

2017

A Study of the Tradition of Extreme Literature

Matthew Chi Hei Chan
Claremont McKenna College

Recommended Citation

Chan, Matthew Chi Hei, "A Study of the Tradition of Extreme Literature" (2017). *CMC Senior Theses*. 1607.
http://scholarship.claremont.edu/cmc_theses/1607

This Open Access Senior Thesis is brought to you by Scholarship@Claremont. It has been accepted for inclusion in this collection by an authorized administrator. For more information, please contact scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu.

Claremont McKenna College

A Study of the Tradition of Extreme Literature

submitted to
Professor Robert von Hallberg

by
Matthew Chi Hei Chan

for
Senior Thesis
Spring 2017
April 24, 2017

Abstract

This thesis endeavours to investigate some of the many ways literary works can engage with the tradition of extremism. In so doing, the author hopes to demonstrate the importance of the tradition as a vessel for understanding the world around and within us. In an effort to show the breadth and endurance of this tradition, this thesis critically analyzes selected works by Robert Browning, Harold Pinter, and Frank Bidart in context with various other literary works.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my gratitude to my family for the opportunity to write this thesis, among many other things.

I would also like to express my utmost gratitude to:

Professor von Hallberg, for the guidance, and support you have given me throughout my time at Claremont McKenna College.

Professor Cole, for truly introducing me to poetry.

Professor Faggen, for showing me the importance of reading well.

The representation of extremes constitutes a long standing literary tradition that reaches as far back as the Book of Job, if not further. When considering such representations, it is easy to limit one's scope to subject matter. However, it is important to recognize that the graphic depiction of Satan smiting "...Job with sore boils from the sole of his foot unto his crown." (*King James Bible*, Job 2.7) is but one approach. Beyond content, writers can also engage with extremism through style, feeling and so forth. In this way, the tradition is pervasive. It endures, not only through time but also across literary genres. This study conducts an investigation into the different manifestations of extreme literature and, why they are difficult or uncomfortable to confront. Oftentimes, extreme works are difficult to confront on the basis of the images alone. Yet, works in which graphic violence is absent exhibit a similar forbidding quality. It seems then that the force behind these works lies not on their exterior, but in the implications beneath. As this study will endeavour to show, extreme works of literature are distressing. However, it is through distress that the illumination of the works shines the brightest.

At the beginning of Harold Pinter's Nobel lecture *Art, Truth & Politics* in 2005, he quoted something he had written in 1958: "There are no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false. A thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false." (Pinter, page 1) There is no truer representation of walking the fine line between the real and the unreal than in Pinter's own plays where the audience often find themselves "In a pass between two worlds, participant of neither." (Melville, page 629) The two-act play deviates from the traditional five-act structure in a reflection of the way that its contents depart from all

preconceived notions of normality. Around the time that *The Homecoming* was first introduced to the public, Deborah David and Robert Brannon's *Blueprint for Manhood* dominated the conception of masculinity. One of the major themes of the work suggests "that masculinity involves power and dominance over others..." (Kahn, page 56) By employing this theme in the setting of a family, Pinter is able to reduce the conceptions of masculinity of his time to absurdity. In *The Homecoming*, Pinter presents hyper masculinity, as defined by David and Brannon, through an extreme preoccupation with power. As each character vies for dominance, the framework of the family disintegrates into something unrecognizable. Through the unnerving process of defamiliarization, the audience is able to view their conceptions of normality under new light.

The play begins with Max and Lenny, who are only known at this point as "*a man of seventy*" and "*a man in his early thirties*" respectively. (Pinter, page 183) Their initial exchange is tense, dripping with malice and makes Max's incompetence immediately clear. The fact that Max's dominates most of the dialogue actually serves to work against him. In the repeated attempts to locate a pair of scissors, Max inadvertently establishes the hollowness of his words. Lenny is indifferent to Max's threats and requests, mostly reacting in silence. In this way, the violence of threats like "Listen! I'll chop your spine off..." (Pinter, page 187) are reduced to absurdity.

Max (*cont.*) I think I'll have a fag. Give me a fag.

Pause.

Max (*cont.*) I just asked you to give me a cigarette.

Pause.

Max (*cont.*) Look what I'm lumbered with.

He takes a crumpled cigarette from his pocket. (Pinter, page 186)

In this excerpt, the pauses emphatically signify Lenny's silence. Max's tone escalates with each iteration of his demand and the pointed "I just asked you" make it clear that he directly addresses Lenny. Yet, the attempt at menace is to no avail and only met with another "*Pause.*". Ultimately, the demands fizzle out into resignation and Max's "Look what I'm lumbered with." as he reaches for his own cigarette becomes an admission of defeat. The fact that Max eventually "*takes a crumpled cigarette from his pocket.*" signifies that the original request is but a veiled attempt at establishing authority. In Max's failure, Lenny shines through as the figure in power; through a moment of irony, the play's first stage direction cements this dynamic. "*Max lifts his stick and points it at him.*" (Pinter, page 185). The action complements the line "Don't you talk to me like that. I'm warning you." (Pinter, page 185). Though meant as a threat, the action functions as a moment of humour: In an attempt to dramatize his empty threat, Max inadvertently calls attention to the object that most prominently symbolizes his ineptitude. The inanity of Max's action is further highlighted by the muted way that Lenny looks up "quietly" (Pinter, page 185). The significance of the interaction between Max and Lenny is crystallized through a revelation that surfaces amid violent threats, and labels like "stupid sod" (Pinter, page 186): Max is Lenny's "lousy filthy father..." (Pinter, 187) In this struggle for power, the play undercuts conventional familial relationships by subverting the patriarchal figure. However, this defamiliarization of familial interaction is merely the beginning: a case in point would be the scene when "*Lenny kisses Ruth. They stand,*

kissing.” (Pinter, page 233) Not only is Lenny Ruth’s brother-in-law, the scene is also set in full view of Max, Joey and Ruth’s husband. To the audience at the Aldwych Theatre, where the play was first presented, this would no doubt have been at least foreign, if not shocking.

The cigarette scene works as a moment of conflict in which Lenny prevails through silence. However, Lenny is not a passive character. Much like Browning’s Duke, Lenny is acutely aware of his own standing and is masterful in asserting his dominance and masculinity through language.

Lenny (*cont.*) What do you think of Second Wind for the three-thirty?

Max Where?

Lenny Sandown Park.

Max Don’t stand a chance.

Lenny Sure he does.

Max Not a chance.

Lenny He’s the winner.

Lenny ticks the paper. (Pinter, page 187)

Though the diction of this blunt exchange is unembellished, it is substantial in establishing Lenny as a domineering force. It is clear that Max seeks validation throughout the dialogue; it is seen in the assertion “I could have taken care of you, twice over. I’m still strong. You ask your Uncle Sam what I was.”(Pinter, page 186) Here, the

need for Uncle Sam's attestation suggests insecurity and perhaps even recognition of the sterility his words. This desire for recognition is again seen in Max's vague claim to being one of "the worst-hated men in the West End of London." (Pinter, page 186). In this context, Lenny soliciting advice on horses works as a symbol of his manipulative control: Lenny's recognizes Max's desire, and effectively throws him a bone with the question. Max's excitement is tangible from the curt response "Where?" that is a far cry from the raving, adjective addled line preceding it. Max's enthusiasm is further apparent from the immediacy of the response, which is contrasted with an uncharacteristic pause that meets Lenny's assertion that he is "getting demented" (Pinter, page 187). However, what seems to be a glimmer of kindness is quickly quashed by the dismissal that follows. Working in the same way as the pauses, Lenny's response completely disregards Max's answer. The condescending tone of "Sure he does." oozes with nonchalance, as if the question was only posed for Lenny to undermine the answer. The cruelty of this endeavour is illustrated by the confidence with which Lenny "*ticks the paper*". The action is emphatic as a complementary image to the assertion: "He's the winner.". The entire exchange suggests that the answer had been pre-determined, which begs the question: Why does Lenny ask for Max's opinion at all? Just as Browning's Duke solely works "by design" (Browning, page 384), so too is this exchange deliberate. By undermining Max in a verbal way, Lenny demonstrates a few things: First, is the astuteness of his perception in identifying Max's hunger for validation. Second, is Lenny's ruthlessness in the unflinching manner that Max's craving is exploited. Third, is the masterful way that Lenny's manipulates language to establish and exert control over other characters. As the play develops, it becomes evident that the cruel taunt is not an isolated incident.

Immediately following Max's spiel, Lenny feigns interest in the dinner that Max had prepared: "...what was the name of it? What do you call it?" (Pinter, page 188) The pause that follows gives the audience room for speculation and to perhaps even hope for a moment of kindness in what has so far been an unceasing and unnerving barrage of insults and tension. True to its form as a work of discomfort, the ensuing line is a gleeful dismissal of Max's abilities: "Why don't you buy a dog? You're a dog cook. Honest. You think you're cooking for a lot of dogs." (Pinter, page 188)

The most emphatic undermining of the traditional family hierarchy and Max's authority occurs in Lenny's outburst:

Max grips his stick.

Lenny Oh, Daddy, you're not going to use your stick on me, are you? Eh? Don't use your stick on me, Daddy. No, please. It wasn't my fault, it was one of the others. I haven't done anything wrong, Dad, honest. Don't clout me with that stick, Dad.

Silence.

Max sits hunched. Lenny reads the paper. (Pinter, 189)

The abruptness with which this line bursts onto the scene marks a significant deviation from the composure that Lenny has thus far demonstrated. The departure from Lenny's calm delivery is mirrored by a striking change in tone. Here, Lenny feigns weakness to again invite comparison with the Duke from Robert Browning's *My Last*

Duchess. In Browning's poem, the Duke feigns nonchalance when introducing the portrait of his last Duchess to unnerve his auditor. In the same way, Lenny sarcastically feigns weakness by assuming the voice of a child; the emphatic "*Silence.*" and the stillness that follows make the exclamation all the more startling. Keeping the established authority of Lenny in mind, the persona is disorientating and evokes the beginning of Frank Bidart's *Ellen West*. The opening line of the poem is similarly childlike: "I love sweets, --" (Bidart 1) However, the innocence of the tone is quickly lost through the fantasy of "dying on a bed of vanilla ice cream" and the poem's ensuing darkness.

Though different, Pinter's Lenny presents an equally disturbing perversion of innocence. Throughout the play, Max's stick is ever by his side. The stick traditionally exists a symbol of old age and in the play, functions as a compensatory object in lieu of Max's physical ability. Max's physical weakness is best embodied by the flurry of physical violence that begins:

Joey You're an old man. (*to Teddy*) He's an old man.

Lenny walks into the room, in a dressing-gown.

He stops.

They all look round.

Max turns back, hits Joey in the stomach with all his might.

Joey contorts, staggers across the stage. Max, with the exertion of the blow, begins to collapse. His knees buckle. He clutches his stick.

Sam moves forward to help him.

