



# The Interplay Of Speech And Silence In Robert Browning's Monologues

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**Abstract:** Robert Browning, the hero of dramatic monologues, displays an oscillation between utterance and absence, where speech and the boundaries of silence fight against each other. This paper probes into how Browning modifies silence not as mere narrative technique but as a sparkling presence that speaks even more than the utterances within his monologues. Through intense readings of poems such as "*My Last Duchess*," and "*Porphyria's Lover*," the study demonstrates that Browning's speakers have hidden intentions behind the great masks of eloquence. Silence does not only have only echoes here but operates the entire personality of the speaker revealing his emotional and psychological turmoil. The dramatic monologue here emerges as a strategy unfolding the hidden parts of one's being: a performative tool depicting silent truths and suppressed notions. Browning moulds silence in a way to aptly transfer it between the narrative gaps and pauses. Ultimately, Browning's monologues become emblematic of the fact that meaning is produced not just through heavy speeches but through the thin line between void and voice, depicting silence as an active and inevitable force in human life.

**Index Terms -** : silence, utterance, patriarchy, agency, resistance.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Robert Browning's dramatic monologues hold a prominent place in the legacy of poetry for their ability to express the interiority of the being. Although these monologues are the devices of one's speech but the real significance arises from the intentions behind that speech. Browning's monologues express how meaning is understood not just through verbally articulated aspects but through the existence of what remains unexpressed and unspoken—breaks, omissions, suppressed words, and the known but silent presence of listeners. Silence in a way maintains its superiority over the speech aspect revealing how human emotions are stored and expressed in an unfiltered manner without even really expression. Browning's monologues portray speech as an active agent of agency and control. Speakers such as the Duke in "*My Last Duchess*" or the lover in "*Porphyria's Lover*" are engrossed in constructing rhetorically eloquent narratives that normalize subjugation, rationalize moral downfall, or impose unreasonable actions over harsh truths. But these verbal speeches are constantly marked by silences that dissect the narratives in order to bring out the real circumstances. Speech fails to serve the whole purpose but when intermixed with the silent expression depicts the moral and social upliftment. Moreover, this silent listener in Browning's dramatic monologues occupies a structurally important space. Having denied a voice and agency, the presence has an inevitable pressure upon the speaker, shaping the intensity of the monologue and deepening its irony. In this sense, Browning moulds silence into a form of moral resistance, challenging the monological authoritative voice of the speaker and foregrounding the instable existence of narrative truth. This varied point of view does not stabilize one meaning but keeps gaps and space for the interpretation of this silence. The poems selected for the purpose of understanding this interplay of speech / authority and silence/ subjugation are Browning's "*My Last Duchess*" and "*Porphyria's Lover*" where woman, their authority, their voices have been nullified. The oratory power has been fixed to the patriarchal system where the male speakers are striving to prove themselves uncorrupted and superior while their female lovers are to be proved by them as guilty and inferior in mind and thoughts.

These speakers are villainous in nature—"murderers, sadistic husbands, mean and petty manipulators" (Greenblatt 1251). The women discussed here have been objectified and reduced to a state of nothingness. Their value has been compared to the physical objects. Gender has been interpreted as a boundary of analysis for them. To be a woman is to fulfil the ideals of obedience, fragility and purity. These parameters define their boundaries and confinement. Women in these poems have been denied the voice and authority as any interruption from their side disrupts the patriarchal hierarchy. Their silence here does not render them as weak and guilty but serves as a great opponent to whatever has been said against them. The speakers endeavour to corrupt their image as unfaithful and lacking servitude but they emerge from the bubble of silence as purely powerful creatures whose resilience and faith are their strengths.

In *My Last Duchess*, the speaker is the Duke of Ferrara, a highly valued and respected man. The surface level action in inaction of him displaying his late wife's portrait to an envoy. But his monologue unfolds with calculative strategy, interspersed with aristocratic manners and refinement. Yet this rhetorical brilliance has loopholes as it puts great questions on the Duchess's identity whose portrait is being described. His speech does not invite any kind of conversation; it is an end in itself. The Duchess's silence does not merely arise after her death but the culmination of a method of objectification that transforms her identity from a living being into a framed artefact. Her humble nature—manifested in emotional connections and social courtesy—becomes, in the duke's viewpoint, a violation against rigid codes of rank, power, possession and aristocracy. The duke's decision of controlling her through different measures instead of confronting her with the ideology echoes the patriarchal overtone where hints are not provided but directly acted out. This is the zenith of the murder of humanity where villains are your own partners whose death has been planned and executed just for them having an extra layer of humanity. Mentioning the name of Fra Pandolf, the painter, the duke connects art and his own woman emphasizing on a possible and close relation of her with the painter. His speech accentuates the suspicion. He refers to it as:

