if he had none, to the Crown..." (Vicinus 5). Everything in the Victorian era is centered on men and families rather than women and their rights in inheritance, love, and voting. They do not give the rights or identity for women, and everything women have reverts automatically to their husbands after their marriage (and to their children after their husbands died).

Even though Victorian feminists focused on "single women", they did not overlook married women. This is clear in the stories of Susannah Palmer in 1869 and after a few years later Millicent Garrett Fawcett. They were married and appeared in the Recorder's Court in London. Susannah appeared because her husband treated her badly, so she stabbed him. While Millicent appeared because a young thief stole her purse. Therefore, feminists' reform requirements were stated as follows:

The stories of women so different as these two illuminate the arguments used by Victorian feminists in their demands for reform of the married women's property law and for other legal reforms as well. On the one hand, the law often inflicted grievous practical hardships upon women. On the other, the law, regarding a woman as only apart, even a chattel, of her husband, destroyed her independence, her identity, and her self-respect. Reform of the common law affecting women stands out, therefore, as a major achievement of nineteenth century feminism. (Vicinus 3)

The feminists wanted to reform the law and in particular reform the law that allowed the husband to own money and everything else his wife has. These laws needed to be changed because they denied women a basic identity and literally made her part of her husband. This was part of the

broader aim of feminists during the period to protect women's rights from an overall unjust set of laws.

During the Victorian era, writers advocate for women's rights in love and marriage. Laura Schwartz states that writers called for women to be released from strict duties at home so they would have the opportunity to become educated and work; this was an intrinsic part of women's rights (Schwartz 672). These ideas culminate in the concept that women be freer to live lives of their own choosing. The poems "The Lady of Shalott" by Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "Goblin Market" by Christina Rossetti, and "Porphyria's Lover" by Robert Browning provide three views separated by thirty years (these works were written in 1832, 1862, and 1836, respectively) of what it would mean for women to be released to a certain extent from their roles as wives and caregivers. While "The Lady of Shalott" clearly depicts the excitement and potential of women being able to, for example, select their own partners, "The Goblin Market" acts more as a cautionary tale; in the end, being freer to live according to one's choices does not mean that there are no right or wrong choices. "Porphyria's Lover" discusses the class divide that impeded love during the Victorian era, and particularly explains the impossibility of such a boundary-crossing love thriving. Together, the poems present both the excitement and challenges that women would face in the process of making these choices, and also create an interesting depth to the idea recorded in Victorian-era British literature that women are "angelic."

Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott" contributed to efforts to give Victorian women their rights to love, choose their marriage partners, and be part of public life with the partners of their choosing. At this point in history, any given woman was generally considered "literally the servant of her children and husband" (Yildirim 46). Queen Victoria supported men and wanted women to attend to—be at the side of—their men; the primary purpose of women was to submit to God's will by performing housework and to have children (and for sexuality/intimacy in general) (Yildirim 46). In opposition to this, Tennyson's lines concerning weaving dreams create a symbolic new dress for women to wear; his lines helped "weave" liberty for English women, especially Victorian women.

Love was no doubt part of this liberty; Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott" creates a perfect image of Victorian women in talking about a woman who tries to get out of the typical "woman's life" of that period and wear a new dress, or "web." Moreover, the Lady of Shalott is a weaver; she tries to create her "magic web with colors gay . . ." (38). The "web" here means new dress—a new life for an English woman with a man she loves. Furthermore, Tennyson's use of the phrase "colors gay" in this passage confirms the rights of women to choice and self-determination. Tennyson tries to change the idea that women should be slaves for their husbands and children (which is the old way of life) when he writes, "she left the web, she left the loom . . ." (109). The "web" represents the refusal of the Lady of Shalott to be a slave and to get out of the typical life and wear her "web" that she weaves, not the one that society weaves for her. Tennyson also indicates in (37-38) that women want to connect to the world of men, but want to

be in love before proceeding to marriage. In the case of the Lady of Shalott, she weaves her “web” (her new dress) “by night and day” (37). This weaving shows us her strong desire to love; she weaves her new idea of having a man every night and day.

Later in the poem, Tennyson uses the image of the mirror to clarify that a woman’s strong desire to love and marry the man of her choice may have consequences. This desire will cause all men to be angry; she will have to face the “shadows of the world.” Moreover, she wants to belong to this world although this world causes her death, for “[a] married woman was legally the slave to her husband” (Yildirim 47).