Max hits him across the head with his stick, Sam sits, head in hands. (Pinter, page 219)

Max punches Joey in an attempt to substantiate the barrage of threats and reclaim authority from Lenny. In perpetuation of the play's irony, the exchange does little save bare Max's pitiable nature. Here, the stick is crucial in minimizing the impact of Max's collapse. The use of the stick as a weapon further underlines Max's physical incapability to throw more than one punch. In this way, the various functions position the stick as the embodiment of impotence. It simultaneously represents Max's desire to be young and the bitter reality that he is not; this ultimately relates to an underlying desire for virility that is made explicit by Max's final request to Ruth that concludes the play: "Kiss me." (Pinter, page 256) The sexually charged context, in conjunction with the stick's physical appearance establishes the prop as an inherently phallic symbol. Lenny's infantile exclamation then becomes suggestive of something far more sinister than a literal interpretation of the text would suggest. Instead of a plea to avoid physical discipline, the language delves into the figurative to imply sexual impropriety and abuse that Max confirms in his resigned attitude. This revelation harks back to the dysfunction of Max and Lenny's relationship that was established from the outset. Lenny continues to develop the possibility of abuse in asserting: "...You used to tuck me up in bed every night. He tucked you up, too, didn't he, Joey?...He used to like tucking up his sons." (Pinter, page 194) The pointed question works to extend the extent of Max's abuse to all of his sons. The diction of this line is unmistakably deliberate; the word "tucking" is used for its phonetic similarity to the word 'fucking'. Though the insinuations of abuse are

deeply disturbing, Lenny's candid references are arguably more disconcerting. The ease with which Lenny is able to draw on his trauma speaks to the issues of the pursuit of power. In total disregard for himself and for Joey, Lenny capitalizes on a personal trauma as a means of embarrassing Max and exerting his own dominance.

However, the word choice mimics the symbolism of the stick in that both allusions are ambiguous: The sexual and abusive undertones are never explicitly referenced. The suggestions are elusive and require the audience to form their own assumptions. The effect is unnerving for it calls what would ordinarily be innocent requests into question. For instance, "**Max** You want to kiss your old father? Want a cuddle with your old father?" (Pinter, page 220) under ordinary circumstances would merely be a father seeking affection from a son that had been away. Yet, the portrait of Max that has been painted so far and Lenny's insinuations calls the intentions of the request into question. Given Max's aversion to being called "Dad" (Pinter, page 194), it seems remote that this desire for affection could be innocent. Thus the play forces the audience to consider whether the assumptions made fit within their defined conceptions of normality. The uncertainty in this instance is at the core of what makes this play unnerving, and functions only as a small part of the uncertainty that permeates the play.

Amidst the surreal setting of this play, the arrival of Teddy and Ruth initially seems a breath of fresh air. Their mellow dialogue contrasts sharply with the hostility that pervades Max and Lenny's first exchange. However, a pervading strangeness remains in the absence of outright threats and degrading insults.

Ruth Can I sit down?

Teddy Of course.

Ruth I'm tired.

Pause

Teddy Then sit down.

She does not move. (Pinter, page 197)

The conversation is oddly disjointed; despite asking to sit down and claiming to be “tired” Ruth “*does not move.*” The arresting disconnect is further emphasized by the recurring question of whether Ruth is “tired” for a different answer is provided every time. The miscommunication is bizarre and pervasive:

Teddy (*cont.*) (*gently*) Look, it's all right, really. I'm here. I mean...I'm with you.

There's no need to be nervous. Are you nervous?

Ruth No.

Teddy There's no need to be.

Pause.

Teddy (*cont.*) They're very warm people, really. Very warm. They're my family.

They're not ogres. (Pinter, page 201)

It quickly becomes apparent that the non-sequiturs are symptomatic of Teddy's overarching concern for Ruth that is only matched by her apparent desire to leave. The

terseness of her responses, and the rigidity in her lack of movement are suggestive of extreme discomfort. This culminates in the question: “Do you want to stay?” (Pinter, page 199) which is unusual considering the two had just arrived. Complementing this is Teddy’s insistence that his relatives are “not ogres” and his reassurance: “I’m here. I mean...I’m with you.” (Pinter, page 201) Ironically, Teddy’s repeated attempts to comfort Ruth only serve to further highlight the perceived danger of being in the house. The behaviour is highly unusual, and works to confirm the childhood abuse that Lenny repeatedly references. It reinforces the damaging effects Max inflicted as a serial abuser to mark the play’s deepening descent into the sinister. Ultimately, the effect is disconcerting for the discomfort that has left them in such disarray mirrors the audience experience of the play so far. In this way, the arrival of Teddy and Ruth is an introduction of identifiable humanity to the play; the characters’ agitation serves to validate the feelings induced in preceding scenes. The introduction presents Teddy and Ruth as a normalizing force; a familiar couple, who dote on their children that “might be missing [us]” (Pinter, page 199) and a far cry from the disturbing relationship of Max and Lenny. The tension of having such characters in the surreal world of Lenny is unsettling; The character of Lenny is particularly pertinent to the discussion of *The Homecoming* as extremist literature and its potential to unnerve. Though it is uncomfortable to witness someone being rendered pathetic, or to confront the implications of Lenny’s outburst, the discomfort of experiencing this play peaks when Lenny first interacts with Ruth.

Soon after meeting Ruth, Lenny delves into an extended anecdote that lays the menace in the atmosphere bare.

Lenny (*cont.*) One night, not too long ago, one night down by the docks, I was standing alone under an arch, watching all the men jibbing the boom, out in the harbour, and playing about with a yardarm, when a certain lady came up to me and made me a proposal. This lady had been searching for me for days. She'd lost tracks of my whereabouts. However, the fact was she eventually caught up with me, and when she caught up with me she made me this certain proposal. Well, this proposal wasn't entirely out of order and normally I would have subscribed to it. I mean I would have subscribed to it in the normal course of events. The only trouble was she was falling apart with the pox. So I turned it down. Well, this lady was very insistent and started taking liberties with me down under this arch, liberties which by any criterion I couldn't be expected to tolerate, the facts being what they were, so I clumped her one. It was on my mind at the time to do away with her, you know, to kill her, and the fact is, that as killings go, it would have been a simple matter, nothing to it. Her chauffeur, who had located me for her, he'd popped round the corner to have a drink, which just left this lady and myself, you see, alone, standing underneath this arch, watching all the steamers steaming up, no one about, all quiet on the Western Front, and there she was up against this wall—well, just sliding down the wall, following the blow I'd given her. Well, to sum up, everything was in my favour, for a killing. Don't worry about the chauffeur. The chauffeur would never have spoken. He was an old friend of the family. But...in the end I thought...Aaah, why go to all the bother...you know, getting rid of the corpse and all that, getting yourself into a state of tension. So I just gave her another belt in the nose and a couple of turns of the boot and sort of left it at that.

Ruth How did you know she was diseased? (Pinter, page 208)

Up until this point of the play, short lines have dominated much of the dialogue; Lenny's speech represents a departure from convention that is mirrored in other aspects of the anecdote. Much like Lenny's infantile exclamation, there is also a distinct change in register: "Well, this proposal wasn't entirely out of order and normally I would have subscribed to it." (Pinter, page 208) In this instance, the sophistication of the language moves away from vulgarity-ridden lines like "Plug it, will you, you stupid sod" (Pinter, page 186) The formality of the diction works in sharp contrast with the violence described. In this way, the unusually high register brings Lenny's shocking subject matter to the forefront.

Though unexpected, the various changes in presentation pale in comparison to the violent situation that Lenny describes. It seems inconceivable that an anecdote about senseless violence towards an anonymous "lady" could be accepted under most circumstances, least of all upon meeting one's sister-in-law for the first time. Yet, the topic is approached in graphic detail with much candour: "So I just gave her another belt in the nose and a couple of turns of the boot and sort of left it at that." The impreciseness of phrases like "a couple of" and "sort of left it at that." (Pinter, page 208) seems a deliberate attempt at nonchalance that is reminiscent of Browning's Duke. In *My Last Duchess*, the Duke "by design" feigns a similar indifference. The dramatic monologue begins: "That's my last Duchess painted on the wall / Looking as if she were alive." (Browning, page 384, 1-2) In the face of this offhandedness, the simplicity of diction, and

regularity of meter are but a few of the clues that make clear the portrait is far from an afterthought. Its mention is useful in various capacities: Not only is the portrait a subtle and polite way to make the Duke's intentions clear, the discussion is also important to the Duke's ego. In essence, the Duke's glee in recounting his last Duchess' death is rooted in the power derived from the discomfort of his auditor. In the same way, the violence of Lenny's speech strives for the same control. Just like the interactions with Max, the speech becomes a vessel with which Lenny asserts his dominance: He makes clear that there are certain "criteria [I] couldn't be expected to tolerate" and any violation would be bluntly met with being "clumped [her] one." Perhaps more unnerving than Lenny's self-proclaimed volatility is the extent to which it can reach. The sentence "It was on my mind at the time to do away with her, you know, to kill her, and the fact is, that as killings go, it would have been a simple matter, nothing to it." makes clear that there is no limit to his violence. The grasp at dominance is tangible from the turns of phrase in this sentence: The casual "you know" works as a condescending attempt to put Ruth down. All in all, Lenny constructs an aura of violence that is both unpredictable and undiscerning to assert his alpha position in the household. The horror of this anecdote shines through most clearly in the parallels drawn with Ruth's own situation. Just as described in the anecdote, Lenny in the scene is alone with Ruth. In a similar way, Ruth had defied Lenny (by not letting him hold her hand) as the lady "was very insistent" Finally, the lady in question is merely referred to as "a certain lady"; the anonymity seems to imply a universality to the anecdote. Ultimately, these similarities are disconcerting; Ruth, a character of relative normality that the audience can identify with, seems to be stranded in an analogous and imminently dangerous situation.

Rather surprisingly, Ruth is completely unfazed. In fact, her defiant reaction serves as a turning point in the play. The economy of words lends power to her simple response: “How did you know she was diseased?” Though the diction is simple, the question is piercing and in one line Ruth is able to shatter Lenny’s illusion of menace and halt his pursuit of dominance. The uncertainty of Lenny’s language in the speech works as a double-edged sword; on the one hand, it is suggestive of a menacing candour. On the other, as Ruth points out, the imprecise language threatens the integrity of the story. The formality of diction also works against the notion of candour, to suggest that Lenny has not been truthful. In an ironic twist, Lenny assumes Max’s position when confronted by Ruth. The similarity goes beyond the meanness of the response, for Ruth wants power; earlier in the play, Max recounts a generic anecdote of a father and son to substantiate the claim: “I remember my father.” (Pinter, page 197) In the same way, this anecdote is littered with vague claims and inconsistencies: “...there she was up against this wall – well, just sliding down the wall,” Moreover, Lenny’s feigned familiarity and ease with murder is undercut by the fact that the murder never takes place. In fact, Lenny is not even privy to details of what “would have been a simple matter” For instance, the process of getting rid of a corpse is dismissed: “you know, getting rid of the corpse and all that,” Most tellingly, the candour of the final sentence in this new context becomes suspect: “sort of left it at that” is extremely abrupt, as if Lenny had not yet thought of a better ending to his story.

