

**"And yet God Has Not Said a Word!"
Robert Browning and the Romantic Killer in Literature**

by

Erin Burns-Davies

**A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts**

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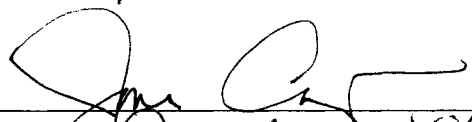
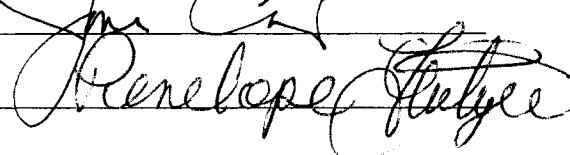
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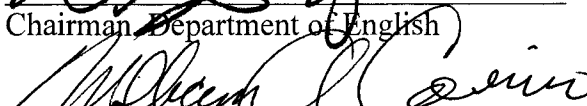
This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor, Dr. Mary Faraci, Department of English, and has been approved by the members of her supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of The Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

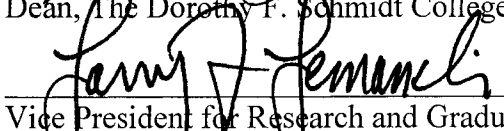
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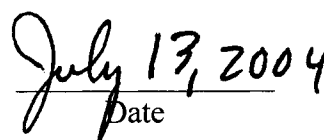

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ABSTRACT

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Robert Browning's dramatic monologues often characterize the darker aspect of romantic love through speakers who demonstrate their devotion to violence. Exploring the innovations in discourse, Browning gives his narrators voices that allow them to speak from an ancient literary tradition. For Browning's speakers, words make the silencing of the lover either the act of ultimate devotion or the result of disappointed expectations. The narrator speaks of the absence of God, as when Porphyria's lover holds her body to him: "and yet God has not said a word!" With the poet's strong speech--in all his attractiveness, his destructive display of love and his dismissal of God--Browning has helped to create a discourse that has sculpted the literary force of the romantic killer.

Three novelists in particular employ the literary force of Browning's experiments: Anne Rice's *The Vampire Lestat*, Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* and Thomas Harris's Hannibal Lecter novels. Intertextual comparisons among these narratives delineate how Robert Browning's innovation of the seductive antihero has persisted in literature.

**For my mother,
whose patience has been without end and whose love has been without doubt.**

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Introduction:
Browning's Creation of the Killer

"Then how grace a rose? I know a way!
Leave it, rather.
Must you gather?
Smell, kiss, wear it--at last, throw away!"

--Speaker from Robert Browning's "A Pretty Woman" ¹

"Old truths and ancient magic, revolution and invention, all conspire to distract us from the passion that in one way or another defeats us all.

And weary finally from this complexity, we dream of that long-ago time when we sat upon our mother's knee and each kiss was the perfect consummation of desire. What can we do but reach for the embrace that must now contain both heaven and hell: our doom again and again and again."

--Lestat, from Anne Rice's *The Vampire Lestat* ²

"Is evil something you are? Or is it something you do?"

--Patrick Bateman, from Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* ³

"Taste and smell are housed in parts of the mind that precede pity, and pity has no place at my table."

--Hannibal Lecter, from Thomas Harris's *Hannibal* ⁴

In order to best contemplate the increasing popularity surrounding the representation of the antihero, the captivating murderer of contemporary first-person fiction, it is essential to study Robert Browning's experiments with voice in the Victorian dramatic monologue. His villains express a disillusionment that would become more characteristic of late twentieth-century writing. They are, as the definition of antihero would imply, attractive to others, but this allure is deceptive in disguising the mask of their more violent tendencies. And though they do not possess empathy in any normative understanding of such sensibilities, Browning's antiheroes express concern for the apathy or absence of God in the presence of their crimes. Through the creation of intriguing monsters, Browning began the evolution of the attractive antihero in contemporary literature.

The majority of Browning's work revolved around the mastery of the dramatic monologue: simply put, a poetic device that allows the reader personal insight into the

character who is speaking. Though the essential details of this form have existed since approximately A.D. 750 and it is arguable to what extent this method was reinvigorated by Browning, he believed the dramatic poem concerned itself with an objective approach to facts.⁵ The objective writer, in this case, would present that which is associated with the common eye, rather than the subjective poet who attempts to embody what God sees (Flowers 96-8). The emphasis is also on mood rather than dramatic action within the external world.

In a pre-Freudian period, Browning's writing portrayed the study of behavior, drives, and sexual mindsets. He provides the voices that testify his characters' often destructive motives. Yet it is important to distinguish this poetic mode from actual drama because a soliloquy is the character's exercise in trying to make the audience process the motives for his actions. As the speaker of the dramatic monologue, however, such a character does not rationalize but instead is making an already established point to the reader from the "outside world" (Flowers 104). In other words, his decisions have already been made.

And though Victorian villains have been portrayed before as charming, rarely have they been elevated to major figures. When they have featured on equal par with their nobler counterparts--as in the novels of Bram Stoker, Mary Shelley and Robert Louis Stevenson--their humanistic aspects are never fully acceptable. Dracula, for example, is not human and we are not offered any insight into his thoughts (as we are through the journals and letters of Jonathan Harker and Mina Murray). He is an enigma, like Jack the Ripper (who, indeed, has been argued as a partial inspiration for Stoker's imagination of merciless violence), and this puzzle ceases any attempts to appreciate his perspective (Rance 441).⁶ Frankenstein's monster is far more sympathetic, but one must remember that he is a construct of other men's genius and frailty. And while Dr. Jekyll presents his own suffering in his journals and his conflicted mind is obviously the origin of the villain, Mr. Hyde is the embodiment of man's base, degenerate desires. The coarseness is, therefore, established as separate from the nobility. These monsters are portrayed as outsiders, while Browning's

antiheroes live among us and evince empathy not through their separateness but through our sameness (even when we are addressed as their victims). Kathleen L. Spencer has classified the standard accepted by *Dracula* in its fantastic fusion of the unnatural in a natural setting. "The world the characters initially inhabit is our own world. Further, the narrative voice insistently emphasizes violation and transgression, the logical contradiction between the impossibility of the occurrence and its actuality" (199). Disbelief at the vampire walking the modern streets of London would be one example of the supernatural in a real place. The more conventional Victorian device of establishing the horrific mood of the narrator is reversed because that view is through the killer's eyes rather than the hero(ine)'s. It is made somewhat easier to be enveloped by these personae because of the aesthetic appreciation Browning provides the speakers.

The subjects of these dramatic monologues offer affectionate description of the embodiment of beauty. In "A Pretty Woman," the hypothesizing narrator discusses the fragility of this state and how it might be exploited and ultimately destroyed. The language is very deliberate in its selection of words that communicate deep desire and abuse for desire's sake. While the speaker's appreciation is carried through his naming a pretty woman as "Sweet" with her "blue eye . . . dear and dewey" and her "face composed of flowers," he soon illustrates her vulnerability.

Shall we burn up, tread that face at once

Into tinder,

And so hinder

Sparks from kindling all the place at once? (Browning *Comp. Poet.* 190-1)

This beauty, in all its apparent loveliness, is actually overwhelming the speaker, and so its annihilation is proposed in comparatively gentle terms. The duality of this state is evaluated by Melissa Valiska Gregory: "Browning's monologue provides an uninterrupted connection between his audience and a sexually transgressive speaker for whom violence and love yield similar satisfactions" (6). By creating a sympathetic impression earlier in the

narrator's description of beauty, the poet has cleverly manipulated the reader with the shift towards the intense lyric.

Another aspect of this dramatic convention is the speaker's use of a mask that in one sense is intended to hide his true animosity while the guise itself hints at the reality behind the mask (Flowers 106). One might consider Duke Ferrara's description of his deceased spouse to the auditor in "My Last Duchess." Rather than simply refer to his lately murdered wife as having been what he would consider a fickle and ungrateful woman, the Duke attempts to refer to her supposed indiscretions in a kindly manner. This illustration is often marked by the Duke's interruptions in his own speech as he seems to contemplate what words would effectively present his wife's failings without conveying any emotion uncharacteristic to his noble position. "She had/ A heart--how shall I say?--too soon made/ glad" (*Comp. Poet.* 252). Here the Duke, while sounding generous despite his disappointment as well as candid to the auditor, is in fact acting for the reader.

Browning's 1835 preface to *Paracelsus*, in which he contemplates his own intentions for the dramatic monologue, states that as much work is required from the reader in digesting the poem as was demanded from him in creating it. The reader's "intelligence and sympathy" are needed (*Comp. Poet.* 12). And if one adheres to this expectation, one sees the Duke's acting, his mask, as an illusion. The Duke later asserts in a more obvious interruption of his speech: "She thanked men,--good! / but thanked/ Somehow--I know not how--as if she ranked/ My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name/ With anybody's gift" (*Comp. Poet.* 252). The performance is not expected to be convincing but to reveal itself by the carefulness of its own delicate design.

