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Exposing the Monsters Behind Victorian Domestic Abuse

Jennifer Komorowski

Abstract

Domestic violence was a social issue prominently debated during the Victorian period. Literature published during this time period, which included Robert Browning's "Porphyria's Lover" and Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, addresses the problem of domestic violence and exposes the problems women faced in the home, problems that were previously thought to be private matters. Throughout the nineteenth century, the laws regarding both domestic violence and the rights of women drastically changed to provide more protection and grant greater rights to both women and children. Both of Browning and Brontë's works expose the hidden monsters that could exist behind the closed doors of a private Victorian home. Literature, such as Brownings and Brontë's, which addresses these types of social problems revealed the need for greater protections for women and children; and in the nineteenth century, helped to further the campaign to strengthen the law.

Keywords: Nineteenth-Century literature; Domestic abuse; Victorian; Social Issues; Women's rights

Victorian literature, including Robert Browning's "Porphyria's Lover" and Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, helped to address the social issue of domestic violence by exposing the psychological monsters capable of committing acts of domestic abuse. Domestic violence was an issue that captivated the Victorian imagination due to the "unprecedented visibility" (SurrIDGE 8) that domestic assault began to receive in the press and the emergence of an ongoing debate during the 1840s and 1850s about domestic assault and other marriage issues that affected women (9). The presence of domestic violence in Victorian literature exposed readers to the same social issues that were present in the news on a regular basis, but on a more personal level.

A key development in exposing domestic violence was the 1828 Offences Against the Person Act that targeted working-class violence. The act precipitated a "cultural shift" (8), and domestic violence became a topic transferred from the private sphere to the public sphere. After the act was passed in 1828, domestic abuse became a regular news story (7), and "the magistrates' courts were flooded with abused wives" (8). Unfortunately, middle-class violence did not receive the same attention until the 1850s when the 1853 Act for the Better Prevention and Punishment of Aggravated Assaults Upon Women and Children and the 1857 Divorce Act were passed. The 1853 Act raised penalties for crimes of abuse against women and children (10), and it also differentiated domestic assaults on women and children from other types of assault (47). SurrIDGE refers to both 1828 and 1858 as "crucial turning points in the public visibility of spousal assault" because of the

press coverage that the new legal proceedings received, especially the new divorce court in 1858.

The Victorians idealized women as “angels in the home” (Lee), but Victorian society also idealized the domestic role of the man as a protector of women. Many men during the Victorian period thought of domestic assault not simply as a woman’s issue, but believed it to be a men’s issue because the “unmanly assaults” (46) that had come into the media spotlight were destroying the Victorian ideal of manliness as “self-control over both sexual and violent urges” (46).

Emily Brontë’s novel *Wuthering Heights* was published in 1847, at a time when public debate about domestic violence was regularly in the news. While readers would have been familiar with the ongoing debates about women’s issues, the events that take place in the novel fall between 1772 and 1803, well before the 1828 Offences Against the Person Act and the changes to the legal rights of women during the Victorian Period. Throughout the reign of Queen Victoria the concern for the welfare of children increased immensely (Hancock 22), and the changing legislation affected not only women but children too. These ongoing debates about domestic abuse are reflected in the plot of *Wuthering Heights* with its depictions of domestic abuse against both women and children.

According to Judith Pike, *Wuthering Heights* is a “critique of the middle-class cult of domesticity” (381), in which both children and women are treated as property. Two of the children who undergo abuse are Heathcliff and Hareton, both of whom have been acquired and brought under the wing of the man who holds power in the home. Although Mr. Earnshaw initially treats Heathcliff as a member

of the family, once he passes away and Hindley Earnshaw becomes the new head of the household, Heathcliff is subject to abusive and humiliating treatment. Hindley descends into alcoholism and imparts abuse upon the entire household, but he is especially vindictive towards Heathcliff, who is refused any further education and is instead forced to do manual labour. Through his actions Hindley denies Heathcliff membership in the family unit. Once Heathcliff earns his fortune after leaving Wuthering Heights for three years, he returns to seek revenge upon Hindley. Once Hindley passes away, Heathcliff declares that Hareton is his possession and “we’ll see if one tree won’t grow as crooked as another, with the same wind to twist it” (187). The vehicle of Heathcliff’s metaphor is the tree, representing the developing child, specifically referring to himself and Hareton. The “wind to twist it” (187) is the abusive and negligent treatment that Heathcliff receives at the hands of Hindley, and that he intends to pass on to Hareton. According to Catherine Hancock, this “presence of violence between parents and children in Victorian fiction undercuts the stereotypical image of the happy Victorian family” (24). In the same way that the portrayal of the male domestic abuser shocked the average Victorian reader, the abuse and murder of children also called into question what happened behind closed doors.