Regardless, uncertainty remains a driving force behind the tension of this scene. A chance that Lenny may be lying does not negate the extremity of his language or the darkness in his intentions. In essence, Ruth's defiance is a roll of the dice that ultimately lands her the top position in the household. The scene ends with Lenny following into the hall, shouting, "What was that supposed to be? Some kind of proposal?" (Pinter, page 212) The words echo Lenny's anecdote to prove that the whole narrative was little more than empty words. Relating to the overarching issue of the play, Lenny's attempt to assert dominance becomes a source of weakness and absurdity. Meanwhile, the character of Ruth is increasingly alienated from the audience as her audacity in facing Lenny transforms into her own search for power.

Ruth's power over the characters is exerted through her sexuality. For instance, Ruth issues a threat to Lenny: "If you take the glass...I'll take you." The language is sexually charged and the power of it is evident from Lenny's shocked response: "You're joking." To the audience, the discomfort escalates as Ruth's sexual willingness departs from her initial image as a doting mother and wife. The shattering of this illusion continues as Ruth takes control of her sexuality to become a matriarchal figure that dominates the play. This is embodied in the final image of the play, after Joey "*puts his head in her lap.*" (Pinter, page 255) In spite of this, the innocence of the image is corrupted by the knowledge that Joey had spent two hours with Ruth; even though they "didn't go the whole hog" (Pinter, page 241), the incestuous implications remain deeply disturbing.

The play concludes with Ruth having successfully negotiated to serve as a prostitute for the family. The language of the agreement is unnerving in its unfeeling formality:

Ruth I'd want a dressing-room, a rest-room and a bedroom.

.
. .
.

Lenny (*cont.*) We'd finance you, to begin with, and then, when you were established, you could pay us back, in instalments.

Ruth Oh, no, I wouldn't agree to that. (Pinter, page 251)

Despite the shock to the audience, the deal is symbolic of Ruth's empowerment. It is reached on her own terms and positions her as the primary breadwinner of the household; effectively, Ruth upturns the patriarchal convention and emasculates the men of the play. The hyper masculinity of the male characters in the play works to make them pathetic. Conversely, assigning these 'masculine' values to a female character results in dominance. In this way, Pinter demonstrates the absurdity of the four themes in *Blueprint for Manhood* and on a wider level, the frivolousness of assigning certain roles and characteristics to certain genders. The point is emphatically driven home by the disintegration of familial relationships. Ultimately, the subversion of the family serves as a grim warning against the dangers of hyper 'masculinity' and the preoccupation with power that it necessitates.

The discussion of power and the implications of pursuing it echoes *Porphyria's Lover*. As a precursor to *My Last Duchess*, *Porphyria's Lover* is both visceral and markedly different: the key event of *Porphyria's Lover* is Porphyria's death, which is described in unflinching detail not matched by *My Last Duchess*. However, the representation of violence is only one way that the poem engages with extremism. Relating to the discussion of *The Homecoming*, the key issue of the poem actually lies in the use of agency and power in various manifestations to manipulate perception. The manipulation of perception ultimately relates to the undermining of judgment. The poem demonstrates the unnerving ease with which perspective may be manipulated. For instance, the speaker's grasp at absolute control necessitates the discussion of theodicy to undermine the reader's perception of religion. Hence, the poem elicits discomfort in the reader in a far more effective way than mere graphic description. Through an exploration of mental illness, *Porphyria's Lover* is both disturbing and illuminating. With regard to this, the title of the poem is immediately telling. Porphyria is an umbrella term for diseases that affect the skin or nervous system. More importantly, porphyria is historically associated with mental illness; it is a painful condition and the fact that the speaker is its lover sets a dismal tone for the poem.

The beginning of the poem alienates the normal conception of murderers: although Porphyria's lover originates the poem's key event, he represents himself as a largely passive character. The stark contrast between the representation of the speaker and of the other characters is evident from the language that describes the storm. Through

personification, the reader is introduced to a “sullen” wind that tears “elm-tops down for spite...” (Browning, page 434, 3) In specifying that the destruction is “for spite”, the speaker instills the storm with a surprising maleficence. The speaker’s perception of spite in the storm is further highlighted through diction. For instance, in how the storm attempts to “vex the lake...” (4) The depiction of nature as a deliberately malicious force makes use of the concept of the sublime: the storm is both remarkable and terrifying in its power. In contrast, the power ascribed to the storm is noticeably absent from the speaker. As a character that never confronts the storm, the speaker positions himself as a mere observer. The speaker as murderer invites comparison with the storm: the power of Porphyria’s lover is demonstrated through murder, and yet the demonstration is horrifying. The comparison suggests that the difference in position between the storm and the speaker may not be as simple as it seems.

The duality that the storm analogy lends the speaker is but a small facet of his complexity. The presentation of the storm is also laden with moments of compassion that reveal a surprising empathy in the killer. For instance, the line “I listened with heart fit to break.” (5) to fallen trees is again at odds with one’s conception of a murderer. Yet, the notion that rain is unwelcome also bears ominous undertones: In later modernist conceptions, rain functions as a symbol of divine relief. For instance, in T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, the absence of water is excruciating: “Here is no water but only rock / Rock and no water and the sandy road/The road winding above among the mountains/ Which are mountains of rock without water/ If there were water we should stop and drink” (Eliot, 5.10-14) In this context, the pain that the presence of rain elicits in the speaker

rejects the notion of divine relief. The rejection of religion that this foreshadows becomes important when considering the speaker's struggle with time.

Ultimately, the power ascribed to the storm serves as useful contrast to highlight the power of Porphyria. In this regard, the overwhelming calm that accompanies Porphyria's appearance is immediately telling.

When glided in Porphyria; straight
She shut the cold out and the storm, (6-7)

Speaking to the seeming influence of her character, the effect of Porphyria's presence is immediate. All mention of the storm ceases following this passage; the abruptness with which this occurs is evident from the emphatic use of a caesura before "straight". As the focus of the poem shifts to Porphyria, the speaker again engages with passive observations. From the passage above, there is a discernible admiration for Porphyria that is exemplified by the word "glided". The image of gliding evokes elegance and fluidity in motion that are welcome relief from the harshness of the storm. The smoothness commonly associated with gliding further materializes in the alliteration of 'S' sounds as well as the enjambment in "straight / She...storm".

Beyond discussion of Porphyria's seeming influence, the initial description is also significant in the way that the speaker observes Porphyria's "dripping cloak and shawl" (11), her "soiled gloves" (12) and "damp hair" (13). The focus on Porphyria's physical

condition from braving the storm illustrates the speaker's awareness of her selflessness. At the very least, these descriptions demonstrate acknowledgment of the care that Porphyria provides. At best, they may even signify gratitude that Porphyria had "come through wind and rain" (30) to relieve him. Again, the notion of gratitude that the speaker presents is irreconcilable with the murder to follow.

The surprising passivity of the speaker is highlighted by his initial role as observer to first the storm, then Porphyria. However, the most glaring contrast between Porphyria's agency and the speaker's passivity arises from the image of domestic bliss of a "cottage warm" (9). The construction of this scene is solely attributed to Porphyria, who "made the cheerless grate, / Blaze up..." (8) before tending to herself. Further evidence of the speaker's strange passivity may be found in the initial interactions with Porphyria. For instance, the line "She put my arm about her waist..." (16) assigns the action to Porphyria. In this image, the speaker almost represents himself as an object to be manipulated. The speaker's self-objectification is reinforced through silence. Even in the face of a raging storm, the poem's only appeals to the sensation of sound are from vague descriptions of Porphyria's "Murmuring" (21) and calls to the speaker. Imperative diction in lines like "She made my cheek lie there" (19) also furthers a sense of passivity that is inconsistent with the violence to come. In conjunction with the domesticity of the scene, the speaker's submissiveness paints Porphyria as a dominant, matriarchal figure. This suggestion is particularly troubling given that the title of the poem makes their relationship as lovers clear. The incestuous implications derived from a seemingly powerful female figure anticipate the powerful matriarch of Pinter's *The Homecoming*.

All in all, the speaker's deliberate lack of agency illustrates a character that is not overwhelmingly evil. Even his atrocious act of violence is mediated by the assertion that "...No pain felt she; / I am quite sure she felt no pain." (41-42) These details seem to push back against the utter condemnation to be expected of someone who has just "strangled" (41) his lover. There is a profound difficulty in reconciling the murder with the speaker as represented on the page. As a result of this complication, one has a hard time condemning the speaker. This momentary hesitance is at the heart of what makes *Porphyria's Lover* so unnerving. Through misplaced agency, the speaker subordinates himself to confuse our ordinary sense of evil. In the speaker's deliberate misrepresentation, the murderer becomes identifiable to the reader. In this way, the poem conflates the notions of evil and normality that subverts one's ordinary conceptions. The insinuations of gratitude, empathy and meekness then become tools; they demonstrate the ease with which one's judgment may be clouded, to call the reader considers 'normal' into question and force them to reevaluate their judgments. The form of the poem best demonstrates this. As a dramatic monologue, the poem wields a singular perspective that never leaves the speaker's consciousness. Anything the reader perceives is merely what Porphyria's lover chooses to show. The silence that pervades the poem attests to this; the absence of dialogue prevents the readers from entering the scene and from forming their own judgments. Therefore, to engage with the poem is to surrender one's perspective and agency to the speaker. The speaker's ability to confuse the reader's judgment anticipates the Duke in *My Last Duchess*, in the sense that the speaker willfully unnerves his auditor. The seeming conflict between what pain the speaker feels for the "elm-tops" (3) and the

“lake” (4) and how he “found / A thing to do...”(37-38) is then nothing more than a façade; just as what gratitude the speaker feigns through keen observation is but an illusion. In fact, the specificity of those observations works in more than one way. The description of Porphyria’s hair is repeated three times to suggest an unusual preoccupation that foreshadows an imminent and sinister twist: “...all her yellow hair / In one long yellow string I wound / Three times her little throat around...” (39-40) The fact that the details may be initially perceived as care demonstrates that although details can be known, their implications of evil are hard to know well.

Porphyria’s imminent death quickly makes clear that she is far from Pinter’s Ruth: the agency and power that Porphyria exudes are merely assigned by the speaker as a tool to invite sympathy. This is most evident in the purely physical nature of the relationship. Throughout the poem, there is a lack of verbal interaction between the two characters and an emphasis on physical detail. Again, this taciturnity anticipates the Duke. Just as the Duke objectifies his last duchess through portraiture, Porphyria is reduced to her physical attributes. This reduction comes home to roost in the way Porphyria’s corpse is handled: particularly in the way the speaker “...warily oped her lids” (43) and “...propped her head up as before,” (48) as if Porphyria is nothing more than a tool.