According to several critics and fellow poets--including Elizabeth Barrett Browning--this was an unconventional device because it demanded effort on the part of the reader to deconstruct the hinted drama yet it did not "teach" the reader as was considered the Victorian poem's primary function (Flowers 110). However, Browning's poetry conveys a mistrust of authoritarian instruction that would become more common with artists in the

coming century. What the narrator speaks is not necessarily of any moral value, but it can maintain a dramatic interest and, while the reader learns to accept the speaker's word less and less, so Browning's characters are able to express a questioning of religious belief without the burden of the poet's moralistic duty. This device frees the reader to judge for him or herself how to regard the subject. Rather than present a clearly positive view as a contrast to an explicit evil in his poems, Browning uses noncoercive speech by allowing his speakers to portray themselves and their experience with a sense of normative behavior and thought. Because of his restraint from poetic judgment, the reader is then free (or obligated) to invest in the subject his or her own scrutiny and thus decide what is at stake. The possibilities for examination often rank with the highest concerns of the Victorian age, including religion.

In "Porphyria's Lover," one of Browning's most famous dramatic monologues, there is clearly a heavy religious doubt. As earlier discussed, this narrator--the lover--expresses the sweetest tenderness in his realization of Porphyria's devotion one stormy night. Upon her unspoken admission of love, she appears an object of perfection to him. Hoping to preserve this ideal moment in their union, the lover strangles Porphyria with her own long hair and holds her body to him throughout the silent evening. "And yet God has not said a word!" (*Comp. Poet.* 286). This poem's final line is indicative of defiance or even hopelessness. In this admission of action, the lover is establishing the righteousness of his decision in the eyes of God. One might also postulate that God's silence is maintained because there is, in fact, no higher power with the strength to question or to castigate what has happened. This contemplation of religious authority in the face of shocking crimes would suggest the author's attempt to understand the nature of brutality.

In addition to the narrator's discussion of such universal themes, it is valuable to return to the subject of the villain's familiarity with the reader through the use of the dramatic monologue. Gregory has noted the structure of the personal lyric and how it "creates a dynamic of forced intimacy" (4). The reader is either complicit (as in "My Last Duchess")

or susceptible (as in “Porphyria’s Lover”) because of the auditory position Browning has created.⁷ Herein may lie another source for the critique of the poet’s methods.

Domestic violence in Victorian England has a particular resonance in the literature of its time; few had examined the subject with quite the same ferocity as Browning. “The rhetorical dynamics of his monologues, which metaphorically force themselves on their readers,” Gregory writes, “parallel the dynamics of sexual violence” (3). Because this type of abusive relationship revolves around domination, so Browning arranges his poem with the reader in a subordinate position, an action which infuriated many. Most of the attacks were personal. *The Eclectic Review* warned Browning of the “bitterness” that would grow in him from such material and *Athenaeum* referred to *Men and Women* as “perverse” and “incomplete” (qtd. in Gregory 5). However, it is necessary to consider the value of the compulsory position of the reader through the abuser’s stance because it provides at least a venue for discussion of a serious societal problem. Domestic violence is evaluated in a clearer manner than works that only hint at the abuse from the perspective of a battered and conflicted victim.

A particularly powerful example of the abuser’s viewpoint is through the character of Count Guido Franceschini in Browning’s epic poem *The Ring and the Book*. Not unlike the Duke in his noble ancestry and sophistication, Guido is on trial for the murder of his wife Pompilia Comparini. In one sense, the courtroom testimony of the poem sharpens Browning’s rhetorical possibilities. However, because of the courtroom setting, his more critical readers were also accommodated with a moral perspective they felt his earlier works lacked. The result was largely public praise (Gregory 7). Overall, though, this exercise allowed a means for Browning to prosecute the circumstances of domestic violence. Guido is provided with two monologues in the text that he uses to defend his legal and social position.

The second of these testimonies reads similarly to "Porphyria's Lover" in description and intention, and may have been in some ways Browning's revision of that work's approach to reader identification.

She lay there, mine:

Now, mine she is if I please wring her neck,--

A moment of disquiet, working eyes,

Protruding tongue, a long sigh, then no more,--

As if one killed the horse one could not ride!

Had I enjoined "Cut off the hair!"—why, snap

The scissors, and at once a yard or so

Had fluttered in black serpents to the floor:

But till I did enjoin it, how she combs,

Uncurls and draws out to the complete length,

Plaits, places the insulting rope on head

To be an eyesore past dishevelment! (*Comp. Poet.* 584)

There is an obvious obsession in Guido's possessive view of Pompilia. Hair is representative of a woman's potency and Guido's craving to shear off Pompilia's tresses signals his desire to consume that strength. The simile of the horse and the proposed defacement of her beauty are also aggressively sexual in nature and not unexpected of the controlling doctrines of violence.

Having thus established the principles surrounding the poet's alluring antihero and his environment, it is important to illustrate the effect his methods have on the construction of character in modern fiction. Browning's work aided in the evolution of a more complicated literary subject who does not entirely think or act as others do, but is nonetheless a fascinating figure. Such portraits have become far more acceptable in first-person form than they had been to Victorian critics, but the romantic killers' characteristics are recognizably similar to those in Browning's monologues.

Several critics have examined the merging of poetry and prose in literature of the last century, and with it Browning's contribution to the modern novel. Shared concerns of twentieth-century poets and novelists are that both forms should be artistic with an emphasis on their treatment of subject matter rather than on subject matter itself, both offer the author's perspective through the device of a persona and both invest their work with the power of language based on association rather than rational order (Flowers 160-1). According to Flowers, "what Browning had to teach was what prose had to teach poetry . . . directness of language and clarity of mental image" (162). Straightforward verses have dominance over sentimentality in his poetry, and conventional patterns of syntax are altered from earlier methods of prose to carry great significance that would ordinarily have followed a slower, more linear procession of facts. Traditionally, prose operated with the purpose of function and poetry with form, but Browning transforms both by presenting the subject matter through the limited but potentially fascinating perspective of its viewer. Thus, the interior monologue has become a well-known exercise in the modern novel. In her essay, "Browning and the Modern Tradition," Flowers expressed a point valuable to the comparisons in this thesis:

The examination of Browning's relation to modern poetry [or, in this case, modern novels] does not reveal him to be a modern poet, nor does it suggest that modern poets are *Sordello*-style Victorians. Rather, this study is made in the hope that by looking at Browning from a twentieth-century viewpoint, and by looking at modern poetry through a significant figure in the nineteenth-century background, the developments of both modern poets and of Browning will be more deeply appreciated. (178)

It is with this idea in mind that three very popular American novels, with their portraits of romantic antiheroes, have been selected as comparisons in content and style to the standard set by Browning's dramatic monologues.

Anne Rice's *Vampire Lestat* has, in some ways similar to Duke Ferrara or even

Porphyria's lover, become a kind of icon in popular literature. His egoism is well known, thus making him a greatly amusing narrator of his own fictional autobiography, but many of his larger struggles share a commonality with those romantic internal disputes of Browning's dramatic speakers. The vampire questions why no God has clearly validated his deathly existence or even sent punishment for it. Lestat's misguided decision to share vampirism with his lover Nicolas only serves to rupture their bond and eventually leads to the adored friend's self-destruction. The speaker of any such work, by accident or intention, cannot allow the beloved to thrive. Abuse patterns are thus demonstrated by the narrator towards his victims and towards the reader through the device of the first-person voice.

The title character and narrator of Bret Easton Ellis's largely violent novel *American Psycho* echoes many sentiments of Browning's dramatic monologues surrounding the theme of aggression. Like Duke Ferrara, he has a greater preoccupation with aesthetics than with humanity. While he cannot find any sympathetic form under his own "mask" of sanity, Bateman compensates by maintaining the polished lifestyle so expected of successful men in the 1980's. Because he is attractive to men and women wherever he goes, he has many opportunities to be attracted in return, but fails. Bateman describes himself as a shell, and, while he is incapable of love, he's given some pause by the rare presence afforded his company by Luis Carruthers, a co-worker, and by Jean, his bashful secretary. Though neither one of these lovesick acquaintances are entirely pure in their motives and neither compels Bateman to healthfully emote, his recognition is registered as significant by their survival of his rage. Among his many victims, women particularly seem to represent a complicated otherness he wishes to deconstruct, while men expose his anxiety about individual weakness. The absence of personal humanity, however, is felt also by his dismissal of any higher power to justify his isolation or judge his transgressions.

Such a void is also suggested by the notorious fictional serial killer Dr. Hannibal Lecter from Thomas Harris's *Red Dragon*, *The Silence of the Lambs* and *Hannibal*. Having

experienced extraordinary levels of cruelty and been the perpetrator of many cruelties himself, Lecter considers his actions pale beside those of any God that may or may not exist. His problematic relationship with the FBI agent Clarice Starling is particularly significant to this analysis in that it reflects a complicated duality of romantic longing and painful psychological penetration. Such actions are comparable to the Count's determination to utterly control Pompilia in mind and body. Although Lecter is perfectly capable of fully understanding any of his subjects, he does not care for them. To some extent, Starling is an exception to this because she has survived him for the duration of the novels, but her destruction is in his emotional consumption rather than physical annihilation of her. This appreciation of the beloved's splendor and simultaneous violent capabilities is a subject of much interest for Browning's own monsters.

Even through the device of the lyric poem, Browning's pervasiveness in contemporary literature is evident yet largely forgotten. His articulations of character--particularly the violent mind--and the environment that helped to create their bents and later cloak their crimes have been echoed most often in the modern novel. The invitation to both embody the speaker during the confession and to be the victim to the narrator's positioning of the reader, has proved more alluring over the last thirty years than it had been in Browning's own time. Testimony to this would be the large popular success of the novels by Rice, Ellis and Harris. Their creations have further explored the nature of the romantic antihero's appeal, his relationship with God and the curious dynamic of his compelling voice.

