

Speakers for the Dead:  
Narrators in "My Last Duchess"  
and "After Death"

In "My Last Duchess," Robert Browning creates a duke whose tight control over his wife — and his preoccupation with his own noble rank — reveal a misogynistic character. Browning's dramatic monologue stands in stark contrast to Christina Rossetti's "After Death," a sonnet in which the speaker comes back from the dead to reveal what she observes about her lover. When paired together, these poems speak to one another in a time period that seemed to have a gothic obsession with the death of young women.

In their style and structure, Browning and Rossetti create completely different portraits of women after death. In "My Last Duchess," the duke uses the actual portrait of his dead wife to create a portrait in words of a woman that smiled too liberally at men who fawned over her. The duke says, "She had / A heart — how shall I say? — too soon made glad, / Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er / She looked on, and her looks went everywhere" (ll. 21-24). Throughout his long dramatic monologue, the duke meditates on several moments when the duchess betrays him by smiling at others; however, we as readers never get to hear the duchess's side of the story.

In Rossetti's "After Death," however, the tables are turned: the dead woman gets to speak back to the man who performs his grief over her death. In doing so, she carefully observes the behavior of her lover, who thinks that she is merely a lifeless corpse. In each line of the small sonnet, the speaker observes the man as he leans above her, says "'Poor child, poor child'" (l. 7), then turns away without actually touching her body. Even so, the woman suggests that this is an improvement from when she was alive: "He did not love me living; but once dead / He pitied me" (ll. 12-13). The speaker's final couplet is especially chilling: "and very sweet is / To know he still is warm though I am cold" (ll. 13-14). The speaker says that it is "sweet" to know that the man has outlived her. She doesn't explain this sweetness, but perhaps it is because she can observe his emotion in a way that she never could have while she was alive.

When read together, Rossetti's "After Death" and Browning's "My Last Duchess" function as companion pieces, each speaking to the other in a kind of call-and-response. Browning's duke shuts down any speech beyond his own, talking at length in the silence of the portrait and the visitor who looks at it. His story is the only story that he wants to present, even if his speech reveals his own shortcomings. Rossetti's woman provides an alternative perspective of death and mourning as the woman speaks from the dead to reveal the shortcomings of the man who mourns her. Both poems provide chilling perspectives on death, mourning, and marriage in the Victorian period.