However, Porphyria’s lover differs from the Duke in motivation. In *My Last Duchess*, the Duke’s aim in reducing his last Duchess to a portrait is to exert control over her smile and affection. Porphyria’s lover undertakes the grander endeavour of

attempting to preserve a “moment” (36). The desire to preserve the moment seems rooted in the lingering thought that connection between the speaker and Porphyria is real; after all “she was come through wind and rain.” (30) to comfort him. However, it becomes clear that the speaker’s delight is rooted in his possessiveness. The speaker delights in “how she loved” (21) him. This is emphatically represented in the lines:

Happy and proud; at last I knew
Porphyria worshipped me; surprise
Made my heart swell, and still it grew (32-34)

The iambic meter of the poem emphasizes the word “last” in the first line to demonstrate the speaker’s glee at his revelation. It is as if the latter half of the line is to be read as an exclamation of joy. The image of the speaker’s heart swelling also identifies a very real feeling to demonstrate the joy of being in control. There is a frenzied euphoria captured in the line “That moment she was mine, mine, fair,” (36) The repeated use of “mine” lays bare his crazed desire to possess her and her love. However, the diction identifies the issue that speaker’s control is temporary. Ultimately, the dissatisfaction with the impermanence of the moment leads the speaker to find a solution. Through this, the poem’s most obvious appeal to extremist literature surfaces. The solution insinuates that sitting with a corpse can be equated with the joy of being loved. The solution is presented with much candour: “...I found / A thing to do,” (37-38) The diction is simple and monosyllabic in a way that exudes casualness. It is also complemented by the

regularity of the meter that mimics normal speech. The speaker's eerie equanimity is discernible throughout. The poem follows a strict, but irregular metrical structure of iambic tetrameter. This rhythm is complemented by an irregular ABABB rhyme scheme. The poem establishes a seemingly candid tone with unassuming diction. The best example of candour in this poem is in the oddly specific description: "In one yellow string I wound / Three times her little throat around," (39-40). Here, the numeric emphasis and unspectacular diction produces a matter-of-fact tone that is at odds with the content. The discrepancy in tone is further exacerbated by the rhyming couplet. Ultimately, the tone employed exploits the readers' conception of normal communication. After all, it is inconceivable that one may candidly refer to murder as a mere "thing".

Despite the subverted position that he assigns himself, the speaker is condescending. This can be seen in the way the presumption of Porphyria's weakness: the notion that "for all her heart's endeavour," (22) Porphyria is unable to set herself free to "give herself" (24) to the speaker is both belittling and narcissistic. The speaker's self-importance is discernible from the presumptuous: "So glad it has its utmost will, / That all it scorned at once is fled, / And I, its love, am gained instead!" (52-54). After all, the speaker is representing the thoughts of someone who has already died. Further to this is the speaker's assertion: "Be sure I looked up at her eyes...I knew Porphyria worshipped me" (31). The direct address of "Be sure" once again demonstrates complete confidence in thoughts neither the speaker nor the readers are privy to. The confidence with which these assumptions are presented reveals a delusion of omniscience; the delusion is

symptomatic of the speaker's God complex that pervades the poem. In this way, the speaker's desire to possess Porphyria's affection seems rooted in a desire to be 'worshipped'. He delights in Porphyria's worship, but is dissatisfied with the impermanence of it. In a sick perversion, the speaker associates death with the ultimate token of dedication. It is as if Porphyria's death functions as a symbolic sacrifice to himself. The insanity of this desire speaks to the issues that arise from the pursuit of power. The speaker's madness is confirmed by the delusion that Porphyria subscribes to this logic and willfully dies to prove his point. The speaker presumes Porphyria's "darling one wish" (57) to be to die for him. This delusion is perpetuated by the absence of description on whether Porphyria struggled or not. This point is also furthered by the line: "I am quite sure she felt no pain." (42). Not only is the assumption inconceivable, the candor with which it is presented is absolutely disconcerting: The speaker is satisfied with being only "quite sure" that Porphyria endured a painless death.

Just as with the perceptions of agency, the speaker uses murder to position himself. In this instance, the speaker blasphemously assumes the trappings of God. Though necessarily futile, the speaker's defiance is clear from the taunting final line: "And yet God has not said a word!" (60). The silence of God raises the issue of perspective and judgment once again. In this instance, the reader is left with the issue of theodicy: How could God allow this to happen? Why has God not said a word? How does the poem's God fall in line with the Judeo-Christian conception of an omnipotent, omnipresent being? Does God exist at all? The question of theodicy raised here is not unlike the tension of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* as a creation of God that is

deliberate, destructive and not good. In a way, Captain Ahab shares the readers' dissatisfaction with God. Just as Captain Ahab struggles to come to terms with being dismasted, the reader struggles to confront a scene of inane violence. In a way, both are left feeling short-changed and emboldened to "strike the sun if it insulted me." (Melville, page 967)

The insanity of Porphyria's lover and of the violence he exacts anticipates Frank Bidart's *Herbert White*. Most obviously, the two works lend themselves to comparison through their explorations of mental illness. Both poems delve into the psyche of a murderous psychopath to feature horrific acts of violence against women. However, the echoes of Browning in Bidart are not only further reaching, but more complex than mere imitation. As T.S. Eliot declares in *Tradition and the Individual Talent*: "The necessity that he shall conform, that he shall cohere, is not onesided; what happens when a work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them." (Eliot, page 3)

In *Porphyria's Lover*, Browning works against Victorian conventions of politeness to present an explicit description of strangulation. Against such a backdrop, it is telling that *Herbert White* stands out as a work that is even more graphic and taboo. The various descriptions of rape, murder and bestiality sets *Herbert White* apart as extreme even within the tradition of extremist literature. Yet, Bidart's decision to open

his first book of poetry with this poem attests to both the poem's significance and its importance. Just as in *Porphyria's Lover*, merely wagging the proverbial finger would be a grave injustice to the profundity of *Herbert White*. In his note on Frank Bidart, Richard Howard writes: "Shocking as 'Herbert White' is intended to be – and shocking it is – there is every reason for it to precede the rest, for this poem's real horror is its parallel with the discovery made in the closing poem 'Another Life', the *identical* discovery that the self must become one with its unacknowledged obsession, that there is only the one life, not other lives." (Bidart, page xviii) In this way, Howard identifies the poem's value as an opportunity for introspection.

Much like *Porphyria's Lover*, *Herbert White* is a monologue in which the only auditor is the reader. In this way, the poem achieves the same sense of disconcerting proximity that the reader cannot help but to flinch at. However, presenting the monologue in quotations allows the poem to escape *Porphyria's Lover*'s stream of consciousness narration. Through this *Herbert White* speaks directly to the reader, thereby placing them in a position not unlike the emissary's in *My Last Duchess*. Despite the clarity of the form, *Herbert White* is a polyphonic poem. The use of opposing voices within the monologue is a crucial device that allows the work to engage with the issue of the self. As a departure from *Porphyria's Lover*, Bidart's poem advances the undermining of perspective; rather than confusing the reader's judgment of the world, *Herbert White* defamiliarizes the self.

The poem begins: "When I hit her on the head, it was good," (Bidart, page 3, 1). The pedestrian diction evokes *My Last Duchess*' first line. However, the deceptively simple presentation is loaded; the use of "her" succinctly introduces the taboo of violence against women with much candour. In deviation from Bidart's own style the line is also oddly set in iambic pentameter to reinforce the regularity of tone. This is significant for Bidart himself commented: "When I tried to "translate" the phrases in my head into formal metrical or rhymed structures, they went dead. It seemed that my own speech just wasn't, as so much English has always been, basically iambic. (There are lines of pentameter in my poems, but usually they represent some order or "plateau" of feeling I'm moving toward, or moving away from.)" (Bidart, page 12). In this case, it seems as if the poem is being propelled by both form and diction towards a disturbing nonchalance that is at odds with the content. The unceremoniously blunt first line is also important through its presentation as speech. Without any precursors, the conversation and its topic seem wholly unprompted and completely casual; in this way, Herbert White echoes the feigned nonchalance of Browning's Duke. In this way, the reader is immediately confronted with a speaker who either does not grasp or does not care to adhere social convention.

The character of Herbert White is a complicated one to decipher, as there are multiple facets of personality at work.

and then I did it to her a couple of times,--
but it was funny,-- afterwards,

it was as if somebody else did it...

Everything flat, without sharpness or line. (2-5)

These lines are immediately striking for they do not logically follow the first line of the poem. Considered in prose: “When I hit her on the head, it was good, and then I did it to her a couple of times,-- but it was funny, -- afterwards...” The conjunction “and then” reads awkwardly and seems misused because the sentence is unfinished. Rather than completing the thought, the speaker uses odd punctuation and the line break to pause before embarking on another sentence. Again, the “but” seems unnecessary because the sentence does not contradict the preceding one. The incoherent speech introduces the idea that Herbert White is a polyphonic character. It is as if the incoherence arises from the reader being only privy to fragments of different conversations. The description of “Everything flat, without sharpness, richness or line.” summarizes this experience: for the reader, the lack of ‘sharpness’ makes Herbert White’s speech indiscernible. This absence of “line” seems rooted in the Pinteresque notion that there is no hard distinction between the real and the unreal. Specific to *Herbert White*, the speaker seems to struggle between his different manifestations. Ultimately, the incoherence references the halves of Herbert White that are at odds with each other throughout the poem:

When the body got too discomposed,
I’d just jack off, letting it fall on her...

-- It sounds crazy, but I tell you
sometimes it was *beautiful*--; I don't know how
to say it, but for a minute, *everything* was possible--; (13-17)

In this passage, readers are confronted with the upsetting image of the deranged Herbert White murdering an anonymous "little girl" then repeatedly defiling her decomposing corpse as his family waits. In lieu of 'decompose' the speaker deliberately misuses the word "discompose", which is defined in this context as: 'To destroy or disturb the composure of (a person, the mind, emotions, etc.); to perturb, agitate, unsettle.'¹It works as a tongue-in-cheek nod, in recognition of the auditor's state of decomposition. The incorrect word here is also characteristic of the uncertainty that dogs Herbert White throughout the poem; the inability to form coherent sentences bleeds into inaccuracy of language as well. The language mimics a euphoric frenzy as Herbert White struggles to match his articulation with his excitement. This is reinforced by the contrasting use of caesurae and a distinct lack of end-stopped lines. The juxtaposition of pauses and enjambment results in choppy lines that lend themselves to be read quickly yet haltingly.

The sick pleasure that Herbert White derives from murdering the little girl is heightened by the ignorance of his family to the fact:

Still, I liked to drive past the woods where she lay,

¹ Taken from the online Oxford English Dictionary, last accessed 4/23/2017

tell the old lady and the kids I had to take a piss,
hop out and do it to her...