Chapter 1:
Anne Rice and Patterns of Abuse in the Vampiric Community

With the voice of Louis de Pointe du Lac, the protagonist and narrator of her first novel *Interview with the Vampire*, Anne Rice found a release for the consuming anguish over the death of her daughter from leukemia and Rice's subsequent struggle with alcoholism. In the process, she also revolutionized the Gothic sense of the vampire in the modern world. Louis's sentimental recollections over his brief but painful mortal life, followed by his even more tragic existence as an immortal, represent both the stasis of Rice's own period of addiction and grief as well as the *fin-de-siecle* of the Victorian age, demonstrated by Louis's failure to reject the imagined innocence of his childhood and to emotionally develop into the modern period.

In 1985, nearly a decade after the publication of *Interview*, Rice reinvigorated what would become her *Vampire Chronicles* with a different perspective on the story. Her first book had been a huge financial success, spawning a new breed of vampire fiction in print, television and film. The author recovered from her bouts with alcoholism and became a pop culture icon. However, in the midst of the rising AIDS epidemic, new gay rights and feminist movements, and the punk rock decade--with its own debt to Gothic tradition and Rice's writing--the author reevaluated Lestat de Lioncourt's character from that of an enigmatic, shadowy villain, to that of a more appealing and extroverted antihero ready to embrace the twentieth century. The narrative control shifted from Louis to Lestat, the son of a Marquis, whose decadence and French nobility bear social resemblance to several of Browning's voices in the dramatic monologue, particularly Duke Ferrara of "My Last Duchess" and Count Guido Franceschini of *The Ring and the Book*.

Rice confessed that she'd wanted to create a novel "that sounds spoken, with the kind of freedom of a narrator who just steps in at any moment and talks about his characters" (qtd. in Badley 116). Through Lestat's perspective, the *Chronicles* were open to a new set of possibilities. Her narrator embraces the life before him, but his history also resonates in his language and in his actions. As the reader bears the description of abuse through Browning's dramatic speakers, so we also are presented with the dynamics of a dysfunctional vampiric family from the point of view of its abuser. The power Lestat commands from these destructive relationships is also the source for his frustrating questions to God as either his enabler or his adversary. In all his attractiveness, his violent exhibition of love, and his rejection of God, Anne Rice's romantic antihero embodies the survival of the Old World and the modern fascination with the Gothic tradition.

As with the reader's subordinate position in being spoken to by the dominant narrator in Browning's violent monologues, so the reader is placed in a similar dynamic by Rice's organization of Lestat's tale. The readers are situated to receive not only his description of the increased sensuality of the vampire's experience, but also the brutal necessities that accompany an immortal life. Browning, too, allows his characters to illustrate social dilemmas through their supposed inhumanity and their decadence with the intention that the readers will take an active role in determining their own sympathy and judgment. Susan Sellers, in her examination of myth and fairy tale elements in contemporary fiction, has noted how Anne Rice's work offers a study of society's horrors equal to any Gothic novel, but does not create a solution with a return to order. "By showing us the consequences of this dilemma and by leaving the ultimate responsibility with the reader," Sellers writes, "[her] expository fictions present a potent mythopoeia for our time" (95). Rice's transition in narrators between the first *Vampire Chronicles* more powerfully initiates this outlook and its intended result. Unlike the more hesitant Louis, Lestat moralizes little over killing for the sake of his blood thirst.

In *Interview*, Louis recounts how often Lestat would not only sate his hunger for the necessity of vampiric life, but that he would take pleasure in emotionally and physically tormenting his victims before they are finally killed. But in Lestat's own testimony, he justifies the treatment by stating how the victims had been villains themselves.

When [Louis] says I played with innocent strangers, befriending them and killing them, how was he to know that I hunted almost exclusively among the gamblers, the thieves, and the killers, being more faithful to my unspoken vow to kill the evildoer than even I had hoped I would be? (The young Freniere, for example, a planter whom Louis romanticizes hopelessly in his text, was in fact a wanton killer and a cheater at cards on the verge of signing over his family's plantation for debt when I struck him down. The whores I feasted upon in front of Louis once, to spite him, had drugged and robbed many a seaman who was never seen alive again.). (499)

These victims, in other words, had been victimizers and therefore deserved their fate. One might even read into this description that Lestat considers himself having committed a social justice while simultaneously fulfilling his need for blood. But, if one is even slightly informed on abuse patterns, it would be apparent this is one of the most frequent excuses for the perpetration of violence by the strong over the weak. Rice's use of Lestat's voice is one which constantly shifts the reader between sympathy and judgment. The protagonist has himself been hurt and abused and so his abuse is part of a well-known cycle that continues in his relationships with other vampires and, of course, his human victims. In her study of violence and women's writing, Annalee Newitz has written: "The safe space where Rice stages and masks sexualized . . . abuse is therefore a safe space for both perpetrators and victims. It is a space where the line between victim and perpetrator is impossible to draw" (188-9). This complicated dynamic is demonstrated also by Browning's narrators.

Duke Ferrara believes he recognized a fickleness in his wife's disposition that would lead to adultery, thereby rationalizing his "commands" to terminate his last duchess and her provoking smiles "together" (*Comp. Poet.* 252). This exercise evolves in the far more complex *The Ring and the Book* in which Count Guido Franceschini declares his legal and social responsibility to commit the murder of his supposedly unfaithful wife. In fact, he asserts the result of the trial--and the readers' judgment with it--is less important than the count's ability to uphold societal justice through his domination of the household. Mary Rose Sullivan has written: "So strong is [Guido's] insistence on the advantages flowing from his act of violence that he claims, finally, in contradiction to the anxiety he has been professing, to be indifferent to the outcome of the trial" (142). His rhetorical skill is essential in establishing the pattern of abuse in the poem. This pattern is apparent also in Lestat's description of his home life with Louis and their vampiric daughter Claudia.

Domestic abuse having been of particular importance to Browning's monologues, we can recognize its presence in the explanation of the living arrangements of the vampires. Both Browning and Rice reverse the expected dichotomies that illustrate why societal order supposedly works. Consider how the most popular vampire novel of the Victorian age, *Dracula*, studies the upheaval of traditional gender roles but ultimately returns to the status quo with the antihero defeated and the Harkers united in marriage and parenthood (Sellers 80).¹ Some of Browning's most powerful monologues, however, penetrate the domestic sphere--not to illumine its sacredness but to deconstruct its failures. Rice continues this by writing her vampire family with the organization of traditional family roles but leaving them unbalanced by their nature. Louis's perspective had been that he was transformed and kept by Lestat simply for the land and wealth that he acquired from the relationship. But Lestat claims to have "fallen fatally in love," that he was "seduced" by Louis's tenderness and his dependence on Lestat (498). They resemble very much the self-justified abusive husband and the battered wife. That Louis needed him, according to Lestat, is what drove him to bind Louis so closely--even to the point of introducing a child

to the household in a time-honored tradition of mending a dysfunctional relationship with parenthood.

A six year old girl at the time of her transformation, Claudia was clinging to her deceased mother when Louis came upon her in despair. Draining her with the intent of putting the child out of her misery, Lestat completes the process by replacing her blood with his own and making her a vampire. Thus, both men play equal parts in creating their "daughter." And for a time this action succeeds in creating a functioning--though often problematic--family life.² The set does, according to Lestat, envelop the romantic characteristics of beautiful Victorian monstrosity. "We were the essence of that nineteenth-century conception--aristocratically aloof, unfailingly elegant, and invariably merciless, and cleaving to each other in a land ripe for, but untroubled by, others of our kind" (500). This description suggests an awareness of the qualities inherent in Browning's version of attractive yet arrogant villains.

Yet for all the seeming fantastic in this modern Gothic story, Rice has incorporated the typical heterosexual qualities associated with pre-feminist, pro-marriage ideologies. James R. Keller, in his studies of Anne Rice's sexual politics, has written:

In her portrayal of the vampire family, Rice universalizes the male-female and aggressive-passive binarisms of heterosexual unions. Lestat possesses traditional male attributes, such as aggression, bluntness, insensitivity, and practicality. Louis is feminized, manifesting traits such as passivity, sensitivity, compunction, compassion, and resentment (Gelder 112). Furthermore, the marital roles of the two vampires reinforce the nineteenth-century distinction between the separate spheres of men and women. (16)

As such, Lestat as the husband controls the family finances and dominates all major decisions, while Louis as the depressed wife nurtures their daughter and preserves the soul of their home in the expected exercise of a Victorian family. One of the reasons behind this arrangement may likely be that it is a fantastical reenactment of very real situations.

Victims and abusers (in this case, Lestat) often remember their relationship as more satisfactory and participatory than it may have been. Instead of an explicit rendering of the domestic reality, the reader is instead offered the supernatural "household" as representative of closeted human interaction. If vampires are not human, they do not need to follow human laws or manner codes. Despite this rule, the elements of Lestat's narrative are suggestive of domestic violence. The family dynamic of this episode in New Orleans, while it inevitably falls apart by the destructive natures its relatives possess, is more successful when compared to than the organization of Lestat's earlier, rougher attempt at a home in his native country of France.