Heathcliff takes the law of coverture very seriously, and he keeps those people whom he sees as his possessions close to him, often as prisoners within Wuthering Heights. Just as many women were imprisoned within the institution of marriage during the Victorian age, because of economic and political rules, Heathcliff keeps those in his domestic sphere literal prisoners. The only person

Heathcliff allows to leave his domestic sphere is Isabella, because of his intense hatred of her. Ellen Dean seems to believe that Isabella should feel gratitude towards Heathcliff, since “he didn’t molest her” (Brontë 183) once he learns of her location. The reason that Ellen Dean feels this way is because of the laws of coverture at the time, which granted possession of all people and possessions of the marriage to the husband. It was not until Infant Custody bills were introduced, beginning in the 1830s, that a child evolved from “property to person” (Berry 97). The 1939 Custody of Infants Act allowed a woman, separated from her husband, to request custody of children for the first time in the history of English law (99). Since *Wuthering Heights* takes place before these types of laws were introduced, Heathcliff could legally take possession of Linton Heathcliff the day he is born and Isabella would not have been able to challenge him legally. Instead, Heathcliff uses the threat of acquiring Linton to keep possession of Hareton Earnshaw and plans to take possession of Linton later, warning “I’ll have it...when I want it” (Brontë 184).

Another recipient of Heathcliff’s abuse is Isabella Heathcliff, who is not just a victim of domestic abuse but also a victim of the insufficient laws protecting women during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Although only two chapters specifically address the fate of Isabella Heathcliff, these provide important information and thought-provoking social commentary. According to Pike, most literary critics have dismissed the significance of Isabella’s letter in Chapter 13. Pike points out that it is highly significant and identifies that Brontë directs the reader to the importance of Isabella’s testimony through Ellen Dean’s assertion that the letter is an important relic of the dead (136).

Through Isabella's letter to Ellen Dean the reader comes to understand Heathcliff's true nature. The questions that Isabella poses to Ellen, "Is Mr. Heathcliff a man? If so, is he mad? And if not, is he a devil?" (136), and her later confirmation that Heathcliff "is clearly on the verge of madness" (140) reflect the belief of Victorians that men who abused their wives were exhibiting a "sign of madness" (Pike 359) and Victorian society would use this madness as a condemnation of domestic abuse, rather than as an excuse or defense (359). When Isabella later flees from *Wuthering Heights*, she tells Ellen Dean that Heathcliff is "not a human being" (Brontë 174). As Surridge points out, legislators were concerned about the "brute in the form of a man" (48) who would be capable of committing domestic abuse against women and children, and this concern makes clear that the domestic abuser was seen as something less than a man. Through Isabella's letter the reader discovers that Heathcliff's former tormentor, Hindley, thinks of him as a "hellish villain" (138) and he states that hell "will be ten times blacker with that guest than ever before" (140).

Soon after Isabella's marriage to Heathcliff, the effects of her mistreatment are already visible. When Ellen Dean arrives to visit at *Wuthering Heights*, she notices that Isabella's "face was wan and listless; her hair uncurled; some locks hanging lankly down, and some carelessly twisted round her head" (146). Brontë provides a contrast between Heathcliff, who appears to be a gentleman, and Isabella, who now looks like a "thorough little slattern" (146). Later, when Isabella arrives at *Thrushcross Grange* after fleeing from Heathcliff, Ellen Dean describes her face as "scratched and bruised" (172). Although Isabella claims that she scratched her face

on her journey from *Wuthering Heights*, it is more likely that Heathcliff injured her before she left the house.