The whole buggy of them waiting for me
made me feel good;
but still, just like I knew all along,
she didn't move. (6-12)

“The whole buggy of them waiting for me/ made me feel good;” illustrates a perverse sense of pleasure from the simultaneous proximity and ignorance of his family. The adjective “good” is repeated from the first line, as if to equate murder to a relatively banal sensation of being waited on by unsuspecting family members. In so doing, the diction seems to make light of the murder, as if it were nothing more than an adrenalin rush. Through this, the passage reinforces the heinousness of Herbert White’s total disrespect for human life. At the same time, the passage also introduces the reader to Herbert White’s other life. Using details about Herbert White’s personal life, the passage grounds the readers’ perception to frame him through a relatively ordinary lens; in spite of its perverse implications, the second line of the excerpt is essential to this framing. Through the offhanded reference to an “old lady and the kids”, the reader stumbles upon a startling revelation that Herbert White has a family.

The shock originates from various sources. The first is the candour with which the detail is introduced: The lines employ colloquial diction such as “old lady” and “buggy”

to reinforce the notion of regularity. In the context of Herbert White eluding his family, the candid tone is almost taunting. Second, the description of his family is oddly ambiguous especially when considered alongside the details later in the poem. The specificity is most prominent in Herbert White's observation that his father's new wife "was twenty-five years younger than him:" (86). An immediate conclusion to be drawn from Herbert's vague description is that he does not care about them. This notion is supported by the fact that his family is only afforded one line in the poem, after which all mention of them ceases. In the way that Herbert White's candour can be read as nonchalance, the tone of the passage also reinforces Herbert White's indifference. However, the indeterminate language is most important as another way to introduce uncertainty into the poem. Characteristic of extremist literature, uncertainty is employed to facilitate query from the reader. As a precursor, it is important to first recognise the context of the poem. Graphic descriptions of violence and sexual assault are distressing to confront and the depictions in *Herbert White* takes this sentiment further in a proverbial twist of the knife. Not only does Herbert White rape and murder, the poem makes clear that these unthinkable acts are exclusively exacted on young girls. Herbert White's pedophilic obsession is all consuming: "I kept thinking about getting a girl, / and the more I thought I shouldn't do it, / the more I had to—" (103-105) So much so, that Herbert's ungodly fixation bleeds into his speech such that the phrase 'little girl' is repeated throughout. The poem's deliberately offensive particularity prompts the reader to consider the terrifying implications for Herbert White's own children. For instance, if Herbert White were to have daughters, would he look to them for the same release? The implications if Herbert White were to have sons are equally troubling. In an interview,

Frank Bidart discusses the motivations behind Herbert White's actions: In essence, the murders and assaults exist as solutions and a way for Herbert White "to give himself to a violent pattern growing out of the dramas of his past..." (Bidart, page 29) The 'dramas' refer to Herbert White's issues with his absent father that dominates much of the poem. Through the distance that the unspecific language insinuates, Herbert White is also an absent father. In so doing, there is the alarming possibility of perpetuation in his sons. Alas, the ambiguity necessitates that the "kids" identities will always be elusive; in this way, the reader is left with two equally frightening thoughts.

Finally, the revelation is jolting because it starkly reminds the reader of Herbert White's humanity. In the face of such evil, it would be comforting to dismiss Herbert White from the realm of reality and to find his outbursts totally unfamiliar. Yet, that is not the case. As the family shows, lying within the murderous, pedophilic necrophilic Herbert White is a regular person. Hence, the notion that Herbert White belongs to a family works to contextualize the bizarre and relocate it in the reader's world. The introduction of Herbert White's absent father and nagging mother further shatters the illusion of Herbert White as an alien. Even if the reader does not identify with Herbert White the husband, they must connect with the fact that he is someone's offspring. The normalization of Herbert White is most evident from his self-awareness. The recognition that what he is saying "sounds crazy" (15) is complemented by what appears to be a moment of disbelief, if not remorse: "and I knew I couldn't have done that, -- / somebody *else* had to have done that, --" (22-23) The end-stopped lines indicate a moment of shock; the pauses signify a moment of acknowledgment, as if Herbert White is halted by the

atrociousness of his actions. The italicized “*else*” furthers this notion: the emphasis that the murderer must have been another person shows an utter refusal to identify with his actions. Thus, Herbert White presents a side of himself that readers must identify with. Through this familiarity, a major aspect of the poem’s discomfiture is laid bare. Though the reader initially encounters a character that seems foreign, the poem lends a complexity to Herbert White that impedes his relegation to pure fiction. Ultimately, this works to beg some harrowing questions: How is it that someone like Herbert White can have a family? After all, the fact suggests that nothing about Herbert White’s ‘ordinary’ life is discernibly different from the norm. Any number of Herbert Whites could exist in the world but it would be utterly impossible to differentiate them and this uncertainty is terrifying. After all, if Herbert White’s family cannot recognize him for the monster that he is, what hope do the reader’s have?

The possibility that Herbert White exists within all human beings is emphatically demonstrated by autobiographical details from Frank Bidart’s own life that are scattered throughout the poem. Although it is made clear that Herbert White is not Frank Bidart, the details indicate that the two are not wholly separate either. Bidart elaborates on this distinction during an interview with Mark Halliday: ““Herbert White” begins Golden State, and was written at the same time as the family poems. I wanted to make a Yeatsian “anti-self” – someone who was “all that I was not,” whose way of “solving problems” was the opposite of that of the son in the middle of the book. The son’s way (as I have said) involves trying to “analyze” and “order” the past, in order to reach “insight”; Herbert White’s is to give himself to a violent pattern growing out of the dramas of his

past, a pattern that consoles him as long as he can feel that someone else has acted within it. I imagined him as a voice coming from a circle in Hell. The fact that he is an “anti-self” only has some meaning, I thought, if he shares something fundamental with me; I gave him a family history related to my own.” (Bidart, page 29) Most striking from this elaboration is how the “dramas of his past” parallels Bidart’s “family history”. There is something sinister in how the issues that drive Herbert White to “hit her on the head” (1) are “fundamental” to Bidart. The previous discussion illustrates how a fleeting reference to White’s family may be used to place Herbert White within the realm of reality.

Bidart’s “fundamental” similarity with White stretches far beyond these minor points of similarity to “a family history related to my own.” In this way, *Herbert White* becomes a vessel for Bidart to explore the possibilities of his past. Yet, the reader is left hesitant to dismiss the work as mere speculation. After all, the only assurance that Bidart does not share White’s propensities is from the scant assertion that Herbert White is “all that [I] was not,” In this way, the ever-pervasive notion of uncertainty returns again to perturb the reader. Through this effect, Bidart’s own words ring true: “I realized that “subject matter” – confronting the dilemmas, issues, “things” with which the world had confronted me – had to be at the center of my poems if they were to have force.” (Bidart, page 21)

In the interview, Frank Bidart expands on the importance of writing from experience by discussing his earlier poems: “I was doing what many people start out by doing, trying to be “universal” by making the entire poem out of assertions and generalizations about the world – with a very thin sense of a complicated, surprising,

opaque world outside myself that resisted the patterns I was asserting. These generalizations, shorn of much experience, were pretty simple-minded and banal.” (Bidart, page 11) What Bidart describes as the “complicated, surprising, opaque world outside myself” confirms the complexity of Herbert White as derived from the multiplicity of his character. It may seem ironic that Bidart’s personal experience creates a side to Herbert White that exudes universality; however, the “past dramas” of White and Bidart actually touches on a rather ubiquitous issue.

It is clear from the dominating narrative that Herbert White’s “issues in the book” (Bidart, page 29) stem from a dysfunctional relationship with his father. Herbert White introduces his father as a pathetic figure; a lonely drunk in an empty motel room crying. White’s distaste is tangible from the phrase “real embarrassing” that is emphatically highlighted through the use of caesura. Ultimately, the description is rooted in a perception of inadequacy: first, from “all he hadn’t done” in White’s childhood. The father’s inadequacy is also highlighted by instability that White deems “real embarrassing” (54) for a man his age. This is exemplified by the way the woman “was gone” and the fact that “He was still a little drunk,” (55) Here, the patriarch invites comparison with Pinter’s Max in *The Homecoming*: for one, both works exhibit ambiguity in terms of parentage. In *The Homecoming*, this is established through suggestions of the mother’s adulterous relationship with Mac. In *Herbert White*, it is alluded to by Herbert’s attempt to justify his father’s actions: “...with bastards / not even his own kids...” (59-60) Ultimately, it is the perception that White’s father is “real embarrassing” that cements the connection as the same sentiment is expressed through

Lenny's degrading dismissals of Max. However, it is important to recognize that these two works also differ in a significant way. Throughout *The Homecoming*, there is a tense hostility between Max and Lenny as they struggle for power. As evidenced by taunts like "...He used to like tucking up his sons..." (Pinter, page 194), Lenny revels in Max's weakness. Conversely, the perceived weakness of Herbert White's father is an extension of White's bitterness: the father's absence in Herbert White's youth becomes an inadequacy that colours his lens in adulthood. Hence, the thought "To think that what he wouldn't give me, / he *wanted* to give them..." (96-97) offers at least a partial explanation for Herbert White's "violent pattern..." (Bidart, page 29)

As Bidart explains, violence is Herbert White's way of resolving his issues with his father; the "pattern consoles him as long as he can feel that someone else has acted within it." (Bidart, page 29) In the monologue, Herbert White reminisces about "a little girl-- / who I picked up, hit on the head, and / screwed, and screwed, and screwed, and screwed, then / buried, / in the garden of the motel..." (61-65) The rumination perversely likens the act to "finally finished drawing this / huge circle..." (84-85) The image works to symbolize a sense of fulfillment that demonstrates the earlier assertion that "...for a minute, *everything* was possible..." (17) In so doing, Herbert White obtusely champions rape and murder as freeing and "*beautiful*" (18) At its core, Herbert White's issue is rooted in the absence of his father that directly results from "years of sleeping around, --" White's embittered childhood is presented as something his father "wouldn't give [me]" (96) The language here positions Herbert White as the victim of a situation over which he had no control. The joyless description of childhood, in stark contrast with the "laughing /

and bouncing” (92-93) stepbrother, is a direct result of the absent father. Without a model to look to, Herbert White’s developed without guidance and a feeling that things did not “make sense” (67). The stifling condition of such a childhood is embodied in the frustrating silence of the “grass”, “trees”, and “glass” (70). It is as if the desperate search for a father figure has yielded nothing but the same feeling of “a wall; dead, and stopping [me]” (73) Following in Herbert White’s perverse logic, raping and murdering then become tools to regain control and escape the frustrations of his childhood. The desire for control is best represented by what seems a method to the madness. Each anecdote follows a specific formula: For instance, when Herbert White “was screwing a goat”, “it didn’t do any good...” (94,99) The appearance of a method is ultimately underscored by the formulaic anecdotes that describe these attacks. Each description involves a “hit on the head”, rape and masturbation over the corpse. The notion of a “pattern” is perhaps best demonstrated by repetition in the language: “screwed, and screwed, and screwed, and screwed...” (4) Ultimately, sex is what pulls the father away and in recognition of this, Herbert White perverts the act into something extreme and unthinkable; as if to punish the action that has caused him so much grief while also robbing others of their childhoods.