And moving through a mirror clear
That hangs before her all the year,
Shadows of the world appear. (46-48)

The mirror in these lines also ironically represents the real life of that time (which is the life that women were forced to have) by demonstrating what will happen to the Lady of Shalott if she leaves her tower. In fact, we see that the Lady of Shalott’s desire to love and to be linked to the world of men is moot; the desire will be undermined by the potential for death because she dies when she was in her way to Camelot to see Sir Lancelot.

Ultimately, taking “web” as a metaphor for dress and “mirror” as metaphor for the real life of Victorian women will give us a perfect image of the life of that period. Victorian women weave their dreams of love and choice; however, this “web” (or the new dress—representing the right to love and choice) is prohibited, and if any woman tries to wear that new dress, she will see the “shadows of the world” (with “the world” representing the world of men). This is clear when she decides to leave and to see Sir Lancelot, “she left the web, she left the loom . . .” (109). Here, her old dress is the “web;” the Lady of Shalott also cries out, in further reference to the consequences of leaving the “loom” or safe place, that “the curse is come upon me . . .” (116). The curse came to her because she wanted to change her life and move to Camelot. However, the curse does not prevent her from continuing her dream and new life. She takes “a boat” to go to Camelot for seeing Sir Lancelot.

Down she came and found a boat
Beneath a willow left afloat,
And round about the prow she wrote
The Lady of Shalott. (123-126)

Here the reader understands that the only way that men will know about her is through her writing, which leads us to believe that writing (in this case, poetry) is the method for helping women obtain the right to love or the right to go out in public. In addition, she continues her trip to Camelot, but “The broad stream bore her far away . . .” (134), indicating that her boat was

unable to navigate the stream. The stream signifies those who opposed English women getting the right to love and to go out in public in a manner of their own choosing.

In her accursed state, the Lady of Shalott dies on the boat, which then takes her dead body to Camelot. Camelot's citizens find the boat and her dead body, "Dead-pale between the houses high, /Silent into Camelot . . ." (157-158). At this time, the reader learns of Camelot; it is an amazing land that has castles with kings, knights, and kind people; it is the land of peace and freedom, both of which were sought by the Lady of Shalott; it is a place where "knight and burgher, lord and dame..." (160) are recognized as equal. This is another message related to Tennyson recognizing the rights of English women.

Furthermore, when Camelot's people see the Lady of Shalott's face, they see her purity and beauty.

He said, "She has a lovely face;
God in his mercy lend her grace,
The Lady of Shalott." (169-171)

In these lines, we as readers can understand that after reading her name, they discover her "lovely face", which confirms that English women are pure and must have their rights.

Tennyson also asserts that women have a right to go out in public and have others know their names. He addresses this idea in a smart way by not giving the Lady of Shalott any name. In this way, his readers are informed that women at that time were not allowed to appear in public as men would know their names. Laura Schwartz mentions in her article "Feminist Thinking on Education in Victorian England" that female writers during the Victorian era called for women's rights and for allowing women "into the public sphere so that they could 'do God's work in the world...'" (672).

If women could go to the public life, they would also be able to meet men and fall in love. Accordingly, Tennyson's lines reflect a reason for allowing women into the public sphere that's different from that given by Schwartz; the reader understands that the Lady of Shalott weaves her desire and dreams of loving someone. However, no one can see that her hand is behind this beautiful dream; no one can share her dream because of women's position at the time.

But who hath seen her wave her hand?
Or at the casement seen her stand?
Or is she known in all the land,
The Lady of Shalott? (24-27)

In her review, Ellen Stockstill explained these four lines by saying, "the Lady is invisible to the outside world" (14). She also added that, "the Lady's anonymity to the outside world also

emphasizes her ‘over-looked’ position” (Stockstill 14). Moreover, Tennyson’s line “only reapers, reaping early” (28) tells us that the reapers are only people who know about her because they listened to her singing. Moreover, she sings “cheerly” and the reapers are “weary” (30-33). She is happy to look at them from her window, while they are bored. This signals that no one cares about the emotions of The Lady of Shalott, or whether she is happy or sad. In this way, the neglect of women’s emotions during the Victorian era is symbolized; the reapers are “weary” of listening to her song.