In his vampiric youth, Lestat had attempted another family with his own mother Gabrielle as his first vampire companion. Though their relationship had never been traditional as parent and child--Gabrielle never wanted to be called "Mother" and was open in her discussions with Lestat about her sexual desire and her disappointments in the maternal and wifely state--their bond shifts to something more uncannily erotic. "I kissed the blood on her open lips. It sent a zinging through all my limbs and the thirst leapt out for her and tried to transform her into mere flesh" (157). And yet there is another violently romantic sentiment bringing us back to ironic satisfactions available to our antiheroic killer. In mixed emotion during his transforming Gabrielle, he writes, "The thirst wanted her heart . . . And I was standing there with my lips parted and my eyes glazed and I held her far, far away from me as if I were two beings, the one wanting to crush her and the other to bring her to me" (158). His condition brings him a contrasting desire: to be merged with the beloved in all his devotion and yet to destroy her with that same intensity. This is the most common struggle within Browning's own antiheroes in their fascination with vulnerable beauty and its ultimate extinction. It usually arises from the instinct to preserve an ideal by forcefully control or murder. The irony is such force only mutates that ideal into something else entirely. And when Gabrielle's vulnerability is altered with the "Dark Gift," she becomes a greater monster than her son.

Once she has become a vampire, Gabrielle abandons any remaining attachment to her original family, and embraces the freedom of a more masculine identity. She cuts her hair and dresses as a man. With this new role, Gabrielle does not rely on her son for any more than the most basic instructions of her new vampirism for survival. Her union with Lestat, like his later relationship with Louis, is yet another marital structure--only with Lestat in the more feminine position. They are also a reversed child and parent in that Lestat provided his body for Gabrielle's nourishment. Keller has noted, "The image of sucking that accompanies the creation of any vampire . . . signifies infancy" (17). Thus the act of the "Dark Gift" both recreates family roles and confuses them.

The third and final member of this adopted family is Lestat's lover Nicolas de Lenfant. Like Louis in "his grim intensity, his rebelliousness, his tortured capacity to believe and not to believe, and finally to despair," Nicolas in many ways also possesses for Lestat a poetic ideal and also an inviting vulnerability familiar now from readings of Browning (497). Vampirism, Lestat realizes, will force him to drink from--and ultimately destroy--those he loves most. This becomes apparent to him when Nicolas first comes to realize Lestat's new supernatural state. In a scene similar to Browning's poem when the lover realizes Porphyria must die, Lestat holds Nicolas as a friend and slowly feels within him a change from sincere warmth to the bloodlust of a vampire for his victim (134). "I knew that the last barrier between my appetite and the world had been dissolved," he reflects. "No one was safe from me now, no matter how innocent. And that included my beloved Nicki" (143). Though Lestat himself does not eventually kill Nicolas, his friend's spirit is broken and he grows mad after Lestat makes him one of the undead. After that transformation, Nicolas and Lestat are permanently cut off from one another emotionally--no longer communicating fellow thought or feeling.

With his "autobiography," Lestat alters his already strange and chaotic world, makes it his own more than with his supernatural powers. Both interactions, in published and extraordinary forms, redefine the nature of communication and this is reflected in Lestat's

relationships with his own kind because his voice is the only one in control. It is necessary to recall the nature of Browning's narrators to effectively contemplate the reasons why Lestat becomes alienated. The nineteenth-century dramatic monologue—as Browning mastered it—illustrated the speaker's fixed view without the desire to be understood. In this sense, Lestat's first narrative exercise is itself an extended dramatic monologue. The authority he attempts to hold over human life and his vampire companions reflects the command he assumes over the reader. This first created family, like any dysfunctional group, cannot develop without the aid of interactive communication--revealing the problem inherent in Lestat's relationships based around killing, around domination of the other.

Unable to control what he has done to Nicolas, Lestat flees the very family he brought into being and Nicolas is left to the mercy of the Theatre of the Vampires, a coven which attempts to restrain Nicolas just as he begins to study his newfound nihilistic power. He despairs and commits suicide by throwing himself into fire (343). Nicolas's death, it seems, is directly brought about by Lestat's "Dark Gift"--a force that alienates him from his lover and destroys him.

One is reminded of the final line in "Porphyria's Lover" regarding the silence of God. This could be interpreted to mean the lover feels that either what he has done is not to be considered sinful, or that God is not there to judge him. Lestat, too, wrestles with the existence of God--uncertain as to whether he is being punished in the form of vampirism, or deified himself by this status. In fact, Lestat possesses several god-like qualities. His supernatural powers include being able to read the thoughts of others--mostly humans, along with some unguarded fellow vampires. The details of a person's entire existence can be exposed. As indicated earlier by his rationalization of murder, he acts as God's hand by taking the lives of those he believes are set for death. The treatment of religion, particularly Christianity, in the novel suggests a problematic source for society's disappointment. Rather than a representative of a good that can be depended on, Rice's

depiction of faith through Lestat is that it serves as a distraction "from realizing the fundamental meaninglessness of life" (Sellers 81-2). Marius, an elder vampire, tells Lestat he possesses the kind of innocence that is claimed when true guilt is finally dissipated. "To be godless is probably the first step to innocence . . . to lose the sense of sin and subordination, the false grief for things supposed to be lost . . . An absence of need for illusions . . . A love and respect for what is right in front of your eyes" (381). A third possibility is also worth exploring: that God is actually evil, hateful, to have allowed the murder of His creations. As the original Father, God is perhaps portrayed as the originator of the abuse pattern carried out by Lestat and so the vampire is intended to emulate these practices. Without any significant kind of transcendental laws in their works, the anxiety of the age that was hinted through the voices of Browning's antiheroes is later examined through Rice's Lestat in our own time.

"Porphyria's Lover" is again echoed in the description following Lestat's murder of a mother and child on their way to the sanctuary of a cathedral. Having been injured and in need of blood, Lestat had been waiting outside the church for a victim to sate his thirst. Shortly, a beggar woman with a baby in arms notices the protagonist's state and stops to help him. In the woman's embrace, warm with love for her child and concern for the stranger, Lestat briefly enjoys her kindness and then destroys both her and the baby.

There weren't any words for the rapture. Before I'd had all the ecstasy rape could give. But these victims had been taken in the perfect semblance of love. The very blood seemed warmer with their innocence, richer with their goodness. (142)

An interesting contradiction is presented here in Lestat's narration. He begins by stating "there were no words" for the sensation of the kill, but continues to explain his crime against the mother and child and what their unrealized sacrifice means to him. The comfort he experiences through them reinforces Lestat's nature to reflect on violence as more satisfying than it likely was for those who faced him. The perfection of the victims' love

recalls the lover's depiction of Porphyria as "perfectly pure and good" just before her strangulation (286). There is no regret, no sense of loss in either of these deaths, but a celebration of their sacrifice for the narrator's sake. Unlike his previous victims-- "evildoers" who presumably deserved the violence that took them (appropriately related to the "ecstasy" of "rape" by Lestat)--these beggars reflected only goodness and their murder outside the cathedral asserts Lestat's dismissal of concern for good and evil altogether.

When Lestat first realizes that old myths do not apply to him, such as the supposed dangers of crucifixes, his fear of a higher power diminishes. He considers it "further proof that God had no power over me" (103). Slowly, this leads Lestat to believe that the concepts of good and evil are created by humanity itself, eventually leading him to become a rock star at a concert for the faithless (131, 541). These concepts, however, are impossible for him to dismiss entirely, and Lestat's fears are often given voice through Nicolas. "When you got the magic," Nicolas tells him, "what did you do with it but use your Satanic powers to simulate the actions of a good man!" (266). Though Lestat is able to exact god-like powers, he cannot protect those he loves and he can never fully succumb to any real compunction.

Despite his transgressions, Lestat makes a compelling narrator because he is more a man than a monster. Rather, it is through his vampiric needs that he becomes a mechanism of monstrosity. Though he is a "symbolic outsider," he bears "the burden of all our irrational drives and helps us act all of that out" (Rice qtd. in Badley 118). Lestat's supernatural cravings for blood overpower his desire to love and be loved. As a narrator, his reasonings present the perspective of the abuser, the lover and the agnostic. His antihero shares the struggle between chaos and redemption that Browning's dramatic speakers also possess as they establish their will.

Chapter 2: Gothic Resonance Behind Patrick Bateman's "Mask of Sanity"

The media circus that surrounded the publication of *American Psycho*, by then-twenty-seven year-old Bret Easton Ellis, is something of a phenomenon in the world of contemporary literature. Criticized by some who felt the book was intentionally offensive, particularly against women, the text was rejected by Simon & Schuster less than a month before its scheduled publication date. Within forty-eight hours, however, it was bought by Vintage (a paperback division of Knopf) and the rage over the book's content only increased, resulting eventually in a boycott led by the National Organization for Women. Many placed the emphasis of their criticism of Ellis's novel on Ellis's own person. Because he was the creator of Patrick Bateman--the Wall Street serial killer who invests his days in various methods of self-improvement and his nights in the mutilation of young women--Ellis was accused of embodying the monstrosity evident in his writing. Naturally, the public debate aided the financial success of the book and created an atmosphere of discussion surrounding the aesthetic and social validity of Ellis's novel. In some ways, the response mirrored what Robert Browning experienced with the criticism he received for his dramatic monologues emphasizing domestic violence. The purpose behind both authors' creations is the point of confusion for many readers, because they fail to understand the potential behind domestic writings for analyzing the culture that developed them.

By establishing the voice of the abuser in his dramatic monologues, Browning wanted the reader to understand but ultimately reject the social circumstances that lead to domestic violence and allow it to be maintained. Ellis's descriptions by Bateman also communicate a message of disgust, so the physical brutality of the character's actions

might represent the sociological brutality of the 1980's. His persona, while not attractive to the reader, is immensely alluring to others as they fall victim to his horrific desires. But it is notable that two of his co-workers, Luis Carruthers and Jean--despite their longing for Bateman--manage to escape his aggression by somehow revealing their possession of true emotion and his want of it. The break between Bateman's thoughts and actions is significant because it relates to the process of the novel and its function.