Yet, White also makes clear that the release is fleeting: It is only “for a minute,” (17) that “everything / fit together;” (81) The elusiveness of the feeling is highlighted by the unfinished sentence “huge circle...” (85) that is emphatically interrupted by “—But then, suddenly I knew / somebody *else* did it...” (Bidart, page 5) As if in recognition of his heinousness, Herbert White only feels consoled “as long as he can feel that someone

else has acted within it.” The necessity of assigning violence to an ‘other’ for consolation mirrors the feeling Bidart describes after writing *Herbert White*: “So “Herbert White” wasn’t an escape from the world of the family poems...*Golden State* did in fact do for me what I wanted it to do; I felt I had been able to “get all the parts of the problem” out there. I’ve never had to write about my father or Bakersfield again. (Will I?) It seemed to settle those issues for me. It drained those subjects of their obsessive power.” (Bidart, page 29) For Bidart, creating *Herbert White* becomes an outlet for the emotions cultivated by his own past. The work becomes a simulation that allows Bidart to explore and experience the full range of his emotions. In this way, what the violent ‘other’ is to Herbert White becomes analogous with what Herbert White is to Frank Bidart. Both White and Bidart take solace from being able to “get it to seem to [me] / that somebody *else* did it...” (120-121)

Although Bidart and White both find comfort from dissociation, the conclusion of the poem unveils a harrowing revelation:

I tried, and tried, but there was just me there,
and her, and the sharp trees
saying, ‘That’s you standing there.

You’re...

just you.’ (122-126)

True to the tradition of extremist literature, the poem reveals a harrowing truth: "...You're.../ just you." By showing there is no 'other' for Herbert White, the poem also reveals that Herbert White is not separate from Frank Bidart. Ultimately, this speaks to the propensity for unthinkable evil in all human beings that Browning, Highsmith and others espouse. For Herbert White "—Hell came when I saw / MYSELF.../and couldn't stand/ what I see..." (128-131) In this way, Herbert White becomes the embodiment of a potential for evil that exists within all humans. This recursively takes the poem to a central idea that permeates the works of Browning, Melville and Highsmith: "...all angel is not'ing more dan de shark well goberned." (Melville, page 1108) The unveiling of this truth calls to mind the words of Frank Bidart himself: "So much of our ordinary lives seems to refuse us – seems almost dedicated to denying us – knowledge of what is beneath the relatively unexceptional surface of repeated social and economic relations." (Bidart, page 31) In this way, reading the poem symbolizes the mortifying undertaking of self-confrontation. By following Bidart's footsteps in honest self-reflection, the reader is likely to find their own Herbert White. There is an inevitable discomfort in accepting the ugliness of humanity. Yet, to flinch at this truth is to echo Oscar Wilde's critique of nineteenth century literary culture that holds true today: "...dislike of Realism is the rage of Caliban seeing his own face in a glass." (Greenblatt, 1732)

As the harrowing revelations of *Herbert White* demonstrate, the exploration of the self is an inherently difficult endeavor. Yet, it is an important one. The dangers of not recognising the complexities within are emphatically illustrated by Bidart's later poem *Ellen West*. Using the character of Ellen West, the poem is able to show how extreme

delusion can lead to a deadly disengagement with the world. Of the works in this study, *Ellen West* is the only poem that does not reference violence in some way. Unlike the characters of *Herbert White* or *Porphyria's Lover*, Ellen West is not a murderer. Yet, the aversion to physical violence offers no comfort for the reader. As a visceral portrait of mental and physical disorder, its descriptions are both graphic and troubling. Often, the details of Ellen's deterioration are offered by a voice distinct from Ellen's. In this way, the poem is also one of interruptions. The narrative jumps between various perspectives and time frames. Similarly, the language varies; at times, it dives into Ellen's consciousness through monologue. At others, it takes on the form of her doctor's notes, as well as Ellen's suicide letter. Through the multiplicity of perspectives, the poem is able to highlight various ways Ellen detaches from the physical world around her.

The first lines of the poem introduce a familiar idea:

I love sweets, --

heaven

would be dying on a bed of vanilla ice cream... (1-3)

To love "sweets" is not uncommon, and the ordinary diction reflects that. In fact, the simplicity of these lines exudes innocence, calling to mind a child-like fondness of "sweets". However, it is quickly made obvious that the love in question is much more complicated than the diction suggests. The notion of "heaven" as "dying on a bed of vanilla ice cream..." introduces Ellen's internal struggle. The use of the word "dying"

indicates specificity to Ellen's ideal; it implies that the ice cream is as important to her concept of "heaven" as death. By introducing the concept of death, the initial innocence is lost; the love becomes obsessive and suffocating. This perversion of innocence is continued throughout the poem and is most explicit when Ellen describes "a childish / dread of eating; hunger which can have no cause,--" (207) In this way, the first lines also perverts the function of food. The speaker does not want to taste the sweets, but does want to be surrounded by them in a moment when their normal function is irrelevant. The moment of self-denial, rooted in the inability to perceive the function of food is symptomatic of Ellen's disengagement.

The idea of self-denial is reminiscent of Franz Kafka's *A Hunger Artist*. For instance, the short story features equally grotesque descriptions of the artist's starvation. However, the similarity between Ellen West and the Hunger Artist ceases with each character's refusal to eat. The hunger artist's desire for past glory and fame gives rise to a steely resolve that is absent from Ellen. Instead, Ellen seems to oscillate between voracious desire and disgust to reflect her inner struggle. The desire to eat that Ellen resists is illustrated by the train-ride after her discharge is symbolized through Ellen's projection onto others. As she observes the people around her, Ellen sees a "...pathetic, desperate / desire to be *not* what they were:--" (250), yet she fails to ascribe these observations to herself.

The inability to accurately self-reflect is exemplified by the vision of her "true self" (4), the first and most important quality on her list is "thin" (5). The fallacy of this

wish is demonstrated by further elaboration on Ellen's desires: the list also includes a wish to be "the sort of blond / elegant girl whose / body is the image of her soul." (6-8). The latter items are significant because the reader later learns "the intolerable / fact that [I] am dark-complexioned;" (214-215) This "fact" suggests it highly unlikely that Ellen is blond; the implication is that the initially described traits of her "true self" (4) are inaccurate representations of physical reality, if not antithetical to her physical self. The poem employs an objective perspective to present further corroborating evidence of Ellen's delusion: "She has thinned down / to a skeleton" (26-27) and yet, Ellen's primary and deadly goal is to be "thin." (5). Ultimately, Ellen's disillusionment with herself is supported by her relationship with the other female patient. The basis of Ellen's attachment can be found in her fixation on Maria Callas: "I felt I was watching / autobiography—" (164-165) suggests an element of self-identification. In these women, Ellen finds an image that she strives towards but frustratingly never achieves; these women fulfill the "implications" (20) of being a girl that Ellen is only "sometimes" (21) able to attain. Hence, it is only "sometimes, / [I even] feel like a girl." (22)

The intensity of her struggle is palpable from the entrancement with a piece of orange that had been spit out.

After about thirty minutes, the woman
peeled an orange
to quiet the child. She put a section
into its mouth—;

immediately it spit it out.

The piece fell to the floor.

—She pushed it with her foot through the dirt

toward me

several inches.

The image of “The piece fell to the floor.” illustrates the intensity of Ellen’s focus: The alliteration of ‘i’ sounds in the preceding line lends it speed to contrast the stillness of Ellen’s observation. The orange on the floor is further framed by two long pauses and its isolated presentation on the page. From this, it is clear that the fallen orange piece consumes Ellen’s perspective to fuel her hunger. The short, blunt lines that conclude the excerpt highlight the tension between her hunger and her insistence that her husband “*not* bring food...” (261). Ultimately, Ellen’s animal-like desire for the food climaxes in how she wanted “to reach out, / and as if invisible / shove it in my mouth-;” (276). The diction underscores this ferocity; the violence and desperation of the word “shove” starkly contrasts how the mother “put a section” into the child’s mouth. The mundane image of dropped food as framed by Ellen’s voracious desire to “reach out” and “shove it” in her mouth is deeply disturbing. As a consequence of her inner struggle, Ellen is dehumanized. Lingering in the scene is also a sense of uncertainty. The reader is left to consider whether Ellen would reach out for the orange, or continue to resist. Each option is unsettling to consider: To reach for the orange would be humiliating. To do so

would lay bare Ellen's "hunger which can have no cause, -- / half my mind says that all this / is *demeaning*..." (207) Alternatively, to abstain would be to prolong her torment and give in to Maria's "*tapeworm*" telling her "that she was an *idiot* ever to think anything / *material* wholly could satisfy? ..."

Throughout the poem, there is a pervading sense that Ellen's disillusionment with the world is derived from resistance on her part; the tension of the train-ride materializes this battle. However, the most striking example of Ellen's active resistance is in the relationship with her husband. In Ellen's suicide note, she writes: "You and, yes, my husband, -- / you and he" (307-308) As evidence of their divide, the phrase "my husband" indicates that the note is not addressed to Ellen's husband. The commas and 'double-punctuation' that interrupts the line work to isolate "my husband". The emphasis results in a tone that anticipates surprise, as if to imply that the mention of her husband as someone who drew her "within the circle" (309) is unexpected. The negative light that this casts on the marriage is further supported by the observations of the husband on the train: "his eyes / were red; / and I saw / --*I'm sure I saw*-- / disappointment." (286-290) Ellen's assumption is thinly based on the redness of his eyes. In actuality, the actions of the husband suggest care: He goes on walks with her, and visits her at the hospital. Most telling, is the way that the husband perceives Ellen's turmoil on the train: "—At last, he bent down, and / casually / threw it out the window." (280-282) Yet, Ellen is unable or unwilling to recognise these actions. The consequence of this disillusionment is deadly. In the suicide note, the line "I am crippled. I disappoint you." (319) shows that Ellen's misperception is what leads her over the edge.

