The similar themes in “My Last Duchess” and “The Young Housewife”

The poems “My Last Duchess” by Robert Browning and “The Young Housewife” by William Carlos Williams both share similar themes. The narrators in both poems treat women as objects instead of people, and both narrators wish to oppress the women around them. These narrators fail to realize that if it were not for the women of the world, society would have crumbled long ago.

“My Last Duchess” by Robert Browning is a warning against one person having too much power, being self-centered, and being obsessed with material possessions. It also shows how these traits can negatively affect the people around them. The narrator in this poem gives a view of his deceased wife. However, because he considers himself too powerful to be held accountable, he admits and brags about having his wife murdered.

The narrator begins his recount about his late wife by saying, “That’s my last Duchess painted on the wall, / Looking as if she were alive….” (Browning 1-2). He does not have to bring his guest’s attention to the portrait of his wife, but he does because he is self-centered and cocky. As the poem continues, it becomes apparent that the narrator is more concerned about the painting being “…’Frà Pandolf’ by design,…” than the fact that it depicts his late wife (Browning 6). Just like the painting, he considered his wife an object to be owned, ruled, and shown off like a piece of art. To him, his wife was just another piece of his art collection.
As the poem continues, the audience sees that the narrator did not like his wife having a mind of her own, or doing anything other than what he said. The narrator considered her to have “…A heart…too soon made glad,…” and was jealous of her attention being given to any other man (Browning 22). The narrator believed that “…she liked whate’er / she looked on, and her looks went everywhere….” but because the narrator is so self-centered, he cannot be reliable to tell the actual truth about his wife (Browning 23-24). He simply recounts her the way he saw her to be, which could or could not be truthful. The narrator grows increasingly upset about how everything good that the wife experienced “…Would draw from her alike the approving speech, / Or blush, at least…” (Browning 30-31). The narrator wanted to be the singular spot of happiness in his wife’s life and disapproved about her giving anyone or anything else attention. The narrator is also “in command of drawing the curtain,” that covers the duchess’ portrait and he “tries to limit her scope to himself and a few privileged others,” just like he did while she was alive (Dupras 7). All of these events show how controlling and abusive the narrator is towards his wife in both life and death.

Next, the narrator says how because his wife refused to “…be lessoned…” he “…gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together….” (Browning 40, 45-46) This is the narrator willingly revealing that he had his wife murdered, but because he has “…a nine-hundred-years-old name…” he believes he cannot be held accountable for his actions (Browning 33). The narrator brags about getting away with murder so that his guest knows how powerful and important he is, or how powerful and important he thinks he is. This proves that the narrator is “an aggressive and violent egomaniac obsessed by obedience and control,” who wants power over all those around him (Negruț 152). The narrator, however, believes that he deserves another wife and wants to marry a Count’s daughter. He reassures his company that “… no just pretense /
Of mine for dowry will be disallowed…” because he is willing to pay for another woman, or piece of art, to add to his collection (Browning 50-51).

Finally, the narrator moves on and asks his guest to “…Notice Neptune, though, / Taming a sea-horse, though a rarity, / Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!” (Browning 54-56). This proves that the narrator is pretending to be much richer than he is because if he truly was a rich as he claims then the statue would be cast in gold instead of bronze. This confirms his obsession with material possessions and how he would rather spend his money on extravagant trinkets rather than save the money he has. The narrator may be powerful and supposedly rich, but these few lines proves that he is nothing but a fraud.

Overall, this poem shows how too much power, narcissism, and obsession with material possessions can cause a person to become poisonous to those around them. An overinflated sense of self-worth can cause problems from abusiveness to murder. However, just because someone is rich, famous, or important does not mean that they should be able to brag about murder and get away with it. This poem warns about exactly what can happen in an abusive relationship.

Next, is the poem “The Young Housewife” by William Carlos Williams. This poem shows how women are often oppressed, treated as objects, and expected to look perfect for the men around them. The narrator in this poem comments on a young woman that he sees on the sidewalk. However, it is ultimately revealed, at the end of the poem, that the narrator enjoys seeing women crushed under the expectations and standards of society. This poem is “misogynist even within its historical context,” because it was written in the 1930s (Nelson para. 5).

The narrator begins his comments on the housewife as he is driving by in his car. The housewife is described as living “…behind / the wooden walls of her husband’s house….” instead of living within her own house (Williams 2-3). Already, the housewife is seen as
property of her husband. Her purpose, in the narrator’s eyes, is to “…call the ice-man,…” and
the “…fish-man,…” so that she can serve her husband (Williams 6). The housewife is an
oppressed slave who is forced to live in “a house which does not even belong to her” and never
will belong to her (Tiphane para. 3).

Next, the narrator comments on how the housewife is “…uncorseted,…” and is
“…tucking in / stray ends of hair,…” as if being slightly unkempt is sinful (Williams 7-8). This
highlights how the narrator expects all women to look perfect, just for his pleasure. In today’s
society, this would be the equivalent of expecting a woman to spend an hour on her makeup just
to go to the grocery store. These unrealistic expectations of women undermine the true value and
contributions of women in the world. The husband who views the housewife as his property, and
the narrator who views her as only as important as a piece of scenery show a true lack of
appreciation for women in general.

Later, in the poem the narrator compares the housewife “…to a fallen leaf…” and smiles
as the wheels of his car “…rush with a crackling sound over / dried leaves” (Williams 9, 11-12).
This shows how the narrator takes joy in metaphorically crushing the young woman’s spirit
beneath his misogynist ways. The housewife is also compared to a dried leaf because, now that
she is married, she is undesirable compared to another young woman who is unmarried. Once a
woman is married her green leaf metaphorically falls and is crushed under the will of her
husband.

Overall, this poem shows how women are often oppressed, treated as objects, and
expected to look perfect for the men around them. This poem does this in a metaphorical way by
comparing married women to dried leaves. This poem gives modern readers a look at what life
would have been like for a woman in the early 1900s, and shows how some of these topics are still issues today.

In conclusion, the narrators in both poems treat women as objects instead of people, and wish to oppress all women they encounter. However, these narrators fail to realize that without women the world would have fallen apart long ago. Just as there have been male pioneers in the world, there have been female pioneers as well. One half of the world cannot improve without the other, so equality is immensely important today.
Works Cited