Bateman's attractiveness appears to be a necessary component to his power as a romantic killer, and it even adheres to characteristics reminiscent of Gothic villains. The fractured aristocrat with a hidden dark side finds its modern embodiment in Patrick Bateman, who descends from a prominent and wealthy family. Though he "works" on Wall Street, he does not require the funds from his profession. His aesthetic taste is impeccable, hardly compensating for the humanistic aspects he lacks. Bateman is overly concerned with the maintenance of his desirable figure and with his surroundings, and numerous pages are devoted to his daily facial regime and to the contents of his office and living quarters.

A cream leather, steel and wood chair designed by Eric Marcus is in one corner of the room, a molded plywood chair in the other. A black-dotted beige and white Maud Sienna carpet covers most of the floor. One wall is hidden by four chests of immense bleached mahogany drawers. In bed I'm wearing Ralph Lauren silk pajamas and when I get up I slip on a paisley ancient madder robe. .

.. (25-6)

The product naming never ceases, and is provided with more accuracy and indeed more care than Bateman's descriptions of his friends and look-alike colleagues, who are constantly confusing each other and competing for greater status. Ruth Helyer, in her study of "The Postmodern Gothic of *American Psycho*," has noted: "Patrick's obsession with his appearance extends to the aesthetics of his immediate surroundings. Rather than the traditional Gothic settings of ruined castles and Abbeys, modern-day villain Patrick

'works' in the city, in a magnificent office crammed with every conceivable convenience and entertainment gadget" (6). It is Bateman's concern for these materialistic matters in place of tenderness that also grant him further similarity to the aristocratic characters of Browning's monologues. Consider Duke Ferrara's flippant attention drawn from his story of his wife's death to his attention towards a greater artistic object.

Notice Neptune, though,

Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,

Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me! (*Comp. Poet.* 252)

It should also not escape our attention that the Duke grants such importance to his "nine-hundred-years-old name" that he feels it should demand greater respect from his wife than his regard for her (252). The emphasis in the final line on the word "me" also reinforces the deified sense of self the narrator possesses in his conception of the world. Deliberate language permeates both works regarding the characters' obsessions and hostility.

Ellis and Browning also position the reader in comparable fashion. Their first-person speakers force themselves upon the auditor to the point he or she is both victim and witness to the cruelties that are related. The quality of Browning's violent lyric that made it so disquieting for Victorian readers and so intriguing to modern critics is that it has, as Gregory has postulated, "given voice to the inner secrets of sexual dominance" (3). Because the nineteenth-century middle class considered itself separate from the excesses of the aristocracy, domestic abuse was understood to be greatly transgressive, so its everyday reality in the home was largely ignored. Likewise, in the seemingly civilized and technologically-focused period of the 1980's, discussion of the continuing threat of sexual violence against women was (and, noting the maintained ban on *American Psycho*, possibly still is) taboo.

The greatest contrast between the narrative work of Browning and Ellis is the difference in their style. Browning's compositions are elegant, even in the contemplation

of murder, while Ellis's language is stripped of any literary ostentation in his prose. His descriptions are often matter-of-fact. Yet their commonality lies in the importance they both place on the organization of their words, however different. In Browning's monologues--particularly "Porphyria's Lover," "A Pretty Woman," and "My Last Duchess"—there is only the voice of the killer: his motives, his reasoning, his satisfaction, without the benefit of a more righteous voice to condemn what the villain had perpetrated. With Ellis's novel, the reader is presented with several voices quoted by Bateman--from his self-absorbed and materialistic fiancée to his self-absorbed and materialistic co-workers at Pierce and Pierce who simply mirror Bateman's own apathetic view of others and even himself. Not one of them provides a clear contrast to the narrator's view. While Luis and Jean might be argued as the novel's emotional center, their feelings for Bateman cloud their perception of him, so they don't recognize him as a "noncontingent human being" (*American Psycho* 377). In her attempts to analyze the shocking nature of the book, Fay Weldon has postulated that, "There's always been someone in the other books to play [sic] lip service to respectability; to the myth that the world we now live in is still capable of affect . . . Not in *American Psycho*" (qtd. in Freccero 9). The language use of both Browning and Ellis, with their dominating narrators, offers no answers but leaves a space for reader response.

There is a fascinating gap between what Bateman thinks and what he does. One of the evidences of this gap is presented in a casual conversation about women over drinks among his colleagues. Bateman references 1950's Wisconsin serial killer Ed Gein on the subject, who thought two things upon seeing a beautiful woman: how he wanted to charm her and "treat her right" while the other part of him pondered what the woman's head would look like on a stick (92). So Bateman's own fantasies and realities are conflicted. His murderous nature itself is questioned when Bateman sees past victims continue to haunt his daily excursions after he has supposedly murdered them. After Bateman confesses his various misdeeds, his lawyer tells him he very recently saw Paul Owen

(whose death is detailed in the chapter named after him) in London and thereby invalidates Bateman's story. The narrator's confession has, in fact, "meant nothing" (377). Such questionable description has been evident in Browning's poetry as well.

An alternate reading of "Porphyria's Lover" would illustrate that Porphyria was not murdered at all, but that the lover's strangulation of her was part of an erotic exercise. While it is usually interpreted that Porphyria's participation in her own death is only an aspect of the killer's fantasy in preserving a sacred moment, the healthful face the lover describes after the strangulation may be just that. "I am quite sure she felt no pain . . . again/ Laughed the blue eyes without a stain . . . her cheek once more/ Blushed bright beneath my burning kiss . . . The smiling rosy little head, / So glad . . ." (*Comp. Poet.* 286). According to these details, her appearance is by no means deathly and this reading further complicates the manner in which the reader regards the supposedly violent narrator. Despite this dilemma, the characters maintain antiheroic qualities that make them both alluring and monstrous.

Regardless of whether the violence is a product of Bateman's fantasies or his reality, the aggression communicates a concern for the more basic emotions of love that evade him. Luis Carruthers passionately confesses his feelings to Bateman several times and, while others who display more shallow affection for the narrator incur his destructive tendencies, his co-worker survives the book unharmed with only a warning. In this case, he explains, "Listen to me, Luis. Are you listening to me? I usually don't warn people, Luis. So-be-thankful-I-am-warning-you" (295). Why would Bateman make this exception with Luis, unless he recognizes in his colleague something which deserves saving? This action is another testimony to the god-like dominance Bateman maintains through his narration of the world and his actions within it, as he decides who deserves life and who does not.

Jean, Bateman's shy secretary, also grows close to him and encourages him to evaluate the subject of attachment on a more conscious level. Rather than moved, he describes

himself as "touched by her ignorance of evil" and her determination to recognize the sweetness, considerateness and romance in him that are more likely reflections of herself and her own search for love (378-9). Rather than enraged by her misreading him, Bateman is weakened by her. "It's almost as if *she's* making the decision about who I am, and in my own stubborn, willful way I can admit to feeling a pang, something tightening inside, and before I can stop it I find myself almost dazzled and moved that I might have the capacity to accept, if not return, her love" (378-9). Jean's behavior does not completely reverse Bateman's nature, but she does have enough power over him that he is open--if ever so briefly--to possibilities outside his bleak understanding of the world. It is this final interaction that results from a discussion regarding the narrator's disavowal of a higher power.

Bateman is his own God, and much of his time is spent perfecting his physique or securing his social status for the purposes of blending into humanity. It is only a revelation near the book's conclusion that reveals the circumstances surrounding Bateman's emptiness.

This was the geography around which my reality revolved: it did not occur to me, *ever*, that people were good or that man was capable of change or that the world would be a better place by one's taking pleasure in a feeling or a look or a gesture, of receiving another person's love or kindness. . . Desire--meaningless. . . The world is senseless. Evil is its only permanence. God is not alive. Love cannot be trusted. Surface, surface, surface was all that anyone found meaning in. . . this was civilization as I saw it, colossal and jagged. . .
(375)

Without any kind of feeling that he is judged by God or man, Bateman is free to act out his murderous impulses. Because the speaker owns the moment, the rank of his disappointments is worth examining. The "meaninglessness" of desire is followed by the "senselessness" of the world between Bateman's disavowal of God and mistrust in love.

These are the main qualities of frustration in the world Bateman has created through his power of naming. The society Ellis has depicted in this novel, one in which people disappear with far less attention than is paid the dinner reservations of their survivors, has given birth to Bateman. And the protagonist, in turn, gives voice to the consequences of the age.

As in Browning's monologues, what the characters think and say is far more important than what they seem to do. Such an author's "fascination is not so much with a character's evil deeds or even with the motives for these deeds, but with the ability of the character to create an explanation, a mask, which, by value of its very coherence, makes the ugliness of the deeds 'wither'" (Flowers 108). Ellis creates this critique to be Bateman's view of civilization, his reflection of that paralyzed world. This point is reinforced by the fact that Bateman's partial revelation drowns out much of what Jean says the morning she confesses her love for him. Between all of her dialogue in this chapter is his inner monologue, dominating his thought process and refusing to allow any argument against his position. Bateman's disavowal of a contrasting voice mirrors his status as a being free from culpability. There is an absence of anything powerful enough to prevent his control over life and death. And it is this silence in the novel that has contributed to what many have considered the author's moral and social irresponsibility.