“Goblin Market” by Christina Rossetti is another poem that grapples with the themes of women seeking to free themselves from Victorian-era constraints (and the possible consequences of that freedom). Despite the fact that Christina Rossetti confirmed that this poem is only for children, it is hard for readers (even adult readers) to discern the fullness of the hidden meaning, imagery, and the sensual language of the poem. Moreover, “Goblin Market” raised awareness among women in the Victorian era. It told young ladies in an indirect way to be careful about time and not trust in the sweet taste of men’s “fruit” or “knowledge”.

In “Goblin Market,” Rossetti writes of women trying to obtain rights and knowledge that at that time were reserved for men by comparing two views of women that were prevalent during the Victorian period. The first view is represented by Lizzie, a pure woman who refused men’s attempts to seduce her. The other view is represented by Laura, who represented the Victorian women who relented to the “fruit of knowledge” from the goblin men, even though her sister Lizzie cautioned her to “not look at goblin men, / We must not buy their fruits . . .” (42-43). Laura’s interest in this knowledge causes her to lose her position and her grace; she cannot again return to being pure from Rossetti’s point of view. Rossetti compares Laura to another woman, Jeanie, who died and had the same fate as Laura in the same place (the goblin market). Lizzie warns Laura not to meet Jeanie’s fate.

“Do you not remember Jeanie,
 How she met them in the moonlight,
 Took their gifts both choice and many,
 Ate their fruits and wore their flowers

 But ever in the moonlight
 She pined and pined away;
 Sought them by night and day . . .” (147-150, 153-155)

The language Rossetti uses in this passage to describe Jeanie, a language of being unable to detach from something harmful. (“[P]ines and pines away” implies the inability to forget the men), served to caution readers (especially women) to not go to goblin men and consume (learn) their knowledge. Rossetti used imagery of natural beauty to build to this, telling her reader that

the goblin men gave Jeanie their fruits and returned with something more. Jeanie wore their flowers and ate their fruits, which meant that they enjoyed her body.

In terms of time, Rossetti uses two different times of the day that women should be cautious about: “evening” and “twilight.” In “evening,” Rossetti indirectly tells her readers (especially women) that if you go outside, you should have someone to protect you and be “veiled;” in other words, be more careful about protecting yourself:

Evening by evening
Among the brookside rushes,
Laura bowed her head to hear,
Lizzie veiled her blushes:
Crouching close together . . . (32-36)

In these lines, Rossetti provides evening as the time; Laura and Lizzie were together and Lizzie was “veiled”. The readers are made aware that women who go outside their homes should be together; this will help protect them from shadows (in the sense that Tennyson uses this word in “The Lady of Shalott”) or from whatever makes them afraid.

Rossetti further indicates that women should not return home so late, especially at “twilight,” as this time is not good for young ladies. Lizzie again plays her role as Rossetti’s protagonist in this observation that caution is preferable for women, in the same section of the poem where Laura is compared to Jeanie:

“Dear, you should not stay so late,
Twilight is not good for maidens;
Should not loiter in the glen
In the haunts of goblin men . . .” (143-146)

Victor Roman Mendoza, who studied and analyzed “Goblin Market,” reviewed what Lizzie did to protect her young sister. He said:

Lizzie’s “having to do” with the goblin men consists of each party’s attempt to set the terms of exchange. To save her sister Laura from her inexplicable wasting away, Lizzie ventures “by the brook” at “twilight” (326) with the intent of buying and carrying away from the goblin men the fruits she thinks will alleviate her sister’s fatal condition. The goblins instead refuse her terms of transaction and try to force her to “[s]it down and feast” (380) with them on their hitherto irresistible fruits, she remains able to endure the merchant men’s violently hardsell. (Mendoza 917)

Laura seems to be close to death, “knocking at death’s door...” (321). Lizzie cannot wait anymore, and she is not concerned with what is “better and worse...” (323). Thus, she decides to

go and to buy some fruits to save her sister from the perverse men. She puts “a silver penny in her purse...” (324). Unfortunately, the goblin men force Lizzie to “sit down and feast” with them (380). She refuses to “sit and feast;” however, the goblin men force her to sit and start to feed her the fruits. Lizzie does “not open lip from lip” (431). Forcing Lizzie to sit down and putting the juice of the fruits on her mouth demonstrates to the reader the extent to which Lizzie is too weak to protect herself even she does not open her mouth. This indicates that women were perceived as being too weak to protect themselves from goblin men or any perverse men. Moreover, the poem was a clear demonstration of literature that was intended to caution and provide awareness to English women at the time; there was a belief that English women were easy to deceive through appeal (that is, men found it easy to convince women that they loved them, while in reality they merely wished to gratify their sexual desires).