The constant assumption of disappointment is revealing of Ellen's insecurity and self-deprecating attitude. Through insecurity and hyper-awareness, Bidart's Ellen evokes T.S. Eliot's J. Alfred Prufrock who is similarly hounded: "Time to turn back and descend the star, / With a bald spot in the middle of my hair-- / (They will say: "How his hair is growing thin!")" (Eliot 39-44) The words in the brackets emphasize Prufrock's timidity. The diction of this line is significant; "They" is unspecific and calls into question whether these critics exist outside the realm of Prufrock's mind. Despite this uncertainty, Prufrock is unable to confront these whispers and the timidity is highlighted by the use of brackets. This is similarly reflected in Ellen's final words: "Will you greet with anger, or / happiness, / the news which might well reach you / before this letter?" (320-323). Hence, the two characters are connected in their delusion. The similarity reaches further in the perturbing description Ellen assigns to herself: "He married / meat, and thought it was a wife." (14-15). The cruel objectification echoes J. Alfred Prufrock, who declares: "I should have been a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas." (73-74)

Perhaps the most emphatic demonstration of resistance is in the ineffectiveness of treatment. Although references to Ellen as a patient verify the voice's identity as a doctor, yet there exists a glaring disengagement that is exemplified by the sporadic observations: the interval between the first and second observation lasts five days. The second interval spans seventeen days and the final interval stretches over seven days. Perhaps the most telling indicator of the treatments failure is in the irony of the final note. The voice states

that Ellen “Has entirely, for the first time in years, stopped writing poetry.” (106). This is ironically followed by a transition back into Ellen’s verse. The victory of Ellen’s resistance is marked by the doctor’s final note: “We therefore resolved to give in to / the patient’s demand for discharge.” (235-236) The juxtaposition of “resolved” with “give in” is emphatic in highlighting the futility of the doctor’s efforts. In the record of Ellen’s death, the language is unfeeling; though the other patient was described as “elegant”, no adjectives of the sort are spared in the matter-of-fact line: “In the evening, she takes a lethal dose of poison, and on the following morning she is dead.” Through cold language, the poem makes the lack of connection between Ellen and the world clear. Ultimately, the doctor’s failure to prescribe “definitely reliable therapy” begs the question: If Ellen had been receptive to the world around her, would she still have committed suicide?

Ellen’s struggle against the world around her is emphatically demonstrated by the question “Why am I a girl?” (16) The delusion reaches far beyond the ideal of being thin. As the text explicitly shows: “The ideal of being thin / conceals the ideal / *not* to have a body--;” (209-211) As such, the aversion to allowing “another to put food into [my] mouth” (80) is only one element of the battle against “Nature.” (92). In the same way, Maria Callas’ weight loss and the subsequent “change” (140) in her “huge voice” (139) is not merely to “make her artistry subtler, more refined, / more capable of expressing humiliation, / rage, betrayal...” (148-150) The physical change is no longer confined to the “ravenous, still insatiable” desires of Maria’s mind. Tentatively, Ellen attributes the change to “—Perhaps the opposite. Perhaps her spirit loathed / the unending struggle / to *embody* itself, to *manifest* itself” (151-153). The idea espoused is that the Ellen cannot

reconcile the life of her soul with the physical realm. This refusal is evident from how the phrase “—Then I think, No.” (209) riddles the verse as a physical manifestation of the struggle, and escalates through emphatic italicization: “—But then I think, *No.*” (218) The final iteration of this phrase is the most forceful: “—But then again I think, *NO.*” (225) The thundering “*NO*” ultimately puts a stop to the back and forth to preface the final conclusion: “...This *I* is anterior / to name; gender; action; / fashion; / MATTER ITSELF,-” (225-228) The resolute tone signals an absolute departure from the Prufrockian tradition. In a decisive moment, Ellen finds the ‘solution’ to her struggle. By committing suicide, Ellen exerts control over a struggle that has dominated her life. The poem concludes on its most concerning implication of suicide as a solution.

The harrowing ending to *Ellen West* necessitates the question: what is so torturous about the world? The idea of engaging with the outside world as an inherently dangerous task is best illustrated by *My Last Duchess*. Rather than the torment of incompatibility, this poem highlights the deadly effects of extreme societal constraints. Robert Browning’s *My Last Duchess* sets itself apart from the other works in this study; even when considered alongside *Porphyria’s Lover*, the difference is stark. When considering the literary tradition of extreme representation, it is easy to limit one’s scope to graphic descriptions. However, such a limitation would be an injustice to the diversity of the tradition. *My Last Duchess* exemplifies how a work can abstain from extreme language and grotesque depiction but still engage with extremes. For instance, the poem’s key event is derived from the Duke murdering last Duchess. Though the murder is only ever implied, the inference is clear and undeniably disconcerting. In fact, Browning himself

acknowledged that the Duke caused her death and “Most of the many commentators on the poem... agree with Browning that the Duke probably had the Duchess killed.” (Berman, page 75) Although “The subject of the Duke as ur-villain appears to predominate in most critical writings on the poem; we are told repeatedly that the evil of the Duke is notorious and luminous.” (Berman, page 88) It is crucial that one’s consideration not be limited to the allusion to murder; the allusion is but one facet of the work’s extremism. As R.J. Berman observes in *Browning’s Duke*, a moralizing condemnation of murder is the least interesting interpretation of this vivid portrait. Using the Duke’s complexity as a vessel, the poem explores the dangers and consequences of societal pressure when it is taken to an extreme.

My Last Duchess is a dramatic monologue that addresses both the reader and the characters in the poem. Like a soliloquy in lyric form, the monologue could easily be a part of a play. As R.J. Berman writes in *Browning’s Duke*: “The poem, rather than being a narrative is ‘dramatic’ because the whole body of it appears to have been excerpted from the body of a play, of many characters and scenes and a conceivable plot...” (Berman, page 1) The beauty of the dramatic monologue therefore lies in the compact expression of dramatic experience through a lyric medium. Given that the speaker is the only character with a voice, and the “particular set of circumstances” (Berman, page 3) that surround the speaker, the dramatic monologue provides an opportunity for a portrait to be painted. The dramatic monologue form facilitates the complexity of the Duke in part by virtue of the emissary’s presence as well as the events preceding and following as defined by “the reader’s imagination....” (Berman, page 1)

The dramatic monologue is prefaced with the word “Ferrara” Like the portrait of the Duchess the implication of this is initially veiled. Further study reveals the word to be a clue concerning the origins and setting of the monologue. Louis Friedland argues that the Duke is loosely based on Duke Alfonso II of Ferrara, of the Este family. As Berman asserts, this argument “has subsequently come to be almost universally accepted as definitive.” (Berman, page 95) The study also identifies the basis of the last Duchess to be Lucrezia de’ Medici, “daughter of Grand Duke Cosimo I of Florence and Eleanora di Toledo” The historical context is crucial because it provides a reference for the readers’ understanding of societal constraints. In this instance, locating the poem in Duke Alfonso II and Lucrezia de’ Medici’s relationship introduces the issue of class tension. As Friedland notes, Lucrezia was the “daughter of Grand Duke Cosimo I of Florence and Eleanora di Toledo” Despite their renown today, the Medici family were then newly established when compared with the Este family. The Duke’s disapproval of the late Duchess and her mannerisms is easily understandable.

Duke Alfonso II is described by “another historian, Chledowski... “He was immediately arrogant and conceited, and prided himself beyond measure upon his bravery, intelligence and ancient descent.”” (Berman, page 96) The unmistakable resonance with Browning’s Duke establishes an otherwise fictional character in reality. The disturbing implication is that “there are numbers of such men as the Duke and such women as the Duchess in our midst.” (Berman, page 92)

With the context established, the monologue begins “That’s my last Duchess painted on the wall / Looking as if she were alive.” (Browning, page 384, 1-2) The diction here is unspectacular, and almost colloquial. In combination with the iambic pentameter that permeates the poem, a very casual tone is established. The portrait seems to be mentioned by the Duke in an offhand manner, as part of his descent to “the company below”. The dramatic monologue form is again useful because the reader is afforded an opportunity to guess at what could have come before the Duke’s words. In this instance, it is hard to imagine that the subject of the portrait could have been raised by anyone other than the Duke himself. After all, even if the emissary did catch a glimpse of the Duchess’ “glance” (8), the Duke asserts that only the daring have ever chanced to ask him about it. This notion is immediately sinister and revelatory of the Duke’s character. It raises some important questions: Beyond the demands of politeness, why do people avoid or even fear to ask of the veiled painting to the extent that doing so is considered ‘daring’? If the context of the portrait is as scandalous or sensitive as the emissary’s demeanor suggests, why does the Duke insist on presenting it? The conclusion here must be that the casualness in which the painting is introduced is a feigned one. Perhaps out of the need for civility or politeness, the Duke has to veil his introduction to the portrait in order to mask his own unhealthy obsession with its subject. Or, the Duke may be fully aware of people’s cautious curiosity of the subject. In which case, he feigns a nonchalant attitude to purposely unnerve the auditor by drawing on the portraits’ notoriety as well as the demands of politeness. This feigning is clear in the Duke’s moments of ‘self-doubt’: “...She had / A heart – how shall I say? – too soon made glad, / Too easily impressed;” (21-23). Given the Duke’s confident assertion that his actions are

only “by design”, the interjection of “how shall I say?” must be taken as part of the Duke’s calculated pretense. This idea is ideally demonstrated in the lines: “...Even had you skill / In speech – (which I have not) – to make your will / Quite clear to such an one,” (35-37). The irony of these lines again hark back to the notion of control. The Duke is cognizant of his mastery of language and the words contained in the parenthesis become an ideal demonstration of it. For in four words, he is able to convey both the complexity of his feigned speech and maintain the diplomatic politeness required of him. In this way, the poem’s first instance of horror presents itself: A murderer may be scary, but an indifferent killer that politely elaborates his crime is terrifying in a completely different way.

The Duke’s eagerness to speak about the portrait’s subject is demonstrated in the later anecdotes of the various ways the Duchess was “too soon made glad” (22) However, the second line of the poem is most revealing of the Duke’s unflinching attitude: “Looking as if she were alive...” (2) The words are emphatically positioned in that they immediately follow the first line, as part of his first introduction of the portrait. In so doing, the words further reveal the Duke’s bold attitude towards discussing the late Duchess. In fact, a certain glee may be deduced from the tone; this is especially apparent in the way that a caesura is created by the comma at the end of line one, for the pause contributes to an offhand quality in the way the words are spoken. The Duke’s eagerness to speak on the painting is also evident throughout the rest of the poem: the phrase “Strangers like you...” (7) reveals that the curtain is often drawn back for guests other than the emissary. Further, the “glance” that strangers are able to catch implies a

deliberate gap left between the curtains. As Berman notes, "...the Duke manifestly wants questioning, searching glances; he has apparently left a narrow strip in the center of the painting exposed to elicit "strangers' "inquisitively "turning to him. He wants almost desperately to talk about the picture – or its subject." (Berman, page 24) This notion relates back to the previously discussed feigned offhandedness. The Duke wants the portrait to be wondered at and takes pleasure from the restrictions of politeness that prevent the pursuit of said wonderment. In a sadistic act, the Duke is then able to establish control over his auditors while simultaneously causing extreme discomfort. By way of this conclusion, one must diverge from Berman's quotation of Laurence Perrine's regarding the three motives for the Duke's manner of speech. The Duke does not attempt to impress the envoy; on the contrary, it would seem that the Duke wants to unsettle him and in the same motion, the reader.