In studying the public outcry that accompanied the publication of Ellis's novel, one is reminded of the controversy and personal criticism that was associated with the more unsettling pieces of Browning's work. For example, in response to the poet's *Sordello*, Richard Simpson wrote in the *Rambler*: "We detect a keen enjoyment of dirt as such, a poking of the nose into dunghills and the refuse of hospitals. . . accompanied by the particular grunt of which expresses not only the pleasure experienced but also the nature of the experiencer" (qtd. in Adam Roberts 37). While Browning's examination of murderers' points of view was considered threatening to his readers, these examinations seem to have at least predicted the growing fascination with the violent perspective that

has become more acceptable in recent years. Ellis's vividly brutal novel, however, pushed this tactic further than many would have expected. Bateman spares no details in his description of his victims' mutilation. And while Ellis has admitted that little of those incredibly excruciating passages are entirely of his own invention but from homicide case studies he'd researched, the author also received personal attacks from those who felt his conception was unnatural.¹¹

In defense of the book, Murphet wrote, "It has been too easy for moralistic critics of the novel to latch on to these passages (which constitute less than ten percent of the text) as instances of Ellis's own misogynistic bile and disturbed imagination" (17). Several groups even feared the novel would incite violence against women and other minorities. Rosa A. Eberly, in her study of "citizen critics"--non-scholarly writers who discuss literary issues--realized the public debate regarding the purpose of a book had been unlike any kind of literary reaction in recent memory. She writes, "*American Psycho* . . . raised questions about the social role and purpose of literature as well as distinctions between social importance and social value, and those arguments, again, were connected with arguments about publicity" (108). Browning, too, apparently broke with poetic tradition by avoiding a purely didactic mission in his work. But as Browning appeared to have been dissecting the nature of violence without celebrating it, so Ellis uses his text to examine--among other things--the destructive forces inherent in the apathetic environment which creates Bateman.

This is the point that confused so many readers of the novel. Columnist Roger Rosenblatt wrote an article for *The New York Times* titled "Snuff This Book! Will Bret Easton Ellis Get Away with Murder?" in which he cried out against the debasement of humanity depicted in the novel and encouraged its boycott in defense of good literary taste (Murphet 68-9).¹² What Rosenblatt fails to recognize is the use of the novel to denounce the debasement of humanity through commercial exploitation, implied and literal sexual violence, and finally by social apathy. While Bateman literally destroys his

victims in the text, they are already exploited culturally, intellectually and professionally. Murphet comments, "The degradation of women surely occurs first and foremost at the frontline of the fashion industry and the patriarchal logic of a nation which refuses women equal pay and full rights over their own bodies; and 'good literary taste' will not only have nothing to say about these things, but may even positively . . . ensure their survival" (69). In other words, we are supposed to be shocked by the explicitness of Bateman's message because we are not shocked enough by advantages taken from minorities in real life. The effect of the work on readers, however, remains debatable.

A particularly effective analysis of the novel is Jane Caputi's study of "American Psychos" in *Goddesses and Monsters*, in which she reveals heretofore unexamined projections of misogyny in history and popular culture. In her argument, the novel's violence is identified as having prurient undertones. She writes: "When women are murdered, the sequences are extensive, take place in private, and frequently follow upon several pages of sadomasochistic sexual description clearly aimed at arousing the reader" (9). According to her view, women in particular are depicted as abstracted others whose pain can be construed as pornographic in a misogynistic worldview. Because sexual violence continues in such propensity outside the book (indeed, the acts were inspired by real cases) it is certainly conceivable the novel may be reflective of a misogynistic ego, but it seems not to be Ellis's intent, nor is it the only possible reader identification. While the perspective of Bateman's first-person voice is the one with whom the reader may connect in an immediate sense, that reader is also the witness to the abuse and may be equally compelled to align with the victim.¹³ This complication is reminiscent of what Marianne Hirsch referred to as "the triangular field of looking." Though this term was developed for visual depictions of brutality--in particular photographs of children abused by the Nazis during the Holocaust--a comparison is invited because Ellis's reader is placed in a similar quandary (413).¹⁴ The readers may just as likely adopt sympathy with the objects of Bateman's abuse because they, too, are placed under his dominance as the

auditors of the narrator's malevolence and thereby they project themselves upon his victims' suffering.

The benefit of the first-person perspective in such a work, despite the possibly traumatic position in which it places the reader, is that he or she is welcome to reject the narrator's excuses. The dramatic convention Browning helped to develop demonstrated how the reader is invited to recognize the speaker's attempts at deception. In her analysis of Browning's work, Betty S. Flowers wrote: "All the reader can see is the mask, and yet he sees it as a mask, and senses the presence of the real character beneath it" (107). This device applies to *American Psycho* as well; the reader is expected to participate in the question Ellis has posed about his culture. Bateman even refers to his persona as a "mask of sanity" that is beginning to slip (279). In this case, the actor exposes his own disguise.

The success of Ellis's novel resides in his narrator's deliberate use of alienated language and in the social commentary demonstrated by the story's controlled violence, all of which belong in a literary history with Browning's dramatic monologues. Patrick Bateman, with his modern American version of aristocracy, along with the Victorian antihero, is devoid of a humanity both artists consider to be absent in their own time. The conflicts between recognition of love and the inability to truly feel it, the exhibition of Godlike power and the desertion of God, illustrate a cultural problem that demands to be recognized by the writers.

Chapter 3: Hannibal Lecter and Romantic Subversion

The much-anticipated novel *Hannibal*, following the escape of the fascinating title character, was released in 1999 and met with particularly harsh criticism for its unexpected ending. Instead of feminist icon Clarice Starling triumphing against her nemesis by bringing him to justice, she unites with him against the professional and legal system that has betrayed her name and prevented her advancement. Hannibal Lecter himself is transformed from the mystifying villain to a warped philosopher with a telling past. What Harris accomplishes with the third Lecter novel is the humanization of the monster. While the previous work *The Silence of the Lambs* successfully depicts the embodiment of evil through a genius character who claims to simply have "happened," Harris has revealed part of Dr. Lecter's mystery in order to more easily place him inside us (*Silence* 21). With the use of the Gothic convention of doubles, a violent approach to the monster's relationships with both God and his beloved, and Harris's alignment of the reader with the villain, both result in a literary consumption intended to unsettle.

The doubling of character is a convention well known in the Gothic tradition. Sometimes this is accomplished overtly, as in the case *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (in which two extreme characters compete for superiority in one body), but often the dual nature of the Gothic villain is evident in other ways. Harris has constructed the system of the book as a mix of both high (with references to Dante's sonnets, Stephen Hawking's reflections on time travel and Frances A. Yates's discussion of memory) and low (essentially with the traditional perspective on the savage nature of cannibalism) aspects of culture. Peter Messent, in his analysis of the Lecter novels, has written, "Harris's use of the Gothic allows him to bring together such materials and to challenge his audience's preconceptions concerning what is aesthetically appropriate in any textual space" (4). To connect these diverse discourses despite most readers' inability to bridge his literary

purpose, is the weighty endeavor Harris has taken upon himself with this book. Such maneuvering was employed by Browning as well, in order to identify the antiheroic narrator with both his aesthetic and noble superiority and his more sinister tendencies.

The effect created by this hybrid of "taste" is one of both admiration and repulsion. In one sense, Dr. Lecter has achieved greater heights in intellect and refinement than most may even aspire to. He has a finely developed sense of material and social culture. Because of this, he buys lotions and soaps from the Farmacia di Santa Maria Novella, admires Glenn Gould's performance of the Goldberg Variations, and attends a production by the Florence Chamber Orchestra while comparing a 1688 handwritten version of the score from the Teatro Capranica. Yet, with his apathetic destruction of others, he has infuriatingly violated what we consider to be the most sacred behavioral codes of civilization. Barney, Dr. Lecter's former keeper at the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, effectively summarizes his understanding of the cannibal. "One quality in a person [Lecter's perfect manners] doesn't rule out any other quality," he says. "They can exist side by side, good and terrible" (87).¹⁵ As a representative of the societal elite, Dr. Lecter conveys how the "psychological imperialist" is himself a cannibal (Messent 6). His psychic invasion of patients and victims leads to Dr. Lecter's eventual physical consumption of others, and thus Harris reveals how supposedly savage behavior can exist within those characters who are considered the most civilized.

What was alluded to in *Silence*, with the manner of Lecter's escape by donning the face of the murdered policeman, is more specifically illustrated in *Hannibal*. His ideal victims are the "free-range rude," and thus he is established as an enforcer of the higher social order by the savage means of emotional and physical cannibalism. It is also he who first punishes the sadistic pedophile Mason Verger after his wealth frees Verger from any significant legal culpability. These actions would seem to signify a kind of divine justice carried out through Dr. Lecter. However, Barney explains Dr. Lecter's belief system as one that prefers chaos over any absolute because of its self-evident nature (90). This

analysis of the monster's religious understanding does aid in interpretation of his actions and further maneuvers the reader to identify with his position.

In a nightmare sequence halfway through the book, Lecter recalls the death of his younger sister Mischa at the hands of starving soldiers who use her body for their sustenance. In his desperation to save her after having been unable to pry his sister away from the captors who drag her to the expected fate, the six-year-old Hannibal prays once for her life. "His prayer to see her again did not go entirely unanswered," but his final glimpse of Mischa would only be of her remains (*Hannibal* 255). The horrific irony of what followed his sister's murder by the soldiers seems to be returned by the violent comedy Dr. Lecter would enact with his own victims many years later through a god-like vengeance.