Through Lizzie, Rossetti expresses to her young “maidens” that goblin men should not be trusted; their fruits will lead to deceit and they will use the opportunity to gratify their sexual desires again.

“No,” said Lizzie: “No, no, no;
Their offers should not charm us
Their evil gifts would harm us.” (64-66)

Rossetti’s view is pretty clear—women should not be deceived by “their evil gifts” which will soon “harm us.”

Rossetti continued her cautions about trusting in men to readers, especially English women of the Victorian era. She said, “Their fruits like honey to the throat, / But poison in the blood . . .” (554-555). She described men’s words and knowledge as the honey. She believed that this sweet taste, this sweet knowledge, was “poison” once you tasted it; it killed you. She warned Victorian women away from this sweet “poison”. Furthermore, Rossetti addressed Victorian women concerning this “sweet” again when she described Laura’s fall: “Till Laura dwindling / Seemed knocking at the Death’s door . . .” (320-321). By evoking “Death’s door,” she reveals to Victorian women the result of consuming this sweet fruit, this sweet “knowledge.”

The implication with respect to the advice to not trust men is that Victorian women are weak and easily deceived by men’s words. Heidi Scott’s reading of the poem provides evidence about Lizzie’s resolution and Laura’s weakness. In analyzing the behavior of the two sisters, Scott writes:

Laura, of course, deals with the goblins by trading the substance of her body for a go at the fruit. During the financial negotiations, she says, “all my gold is on the furze / That shakes in windy weather / Above the rusty heather” (120-22), and the goblins accept as payment the flower of “a precious golden lock” (126) from the

wealth on her head.³ By contrast, Lizzie never offers her body to the goblins; she wisely brings along a mediated depersonalized method of payment. (Scott 220)

Scott's analysis seems sound because Laura treats life as if her body is a "good" that she can buy or sell. However, as noted earlier, Lizzie had a silver penny to save her sister. Furthermore, she did not offer her body to get sweet fruits because she believed that fruit had a bad taste.

Rossetti also depicts women's weakness when she uses "fruit" as the object of a hunt that will capture her readers, in the way that the sweet "fruit" also puts Laura in her trap; Rossetti shows us how women are easily hunted by the promise of this sweet "fruit." Laura believed that this fruit was very delicious:

"How fair the vine must grow
Whose grapes are so luscious;
How warm the wind must blow
Thro' those fruit bushes." (60-63)

As readers, we understand that Laura has fallen in the goblin men's "hunt." However, the deeper meaning of this line is that Laura's arrival brings warmth to the place; the grapes relate to Laura's body and signify that Laura is very beautiful. Furthermore, in this way the goblin men tried and succeeded in putting her in their trap and enticing her with their corruption. Moreover, we may understand from these lines that Rossetti tried to make young ladies aware that they should not try to be more beautiful when they left their homes; or, perhaps, they should have their beauty "veiled" in the fashion that Lizzie "veiled her blushes" (35).

Rossetti ultimately shows her readers how Laura tried to recapture purity in these lines:

She clung about her sister,
Kissed and kissed and kissed her:
Tears once again
Refreshed her shrunken eyes,
Dropping like rain . . . (485-489)

Kissing her sister, Lizzie gives the reader to understand that this way purifies Laura from the sexual relations she experienced with the goblin men. Although the tone of "kissed" her may suggest to the readers a same-sex relationship, we can easily understand that the true relationship is the relationship between sisters.

Herbert Tucker's commentary on the phrase "Come buy" provides an apt summary of the primary theme of "Goblin Market".

The phrase "Come buy" recurs more than a dozen times in "Goblin Market" as the "iterated jingle" (253) of a straightforward sales pitch. Yet a vigilant virtual

orality has to wonder how to take it. How is the imagined listener to know what the reader so plainly sees, that “buy” has a letter *u* in the middle of it—to know that the goblins are not freely offering something (Do come by our orchard some time) but rather selling something for price? (Tucker 120)

These lines provided the significant role of the hidden meaning and Rossetti’s messages. “Come buy” is an encrypted message to the young ladies that goblin men will deceive you, as they do not give you their goods and fruits freely. The price is too expensive because young ladies (especially Laura in this case) pay with their purity and innocence (their virginity) when they eat of the “fruits.”