Though astute, the diction of Berman's observation of the Duke's desire to speak on the late Duchess lacks specificity. In particular, the Duke desperately wants to talk about *his* picture. The eagerness of the Duke is derived from an excitement about *his* possession. The desire for control is evident and supported by the metrical structure: The iambic pentameter allows the stresses in the first line to fall on "my" and "Duchess". The possessiveness of the Duke is further apparent in the fact that the portrait is only accessible by drawing back a curtain. As Berman notes, "What he wants physically to conceal is the Duchess' portrait when he is not present. Exposing her is the equivalent of exposing himself as one who could not master her. She is gone now; and that mastery, never realized while she lived, asserts itself by his manipulation of a cord that draws

curtains – scarcely satisfying control, but one that must suffice him now.” (Berman, page 26) Again, the point made here is piercing, but falls short in that Berman characterizes the Duke’s control over the late Duchess as “scarcely satisfying” After all, death is the ultimate form of control. The Duke himself acknowledges this in his description of the late Duchess in the portrait: “...This grew, I gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands / As if alive.” (45-47). The Duke’s satisfaction is palpable in the controlled, short sentences of these lines. The concentration of pauses is highly unusual for a poem that is strikingly uninterrupted. Ultimately, the juxtaposition of “There she stands” and “As if alive” pronounces a sarcasm and tongue-in-cheek tone that undermines Berman’s view that the Duke is dissatisfied with rendering his late Duchess into a form finally acceptable to the calling of the Duchy.

In line with the notion of absolute control, the death of the late Duchess has rendered her a piece of art that is fully within the Duke’s controlling grasp. Perhaps more disturbing is the Duke’s deliberate attempt to minimize the portrait. His feigned nonchalance becomes relevant yet again in this attempt to diminish: “We’ll meet / The company below, then” The caesura before “then” reads as if to suggest that the anecdote of the Duchess that it follows was nothing more than an aside. The Duke’s attempt to minimize the portrait’s subject is ultimately cemented in the Duke’s mention of his sculpture of Neptune. Were it not for the pair’s obligation to “meet the company below”, perhaps the Duke would have an equally harrowing anecdote for the sculpture “Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for [me]!” (56) After all, the portrait like the sculpture is nothing more than an object. The sculpture is also relevant in the discussion of control in its

symmetry with the portrait: symbolically, the Duke is represented by the masculine, dominant figure of Neptune while the Duchess is paralleled with the “sea-horse”. In this way, the sculpture becomes the embodiment of an ideal that the Duke feels obligated to aspire to.

The Duke’s excitement in introducing the sculpture is tangible in the exclamation mark and his possessive nature is further obvious in the emphatic positioning of the poem’s final words: “...for me!” It is further obvious in the juxtaposition of “...Nay, we’ll go / Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though...” (53-54). The first part of the excerpt serves to almost usher the Duke down the stairs, but in an eagerness to display his possessions the Duke is obliged to insert at least a fleeting remark on the other artwork. Finally, the sense of urgency created here draws further attention to the fact that despite the time constraints of their narrative, the Duke finds time for a long exposition on his last Duchess. It is a very subtle and politic way to present his demands to the emissary: as Perrine asserts, one of the motivations for the Duke’s manner of speech is to “stipulate politely but clearly what he expects for his share in the bargain both as to dowry and as to daughter,” (Berman, page 30) However, Perrine’s assertion falls short in its failure to recognize the politeness as a veil. While it is true that the exposition outlines the Duke’s expectations, it is also a threat. The Duke’s unflinching approach to the exposition guarantees death, should the expectations be not met.

Though the Duke’s menacing threat to the emissary is uncomfortable to witness, it is but one way that the poem induces discomfort in the reader. Despite the plethora of

condemnation for the Duke's deliberate, calculating and violent character, readers often find themselves sympathizing with an unlikely anti-hero. As Langbaum concedes: "...Moral judgment is in fact important as the thing to be suspended, as a measure of the price we pay for the privilege of appreciating to the full this extraordinary man." (Berman, page 13) For one, the finesse in the Duke's language is impressive: as mentioned, the Duke's tone is deliberately feigned to present both his demands and threats of violence with no uncertainty, while maintaining the politeness expected of his station.

Another point of attraction may be found in the Duke's power over others. The poem's dramatic monologue form is instrumental to this, for the Duke is the only character with a voice that could easily come from a play. The silence of the emissary then conveys a sense of fear, if not respect for the Duke. This sense of the Duke's fearsome persona is further supplemented with the drama of the poem: With regard to the portrait itself, "...none puts by / The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)" (9-10) Further, people would only venture to ask of the portrait "if they durst" (11). Subtler hints of the perceptions surrounding the Duke can also be seen in his direct addresses to his auditor: "...I repeat, / The count your master..." (49). The assertiveness of "I repeat" is highlighted by a rare caesura at the end of the line. The pause then gives way to a stark reminder of the emissary's relative position. In this regard, the syntax is important: By placing "The count" at the forefront, the identity of the emissary is necessarily diminished. Further, the emissary is never directly addressed or labeled as such; the only basis for this is by inference from the words "your master" In fact, the emissary is so

diminutive to the Duke that this line, near the end of the poem, is the only reference at all to the identity of the auditor. A similar effect is observed by critic R.J. Berman in his reading of the poem's presentation of Frà Pandolf: "The Duke avers that "Frà Pandolf's hands," note, did not paint; they "worked": even as a painter he remains a worker, almost a laborer, for the Duke, just as the renowned "Claus of Innsbruck" is later mentioned to have "cast in bronze" – a figure again more of menial than of creative effort..." (Berman, page 35) Ultimately, the single most emphatic claim to the Duke's power lies in the line: "...This grew, I gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together." (45-46) The menace of the Duke manifests in this chilling confession that exhibits an unhesitating willingness to end life. Likened to God, the Duke giveth (the honor and prestige of his name) and the Duke taketh away.

The Duke's charisma extends beyond his domineering demeanor; in fact, his self-confidence is an arguably magnetic trait. The arrogance of the Duke is especially tangible in the Duke's disdainful exposition: "Sir, 'twas all one! My favor at her breast, / The dropping of the daylight in the West," (25-26). The dissatisfaction is made evident by the alliteration of 'd' sounds in the second line. One can almost hear the Duke spitting the words out; as if even the beauty of a sunset should bow to his "favor" Such a high regard for oneself, and the utter contempt for nature is almost Ahabian: it calls to mind again *The Quarter Deck* from Melville's *Moby Dick*, when Captain Ahab declares his willingness to "strike the sun if it insulted" him. (Melville, page 967) Further evidence of the Duke's unassailable pride may be seen in the way he "choose[s] / Never to stoop." (42-43) In context, this uncompromising attitude draws emphasis to both the Duke's

ruthlessness and the innocence of the Duchess. After all, the reader and auditor alike are left wondering if perhaps the Duke had 'stooped' to say, "Just this / Or that in you disgusts me..." (37-38) how different the late Duchess' fate would have been. In refusing to stoop, the Duke displays egotism matched only by Milton's Satan; an equally ambivalent character in the way he also embodies an inherent wickedness that is confused by an undeniable attractiveness. The parallel is especially pellucid in Satan's emphatic declaration: "Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav'n" (Milton, 1.264) Herein lies a major crux of the poem's ability to unsettle: How does the reader's own morality stand if he or she is able to sympathize or even admire a character such as the Duke? The answer to this lies in the deviation of Browning's Duke from Milton's Satan. The Duke's unyielding attitude is a prerogative of the "nine-hundred-years-old name" that he so cherishes. This seems to allow for if not necessitate a certain sympathy for the Duke, given that the calling of his station is no more a choice for him than entering this world was a choice.

In this way, the primary issue of the poem comes home to roost. The pressures and expectations of society created the Duke. Since the Duchess is less a wife than a public role to be filled, it would seem the Duke was merely doing his job. R.J. Berman's analysis endorses this idea: "...the vital difference between the desired wife and the politically requisite Duchess. Ferrara must have a Duchess; such is the Duke's obligation, not prerogative." (Berman, page 82) The constraints on the Duke are ultimately reflected in the regularity of the poem that is obvious in both meter and structure. The lines are written in strict iambic pentameter, laid out in rhyming couplets. This strict adherence to

form can be suffocating and the poem's capacity to yield such a complex portrait is testament to the Duke's own ability as a dramatic character. By recognizing this, the reader may feel absolved of any self-doubt that arose from the feelings of admiration or attraction. Yet, it is inescapable that the Duke is a murderer that cannot be sympathized with. What solidifies the unnerving experience of studying Browning's Duke then is that the pressures of society have resulted in a polarizing figure that can neither be condemned nor endorsed. The dilemma of dealing with this issue is exacerbated by S.A. Brooke's note, "...it is rather a picture of two temperaments which may exist in any cultivated society, and at any modern time. But there are numbers of such men as the Duke and such women as the Duchess in our midst." (Berman, page 92) Browning's poem transforms into a truly disturbing commentary on the state of the dangers of modern society and the prevalence of the characters that it inevitably breeds.

And so, the importance of investigating extreme literature is laid bare. By taking issues to their figurative extremes, the works in this tradition are able to bring their consequences to light in a glaring way. It seems then that extreme literature, through unfamiliarity and discomfort, is the truest representation of our lives. Yet, the human condition is necessarily complex. While this complexity lends itself to the ubiquity of extreme literature, it also renders any attempt to comprehensively study of its implications impossible. In the words of Herman Melville, "For small erections may be finished by their first architects; grand ones, true ones, ever leave the copestone to posterity. God keep me from ever completing anything." (Melville, page 946).

Works Cited

The Holy Bible, King James Version. Cambridge Edition: 1769; King James Bible Online, 2017. www.kingjamesbibleonline.org. Accessed 23 April 2017.

Melville, Herman. *Pierre ; Israel Potter ; The Piazza Tales ; The Confidence-Man ; Uncollected Prose ; Billy Budd, Sailor*. New York: Library of America, 1984. Print.

Redburn, White-Jacket, Moby-Dick. New York: Library of America, 1983. Print.

Pinter, Harold. *The Essential Pinter*. New York: Grove, 2006. Print.

Kahn, Jack S. *An Introduction to Masculinities*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009. Print.

Browning, Robert. *The Poetical Works of Robert Browning*. London: Smith, Elder, 1909. Print.

Bidart, Frank. "Ellen West." *Poetry Foundation*. Poetry Foundation, n.d. Web. Accessed 24 Apr. 2017.

Eliot, T. S. "The Waste Land." *Poetry Foundation*. Poetry Foundation, n.d. Web. 24 Apr. 2017.

"Tradition and the Individual Talent (1920)." *Poetry Foundation*. Poetry Foundation, 13 Oct. 2009. Web. 24 Apr. 2017.

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." *Poetry Foundation*. Poetry Foundation, n.d. Web. 24 Apr. 2017.

Bidart, Frank, and Richard Howard. *Golden State*. New York: G. Braziller, 1973. Print.

Bidart, Frank, and Mark Halliday. "Frank Bidart - An Interview (With Mark Halliday)." *Ploughshares* 9.1 (1983): 11-32. JSTOR. Web. 4 Apr. 2017.

Greenblatt, Stephen. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Vol. 2. New York: W.W. Norton, 2012. Print.

Berman, R.J. *Browning's Duke*. New York: Richards Rosen, 1972. Print.

Milton, John, William Kerrigan, John Peter Rumrich, and Stephen M. Fallon. *The Complete Poetry and Essential Prose of John Milton*. New York: Modern Library, 2007. Print.