While it would be naïve to argue that what happened to Lecter as a child entirely altered his character into what it would become, it does seem to have affected the manner in which he would find satisfaction in the annihilation of others. It also firmly places his actions outside the realm of care regarding a higher power. Harris's narrator explains Lecter's nightmarish past revelation: "Since this partial answer to his prayer, Hannibal Lecter had not been bothered by any considerations of deity, other than to recognize how his own modest predations paled beside those of God, who is in irony matchless, and in wanton malice beyond measure" (256). This rationale, which has apparently stayed with Dr. Lecter since he was six years old, would suggest that he is both acting in defiance of God with his will to murder and aspiring to emulate God's power to destroy.

The ultimate perversion of religious ceremony is conveyed through the victimization of Paul Krendler, Clarice Starling's antagonistic superior in the Bureau. As his brain is consumed by both Dr. Lecter and Starling, a transformation of Catholic communion takes place.¹⁶ The ceremony is a rite during which both bread and wine are represented, or transubstantiated, as the body and blood of Christ, and are consumed as an offer of redemption. Messent, with the basis of metaphorical cannibalism posed by Maggie

Kilgour, has illustrated how the communion service is "a banquet at which host and guest can come together without one subsuming the other, as both eat and are eaten.' For as the body of Christ is consumed by the individual so he or she becomes part of Christ, part, too, of the body of the Church which he represents" (8). The individual becomes one with the Church and the Church is united with God.

And this connection in the novel is offered by the care Dr. Lecter gives to the romantic dinner during which he converts Clarice--who herself has been fed upon by Krendler and his like with their institutional power--to cannibalism. Krendler becomes the subject of a ritual sacrifice so Clarice may join Dr. Lecter in a partnership based against the dysfunctional yet normative practices of society. Harris employs imagery for the scene to reinforce this inversion of Christian ritual. The dining room is set with "the flames of candles" repeated by "tall crystal . . . above the creamy napery at their places" and "a screen of flowers" reduces the space "to intimate size" (469). Dr. Lecter pours Clarice wine to accompany the meal of Krendler. The description aids Harris's parody of the service and Dr. Lecter's overall mocking of the injustices he feels are carried out by God.¹⁷ It is important here to recall the chilling final line of Browning's "Porphyria's Lover": "And yet God has not said a word!" (*Comp. Poet.* 286).

In a traditional, literal reading of the poem, Browning's narrator also realizes he has committed murder but it does not appear he will be held accountable for this trespass by any God who remains silent amidst death. In his examination of this dramatic monologue, Adam Roberts postulates that "even God is not displeased by [the lover's] actions" (38). The understanding is that God's silence is maintained because Porphyria has passed into a more peaceful state through the lover's gaze.

Porphyria's lover, in another sense, transforms the object of his desire as well. Again, the poem can be read as more of a sexual fantasy than an actual murder. Another interpretation would respond to the narrator's description of the "death scene" as the destruction of Porphyria in body and memory. Her cheek that blushes "bright beneath

[his] burning kiss" and her "rosy little head" could likely be the flush of blood that flooded her face during the strangulation. And what her lover considers her "smiling" might instead be the struggled contortion of Porphyria's features that resulted from her death throes (*Comp. Poet.* 286).

Both readings, with what the auditor is presented, could be equally valid. On the one hand, a sexual act from an antiheroic perspective can be offered as a curative exercise, the fulfillment of a "darling . . . wish" that serves to unite two people in the awkward beginning stages of first love. On the other, the narrator becomes murderous in his perverse notion of what constitutes a loving act. So the disturbing union between Lecter and Starling in the final pages of *Hannibal* can be read in ways both healing and disfiguring.

Following the mock communion offered by Krendler, Lecter and Starling sit by the firelight and discuss the displacement of the mother's breast to baby sister Mischa. When Starling reveals her own breast to Hannibal and it is accepted by him, the sequence might suggest that Lecter's fractured character is corrected by Starling's recreation of the childhood scene. Messent writes, through this reading, "Lecter can . . . take his place in a (relatively) normal sexual and social world, leaving both forms of cannibalism behind him. To see it thus is to see [Starling] allowing Lecter to remember his dismembered self, curing him by making him whole" (9). By mimicking an oral cannibalism, Starling is empowered over Lecter by her initiative as the mother figure over her former enemy. Harbin seems to favor this view, stating that, "Starling has released Lecter from his past just as he has released her from hers and . . . they find their intimacy so intellectually and sexually compelling that they have abandoned all other pursuits" (5). Just as Porphyria might be read as a participant in the actions related in Browning's monologue, others such as Harbin and Messent have suggested Starling's relationship with Lecter, in her ability to

reform the monster, is ironically consistent with her former practices as an agent of justice.

The balance of power in the relationship between Guido and Pompilia in *The Ring and the Book* is also debatable. Despite his attempts to deny contrition and assert his personal justice for the murder of his wife, his self-image is shattered when he momentarily remembers how Pompilia defied him at Castelnuovo. This internal crisis is indicated by the manner in which Guido shifts from his unexpected loss of nerve to a rage (Buckler 260). He is flooded with fury and disgusted by the part of him that became feminized by his wife's goodness:

I knew that just myself concerned myself,
Yet needs must look for what I seemed to lack,
In a woman,--why, the woman's in the man!
Fools we are, how we learn things when too late!
Overmuch life turns round my woman-side;
The male and female in me, mixed before,
Settle of a sudden: I'm my wife outright
In this unmanly appetite for truth,
This careless courage as to consequence,
This instantaneous sight through things and through,
This voluble rhetoric, if you please, --'t is she!
Here you have that Pompilia whom I slew,
Also the folly for which I slew her! (*Comp. Poet.* 574)

From this, Guido's greater madness seems to stem not from Pompilia's infidelity but from her ability to influence him, to shift his need for action to further insight. William E. Buckler, who examines the concept of truth in the poem, signifies how "an insatiable 'appetite for truth,' a 'courage. . . careless of consequence,' 'instantaneous [in]sight'" are those aspects of character belonging to Pompilia. It might even be suggested that her

emotional penetration of him is stronger than the physical damage he inflicts on her. She represents the woman in Guido in his memory of her and in his own nature, and so both must be destroyed. It is this self-denying passage from Browning's speaker that is particularly necessary in studying the antihero's complex relationship with the beloved as one of confused devotion. The violence of Hannibal Lecter, it seems, is affected by his connection to Mischa and his unwillingness to release his rage over her loss. Clarice, too, fascinates him in a way that signals his memory of the dead sister and perhaps the eventual cessation of his murderous nature. Unlike Guido, Dr. Lecter is not ashamed of those aspects of his feminine self that resemble Clarice and Mischa, but one might suggest he is equally aroused by their strength.

Another, more dominant, possibility leaves the reader with an even more unsettling understanding of this seduction scene because the seducer is less likely the heroine who disarms her opponent through nurturing and more likely the monster who has taken her as a bride. Such a reading would render the "breast-feeding," rather than a restorative, as a "retreat into the realm of (Lecter's) fantasy or madness" (Messent 9). Many references have been made up to this point of Dr. Lecter's drugging Clarice to the point that she is "both herself and not herself" (*Hannibal* 441). He has also been treating her with regular sessions of hypnosis during which he acted out the part of her late and beloved father. Next he collected the dead man's bones, laid them out on a bed for Clarice, brought her to them and told her to keep "only what [she] need" (453).

After a time, she emerges from the room empty-handed. Lecter's treatment calls for Clarice to change her grief for her father--first into anger, then into a return to devotion, and finally into a release of his identity. It was this sense of injustice over his death that partially aids Starling's heroic instincts. But Dr. Lecter manages to convince Clarice that she must fracture that part of herself in order to accept him as a father figure and later as a lover.¹⁸ With this biographical knowledge leading to the firelight intimacy, the reader can try to determine how Clarice may not have taken an active role but been fashioned

for the part she plays with Dr. Lecter. And although Starling does not require the treatment of drugs or hypnosis in later stages of the affair, their resonance seems to stay with her. "It is hard to know what Starling remembers of the old life, what she chooses to keep" (*Hannibal* 484). In other words, Starling may now be a reprogrammed version of what she was, one who has become fractured herself. And it is her questionable happiness in this conclusion that asks the reader to examine the social order she escapes.

To leave the reader in this place, instead of the cleaner, more obviously fictional ending (such as the Gothic consumption of Krendler in the mock communion) is Harris's intent toward the exposure of living danger, the possibility of violence, in everyday life.

Messent writes:

Harris himself refuses his reader, leaving her or him in a fictional world where social and moral disruption still remains, where we are not allowed a comforting ending that lays anxiety to rest . . . The ambiguity and interpretive indeterminacy of the previous scenes have given way here to a final sense of threat and nightmare . . . We are left with unspeakable Gothic energies still inhabiting this fictional world, still threatening our . . . conceptions of normality to powerful effect. (12)

While the relationship of Dr. Lecter, the antihero, and Clarice Starling is open to question, the reader's own uncertainty in life is established by Harris's omniscient but often inviting narrator. We are complicit to what occurs throughout the story because Harris employs the device of "we" to specifically include us in the events. The final lines of the novel read: "We'll withdraw now. . . We can only learn so much and live" (12). A further key behind Harris's purpose in this method of communicating to each reader is his foreword to the 2000 edition of his 1981 novel *Red Dragon* (in which Dr. Lecter was introduced).