While Rossetti warns Victorian women, Robert Browning in “Porphyria’s Lover” discusses the class divide that impeded love during the Victorian era, and in particular explains the impossibility of such a boundary-crossing love thriving. “Porphyria’s Lover” is one of Browning’s dramatic monologues, which according to Nerstad are “fundamentally about positioning oneself in relation to another and seeing with or in her or him” (544). “Porphyria’s Lover” is about hopeless love and a crime involving a blooming young woman whose name is Porphyria and a speaker who lives in a cottage in the countryside.

The speaker is from the lower classes; the reader recognizes this with the lines he speaks: “And kneeled and made the cheerless grate / Blaze up, and all the cottage warm ...” (8-9). He lives in cottage in which he does not even have a fire for protection from the cold. Conversely, Porphyria is from the upper classes. She looks at the speaker in “pride” (24). The speaker loves her; however, he cannot be with her because of the social differences between them.

The first lines reveal the setting of the poem.

The rain set early in tonight,
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. (1-5)

Browning describes the weather with phrases such as “sullen wind” and “tore the elm-tops down for spite” to capture the mood of the narrator whose “heart is fit to break” with the turbulence and darkness of the world he lives in. Such a man was not able to love or marry a woman from a different class during the Victorian era.

Browning describes the purity of Victorian women, confirming ideas put forth by Tennyson and Rossetti. When Porphyria enters the cottage, “all the cottage” becomes “warm”, signifying her warm-heartedness (9). Furthermore, there are signs that she cannot speak, perhaps meaning that women during the Victorian era could not speak about love. With the lines “And,

last, she sat down by my side / And called me. When no voice replied ...” (14-15), the readers comes to understand that the speaker and Porphyria were not allowed to speak about their emotions. The speaker’s way of saying “when no voice replied” rather than “I did not reply” is another distancing technique (the narrator passively describing his own voice).

Victorian women were not allowed to express sexual desire. This is clearly addressed in Browning’s lines. Porphyria is:

Murmuring how she loved me – she
 Too weak, for all her heart’s endeavor,
 To set its struggling passion free
 From pride, and vainer ties dissever,
 And give herself to me forever. (21-25)

She “murmur[s]” to the speaker that she loves him. “Murmuring” here shows how women express their love and emotions; they can only express them softly because they are “too weak” (22). Moreover, Catherine Ross notes:

These lines are usually read as a reference to the difference in social status between the lovers, one of the impediments to their being together that drove him to murder her. Alternatively, these lines might refer to the pride and fear of a young gentlewoman who knows the likely consequences and social price to be paid if she sets her passion free outside of marriage in an age with no reliable birth control. (Ross 71)

Ross explains that women in the Victorian era were suffering both from social class differences and, sometimes, from men themselves (as Porphyria is murdered in the poem). Furthermore, women must be punished by society and those in their class if they do not live up to expectations with respect to purity.

Max KeithSutton clarifies that “the poem conveys the hopelessness of being locked within oneself ...” (Sutton 287). This is clear when the speaker thinks that Porphyria loves him in these lines:

Be sure I looked up at her eyes
 Happy and proud; at last I knew
 Porphyria worshiped me: surprise
 Made my heart swell, and still it grew
 While I debated what to do. (31-35)

Here, the speaker is “hopeless”. He is unable to decide his course of action, even though he is “happy and proud” that she “worships” him, which makes his “heart swell.” This may mean that

the speaker is a madman because he considers what to do with Porphyria and then decides to kill her. Moreover, the speaker becomes mad: “That moment she was mine, mine, fair, / Perfectly pure and good: I found” (36-37). He wants to have her no matter what she feels about him, but she is “pure and good...” (37). In order to keep her forever, he takes her hair “Three times her little throat around, / And strangled her. No pain felt she...” (40-41). Though he has wounded and then murdered her, he is “quite sure she felt no pain...” (43). Through this, we as reader are sure that the speaker is really mad. How could he kill her and be sure that she did not feel pain?

To understand the speaker, Françoise Barret-Ducrocq discusses the behavior of the classes during the Victorian age. Dealing with the lower classes, she demonstrates that “[t]he behavior of the poor, seen as a whole, blatantly violated the principles of the dominant moral order...” (Barret-Ducrocq 9). This is clear when the speaker broke with accepted morality and humanity and “laid her soiled gloves by” (12). The “soiled gloves” point to Porphyria’s “soiled” reputation. Then, she “...untied/Her hat and let the damp hair fall...” (13). This confirms the idea that Porphyria’s reputation becomes dirty or “soiled” also conveys the idea of the “fallen women”, which was a common trope during the Victorian era. Briefly, the “fallen women” has sex without being married, going from being pure (a virgin) to being a disreputable woman.