...Sir, 'twas not  
Her husband 's presence only, called that spot  
Of joy into the Duchess' cheek; perhaps  
Fra Pandolf chanced to say, —Her mantle laps  
Over my lady 's wrist too much, || or —Paint  
Must never hope to reproduce the faint Half-flush that dies along her throat. ||

[Browning]

Although the duke tries hard to plant the seed of doubt in the mind of the readers but the courtesy speaks more than words. The duchess and her nature are popping out of the background silences. The complaining nature of the duke reveals his own personality establishing his superiority complex. This petty jealousy and unpleasant behaviour prove him to be an insane personality who is deceptively self-obsessed. The inanimate comparisons he establishes here by comparing his legacy, a bough of cherries and the white mule equally being favoured by the duchess ignites the jealousy in him and he mentions: "I gave commands;/ Then all smiles stopped together". (35,46-48). His proud acceptance and lack of remorse prove the villainy inclination of his nature whose speech however directed towards the justification of a murder is clearly overruled by the duchess's silence that echoes her innocence and lack of agency to survive in a patriarchal world.

Similarly, *Porphyria's Lover* escalates the situation from verbal authority to the silence physically imposed. The speaker initially proves himself as subordinate to Porphyria, making her the main agent who rejects social conventions to prove her love. However, this instance of female agency has been proved intolerable. Porphyria's deep voice, calm gestures, and emotional clarity undermine the speaker's desire for permanence. The act that he undertakes has been framed not as a violent step but as preservation, revealing how patriarchal authorities mould subjugation as devotion. Porphyria's constant silence is analysed by the lover as consent, proving how patriarchy appropriates female silence to validate its own approaches. Her silence shows the moral cavity at the heart of the speaker's actions, proving his speech even increasingly hollow and self-destructive. This unreliable narrator reveals the true shades of his nature to the readers through his own expression as found in "Porphyria's Lover":

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)

These lines prove one of the Browning's most indirect but perfect descriptions of a speaker. The man who is the authority here is a murderer and completely insane. The confession and description of a murder so proudly make the reader question his state of mind. The way that the speaker wishes to have Porphyria entirely to himself and wants to keep her "perfectly pure and good" shows his desire to have obsessive control over her. However, the serenity with which the speaker describes this violent action proves his character to be completely wicked. His possession and instable mind come to the forefront when he depicts the happy gestures of Porphyria towards him as an act of worshipping. His irrational thoughts when combined with Porphyria's intense love take him to the heights of the superiority complex. This obsessive desire of possession somehow resembles the Marlowe's heroes who are struck with some intense desires which become the reason for their downfall. The speaker here however no longer is captivated in the net of regrets as his irrationality justifies that he has transformed Porphyria into an object of possession. The depth of love, the female agency, the expectation after expression is all defeated in the course of these circumstances. The brutality crosses the limits when the speaker asserts, "No pain felt she; I am quite sure she felt no pain." The pain of not being able to maintain the fragile male ego overshadows even the pain of death. This is how Porphyria has been completely silenced physically and metaphorically by her own lover who completely justifies the murder as their union.

Across both poems, Browning portrays silence not as a lack of meaning but it is a site that fulfils the unknown and unexpressed meaning. The voicelessness of the women act as intensifiers to the reader's viewpoint of what has been left out from the narrative, demanding an act of self-interpretation for the idea. The speakers' fluent expression leads to many questions as if there is no site for remorse. In this sense, Browning treats the reader as an ethical judge delivered with a task of understanding more than what the speech reveals. When viewed with a feminist lens, the silence of the Duchess and Porphyria becomes emblematic of the continuous erasure of female agency within patriarchal rigid structure. In this regard, Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949) that "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman (Beauvoir 301)." Their silence is not natural but it has been normalized through romanticizing and objectifying their identity. The portrayal of them as mystified creatures have made their existence and death shallow. They are not being treated here as human beings but as objects of victory. Here, the opinion of Mick Leach is very important that "Unlike the biological state of maleness, masculinity is a gender identity constructed socially, historically and politically. It is the cultural interpretation of maleness, learnt through participation in society and its institution (Leach 36). To conclude, *My Last Duchess* and *Porphyria's Lover* show Browning's sophisticated dealing with the interplay of voice and silence. The monologues of the male speaker not only assert dominance but reveal how women suffer subjugation at the hands of such ideology and discourse. Thoughts when divorced from rationality become the ultimate reason for the failure of humanity.

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