In his imagination, the characters acted before him as though he were an invisible witness. But when Dr. Lecter arrived, Harris claims to have felt vulnerable and exposed

to his creation. "I found, and find, the scrutiny of Dr. Lecter uncomfortable, intrusive" (ix). It is this "uncomfortable" feeling that is maintained even with an omniscient narrator recounting what is seen. It is the antiheroic character of Hannibal--like that of Browning's narrators, Lestat and Patrick Bateman--who is intended to represent the problems inherent in the culture that created him. Through him, the cannibalistic tendencies of everyday order are revealed.¹⁹

Gothic literatures, which provide a strong basis for Harris's work, were often subversive. With it, Victorian society could see "its own imperial practice mirrored back in monstrous form" (qtd. in Arata in Harbin 5). So Hannibal Lecter could be a figure for the manner in which consumerism succeeds in enveloping its own world. Capitalism is, according to Karl Marx, one with cannibalism because it preys on living workers and their lifeblood (Messent 5). The excessive "appetites" of western culture are exposed by the means of a character who ferociously and literally acts out the metaphorical principles upon which western society is based. And the alteration of Clarice in the finale of Harris's Lecter trilogy seems to echo Browning's questioning of sexual and emotional violence. The novels create sympathy for the heroine, but slowly she is psychologically dissected by the monster and eventually influenced to succumb sexually in a relationship that ridicules the moral integrity she once upheld.

The result of this exercise, through the "unmasking" of Dr. Lecter's religious defiance, his partial historical definition and his reflection of our own distorted intentions, is that the reader is positioned to align with the monster. As Dr. Lecter struggles with his pursuits to find a "prime place in the world" for his lost sister in Clarice and possibly in himself, so Hannibal has been constructed to find a home in the reader (476).

Conclusion:
The Antihero's Home in the Modern Novel

The complicated nature of the antihero, dissected so masterfully in Robert Browning's dramatic monologues, has found a particular resonance in modern writings. His portrayals of the narrators in several poems—especially the lover in "Porphyria's Lover," Duke Ferrara in "My Last Duchess" and Count Guido Franceschini in *The Ring and the Book*--illustrate a longing for understanding that has echoed the twentieth-century perspective of isolation. To Browning's antihero, the silencing of the lover is either the act of ultimate devotion or the result of disappointed expectations. A moment is also captured when the narrator contemplates the indifference or absence of God, as when Porphyria's lover holds her body to him "and God has not said a word!" (*Comp. Poet.* 286).

While the poetry is not intended to be didactic, a lack that drew much controversy in Browning's age, it often conveys the consequences of a social dilemma. The content of the works is intended to be all the more dramatic by Browning's positioning of the reader as either complicit with the killer's acts or susceptible to his abuse as the auditor. Browning made progressive use of language in his poetry with its prosaic penetration of the interior mind through straightforward sentiments. With the poet's strong speech--in all his attractiveness, his destructive display of love and his dismissal of God--Browning has helped to create a discourse that has sculpted the literary force of the romantic killer. To further convey the resilience of this prototype, one need only peruse some of the most popular American novels of the past twenty years.

Three novelists in particular demonstrate similar characterizations in their work. The self-absorbed protagonist in Anne Rice's *The Vampire Lestat* wrestles with his relationships with God and his own soul, ultimately bringing his lover Nicholas to

destruction. To the antihero of Browning and Rice, love is a force that both alienates and destroys the beloved.

Patrick Bateman, the serial killer and title character in Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*, is obsessed with the search for some humanity to fill his own emptiness, some meaning powerful enough to change his indifference to life and death. The heavy violence of this text, detailed to a revolting extent by Bateman, suggests an intention by the author to communicate the wrongness of societal apathy through a characterization that must be rejected by the reader. Such an objective is comparable to Browning's exposure of violence in the domestic sphere.

Dr. Hannibal Lecter--from Thomas Harris's *Red Dragon*, *The Silence of the Lambs* and *Hannibal*--demonstrates a possessive and often hurtful relationship with Clarice Starling that is not dissimilar to that of Browning's narrators with their damaging needs. While they would most likely be understood as mere monsters through simple description of their actions, both Lecter and Browning's characters are humanized through the mental analysis created by narration.

It is necessary to draw intertextual comparisons among these narratives in order to delineate how Robert Browning's innovation of the romantic antihero has influenced popular twentieth-century literature. The omnipresence of his lyric voice, while it has been largely forgotten, is expressed in the modern novel's design and purpose, but most importantly in the reader's continuing relationship with the romantic antihero.

Notes

INTRODUCTION

¹ Quote from "A Pretty Woman" by Robert Browning from *The Complete Poetical Works of Browning*, p. 191.

² Quote from *The Vampire Lestat* by Anne Rice, p. 494.

³ Quote from *American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis, p. 377

⁴ Quote from *Hannibal* by Thomas Harris, p. 466

⁵ First, it is suggested that *Beowulf* is possibly the earliest dramatic monologue.

Next, according to Flowers's research in *Browning and the Modern Tradition*, there is a debate as to whether Browning seriously affected the structure of the dramatic monologue at all. She cites several critics who maintain that he produced his work based on the vehicles developed by "scores" of other writers during and prior to the nineteenth century (qtd. in 96). Flowers writes:

Perhaps, then, in approaching Browning's dramatic method and its relation to modern poetry, it would be more profitable not to argue about Browning's place in the history of the dramatic monologue, but to examine how he used particular dramatic techniques and how the use of these techniques implied a greater freedom in poetic form, a freedom that modern poets have accepted and expanded. (98)

⁶ This is not an attempt to discredit the mastery of Stoker's novel with this comment, but to establish its distinction from the characteristics of Browning's narrators.

⁷ Gregory also points out that, despite the various attacks on Browning's portrayal of violent domesticity in his dramatic monologue, it is those which explore the matter—"My Last Duchess," "Porphyria's Lover" and *The Ring and the Book*—that remain the most popular among his works(4).

⁸ Browning was recognized even in his own time for this effective combination of both poetry and prose. Flowers quotes Oscar Wilde, who had said that Browning used poetry "as a medium for writing in prose" (qtd. in Flowers 162).

RICE

⁹ In the introduction, *Dracula* was also alluded to as a comparison to Browning's antiheroes and how the latter were humanized in a way that Stoker's monster was not. Because Lestat is himself a vampire—a nonhuman—I feel it is important to note that Rice's protagonist had been established through his charming narration as someone relatable and humanized to the reader.

¹⁰ In *The Ring and the Book*, Count Guido Franceschini has an equally problematic relationship with his son Gaetano, who Guido thinks may or may not be his own. According to his speech, Guido is at times elated over the arrival of his newborn son, and then rages over the questionable paternity of the baby. This inconsistency is discussed in-depth by Mary Rose Sullivan in *Browning's Voices in The Ring and the Book* on page 140.

ELLIS

¹¹ Murphet, in his reader's guide to the novel, cited Ellis's approach to the more violent scenes in the book.

The research that I did was only to inform the murder sequences because I really had no idea where to go with that. These were sequences, four or five of them scattered throughout the book, that I left blank and didn't work on until the book was completed; then I went back and filled those scenes in. I really didn't want to write them, but I knew they had to be there. So I read a lot of books about serial killers and picked up details from that and then I had a friend who introduced me to someone who could get me criminology textbooks from the FBI that really went into graphic detail about certain motifs in the actual murders committed by serial killers and detailed accounts of what serial killers did to bodies, what they did to people they murdered, especially sex killings.

That's why I did the research, because I couldn't really have made this up. (17)
It's particularly interesting how Ellis created Bateman without the specific murder details in mind because a result of this, unexpected or no, would be that Bateman's consciousness would not necessarily be carrying those past indiscretions with him throughout the story. It makes him an unusual serial killer to not reflect on past acts and further emphasizes the cultural implications he represents.

¹² Tim Price and other of Bateman's yuppie friends refer to Rosenblatt in the novel.

¹³ This is likely what Melissa Valiska Gregory would refer to as the "forced intimacy" created through the convention of the dramatic monologue (3).

¹⁴ The specific intention of Hirsch's use of this term is to describe how an adult viewer recognizes him/herself in the Holocaust photographs. "As the child victim merges with child witness, as we begin to recognize their identity, we ourselves, as spectators looking at the child victim, become witnesses, child witnesses, in our own right" (412).

HARRIS

¹⁵ Barney continues to assert that his understanding came from Socrates, whose writings Lecter had introduced him while Barney was taking courses by mail.

¹⁶ It's also important to note that Lecter's use of Krendler's brain for his romantic repast with Clarice Starling is a literal version of the doctor's psychological penetration of the minds of his subjects/ victims.

¹⁷ There's an odd irony, though, that Dr. Lecter's eyes remain "piously closed" during Krendler's grace at the table.

Father, we thank thee for the blessings we are about to receive and we dedicate them to Thy service. Starling is a big girl to be fucking her daddy even if she is southern. Please forgive her for that and bring her to my service. In Jesus' name, amen. (470)

This silence on Lecter's part is likely his cue to Clarice to fulfill her part in the ritual sacrifice of Krendler because it's upon her notice of Lecter's non-response that she begins to verbally attack Krendler for his various abuses during their time together in the Bureau.

¹⁸ Ironic how Clarice's mind is not a place Dr. Lecter will share with her father, but she must share his mind with Mischa.

¹⁹ Self-consciously, a reference should be made to Messent's allusion (who, again, borrowed from Kilgour in this idea) to the critic him/herself as a metaphoric cannibal "eager to sink his teeth into the fresh kill" (11).

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