Browning ends his poem with the speaker wondering at the fact that he does not receive any punishment from others or from God.

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! (56-60)

The speaker here calls himself “Porphyria’s love”, and he tells us that Porphyria could not guess her wish (to be with him forever) (56). He fulfills this wish by killing her, as this is the only way to “sit together” (57). He is with her “now” and does not hear any objections from anyone. Moreover, the tense of the speaker’s lines changes from past to present tense with “we sit together now...” (58). This gives us a sign that the whole poem is about the thoughts of the speaker while he is holding (hugging) his killed lover. Finally, in the last line, the speaker indicates that he may be waiting for punishment from anyone (or, at least, God) for his crimes, but that this punishment has not come yet. He could be expecting thunder or lightning to hit his hands for killing his lover, or perhaps a storm or the wind will punish him. However, he does not get any punishment, not even “a word”.

Perhaps Browning wants his readers to think about Porphyria. Does she deserve this tragic end? Does anyone, from the speaker to the society at large, give her the right to speak? Does he want Victorian society to change, to enact laws that allow women to choose the men they love?

Ultimately, Browning ended his poem by leaving his readers in confusion about Porphyria. In spite of this confusion, Browning's "Porphyria's Lover" is a real lesson from Victorian poetry that teaches us how Victorian women were treated by their society and by the men of that period. The Victorian writers found inspiration in "eventful lives [that] could be transposed into moral universals by an emphasis on private experience..." (Burstein 65). Therefore, "Porphyria's Lover" depicts one small element of the life of Victorian women during that time.

To summarize, Tennyson, Rossetti, and Browning had great aims that related to the role of women during the Victorian era in their poems. The poems, through their beautiful and profound meaning, memorable images, and emotionally powerful language, reflected women's status in the Victorian era. Collectively, these poems also show indirectly how English families treated their women due to the belief that women should be homemakers first, while contributing to changing this situation. Generally, Tennyson claims for the rights of women to love and to walk in public like men; Rossetti cautions women against walking outside alone and trusting in men. Browning argues for the right to love across class boundaries. Therefore, the three poems ultimately also work together in explaining that women should have the same freedoms and choices as men, but should still be cautious and wise about how they exercise these choices.

Ultimately, Victorian writers were limited in their writing by the social conditions during their time period, especially with respect to the "sexuality issue." Furthermore, John Maynard, a professor of English, discusses the "openness" issue during Victorian age. He clarifies that:

When we turn to the larger number of more specifically literary studies, there is an immediate sense of less openness. Yes, as the editors point out, the Foucauldian paradigm, of an expanding network of discourse on sexuality, has replaced Steven Marcus's simpler binary of prudery/pornography; so we have here solid explorations of the place of sexuality in the texts of major Victorians, accounts that allow Victorian writers to be writing about sex, often giving it a major place in their visions of life as a potentially positive force, without agreeing with more liberationist formulations of our century. (Maynard 319-320)

The above passage speaks to the simultaneous openness and discretion of the writings concerning sex and sexuality during the time period. With some openness, Tennyson, Rossetti, and Browning all succeeded in showing how women were treated; their poems discussed rights related to sexuality in a very effective way that allows contemporary readers to understand the status of women at the time. Furthermore, "Victorians saw the sexual depravity of the majority of Londoners as a threat to the moral and, potentially, the political order..." (Barret-Ducrocq 2). However, Tennyson, Rossetti, and Browning successfully discussed the "sexuality" issue in a way that preserved the concept of morality and did not "threaten the political order" of the Victorian period.

Finally, critics have confirmed the role of Victorian writers as advocates for women's rights. For example, Linda H. Peterson, who is a professor of English and teaches Victorian poetry and prose, emphasizes the significance of Tennyson's poems.

Tennyson volunteered verbal form, and as we have especially seen here, a revisioning of poetic genre as "means" to do fuller justice to women's powers, rights, and duties within a modern social order. He bestowed on his female characters the power to shape men, homes, nations, and empires—even if he never could quite confirm their lasting influence. (Peterson 41)

This quote confirms the significant role of Tennyson's works and poetry in general as "a means" to defend and advocate for women's issues and try to achieve "justice" for women's powers. The same observation applies to Rossetti and Browning. Together, the three poems show a great knowledge about Victorian women and how literature tries to help them to get their rights.

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