Robert Browning's monologue "Porphyria's Lover" is another example of Victorian literature that exposes the reader to a potential monster hiding behind the closed doors of a Victorian home. Initially, critics were disturbed by the "forced intimacy between the speaker and audience" (Gregory 23). Many of Browning's characters refused to "conform to conventional masculine norms" (83) and, although Victorian readers were accustomed to reading about domestic abuse in the news and other literature, Browning "[lures] his readers into intimate contact with speakers whose transgressive sexual fantasies and disruptive behavior profoundly violated nineteenth-century domestic norms" (72). Critics received Browning's later poem, *The Ring and the Book*, more positively than "Porphyria's Lover" and many of his other monologues, although both *The Ring and the Book* and "Porphyria's Lover" address the same type of subject matter. The reason, according to Melissa Gregory, is the courtroom setting of *The Ring and the Book* which creates a didactic work that provides an "invitation to judge [Browning's] speakers" (92), rather than being drawn into a "dynamic of forced intimacy" (79).

Part of the reason for the critical backlash against "Porphyria's Lover" is due to the reader being lulled into an intimate reading of the speaker's account of events, and it is only part way through the poem that the reader can recognize that something is not right and the speaker is in an "abnormal state of mind" (Reidhead 1252). The speaker does not describe the murder in a sensational but in a straightforward way with a strangely calm tone. After the murder is committed, he

says “no pain felt she;/I am quite sure she felt no pain.” (Browning 41-42). This repeated assurance to both himself and the reader, that Porphyria did not feel pain when he strangled her, has the reverse of its intended effect. At this point the reader knows that the speaker’s account of events cannot be trusted, and his later description of Porphyria’s unstained eyes and blushing cheeks reinforces his unreliability.

Gregory believes that Porphyria’s lover communicates through “self-absorbed expressions” (94), and we can see his self-absorption in his descriptions of the outside world and of Porphyria. Browning’s speaker superimposes his own emotions on to others, and, by personifying the wind as sullen and spiteful, the speaker expresses his own emotions through the outside world. He also attempts to convince us that it is Porphyria’s “darling one wish” (57) to be possessed by him, rather than his own desire.

During the Victorian period many feminists believed that the domestic abuse of women “was a symptom of women’s legal nonexistence” (SurrIDGE 48). The fact that coverture meant that women and children were legally property belonging to men is an important issue in relation to “Porphyria’s Lover”. The speaker desires to own Porphyria, as a piece of property, but we find out that she is not willing to marry her lover, although we don’t know the reason behind her reluctance. The speaker decides that she belongs to him anyway, because he thinks “Porphyria worshiped me” (Browning 33); the speaker thinks he can take possession of Porphyria because of her devotion to him, which leads to his belief that at “that moment she was mine, mine, fair,/Perfectly pure and good” (36-37). The speaker’s

repetition of the word “mine” emphasizes his possessiveness. This passage also reveals that part of his motivation for murdering her is to keep her pure forever. His motivation indicates they have not consummated their love affair; thus the speaker, by murdering her, ironically prevents Porphyria from becoming a fallen woman.

The objectification of Porphyria turns her into a thing to be possessed by the speaker, literally a corpse. The description of her is from the objectifying point of view of the male gaze. He breaks her down into individual body parts, and in turn removes her identity as an individual. The speaker’s description of Porphyria breaks her down into a series of body parts, such as “her smooth white shoulder bare” (17) and “her yellow hair displaced” (18), showing his objectifying viewpoint. Her yellow hair later becomes the murder weapon, turning her own body part into a tool for the speaker to use; thus confirming that the speaker views Porphyria’s hair as another object rather than as a part of her whole.

Although “Porphyria’s Lover” is not explicitly didactic, Browning takes the power away from the speaker by not naming him and gives remembrance to the victim by not forgetting her name. Browning also identifies his speaker’s abnormal appetites through his strange inactions when Porphyria arrives: he does not reply when she addresses him, Porphyria must position his arm around her waist, and she places his cheek on her shoulder. But, in contrast, once Porphyria is dead he imparts a “burning kiss” (48) upon her cheek, positions her head upon his shoulder, and sits all night with her dead body. The description of the kiss as burning makes that kiss passionate from his perspective, an element missing during his interactions

with her when she is living. We can read the speaker's actions and his own interpretation of them as a sickness or madness on his part, and we can understand that it is not a normal man who abuses or kills his lover but a sick one.

Domestic violence in the Victorian period called into question the morals of a man capable of abusing his wife and children. Both *Wuthering Heights* and "Porphyria's Lover" expose the monstrous elements in the person who commits acts of violence. The fiction and non-fiction published during the Victorian period exposed the horror and violence which existed behind closed doors. By bringing these issues to the attention of the public, writers were able to lead the way for changes in the law to protect both women and children from domestic violence and to give these marginalized groups rights previously denied to them.

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