

"my last duchess"
and "porphyria's
lover" essay sample



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“ My Last Duchess” and “ Porphyria’s Lover” Essay Sample

The stereotypical representation of love in a love poem is a feeling of mixed emotions, cheerful feelings that generally brighten up your day. A love poem should typically have a genuine romance that concludes with a jubilant ending. However this is only the portrayed idea of love, as love can also be represented in others ways, take for example My Last Duchess and Porphyria’s Lover. In these poems, we are shown a different type of love, a possessive love where the male in each wants the woman to himself.

The shocking thing about this type of love is the fact that the possessiveness reaches a point to where the lover kills his partner just to keep her to himself. Both ‘ My Last Duchess’ and ‘ Porphyria’s Lover’ are written in the style of a dramatic monologue, where there is only one person (the protagonist) speaking throughout. Also both poems are written in continuous enjambment, this gives the effect of a conversation in ‘ My Last Duchess’, even though it is only the Duke speaking, while the servant listens, however in Porphyria’s Lover, it gives the effect of a recalled memory from the lover of Porphyria.

The main character and protagonist of ‘ My Last Duchess’, is the Duke. We can learn a lot about the Duke from the way he speaks for instance we learn that he is a very cold, detached and possessive person, which can be seen throughout ‘ My Last Duchess’ for example “ The bough of cherries some officious fool broke in the orchard for her. ” This illustrates how an admirer of the Duchess gives gifts to her, and shows how cold and detached he is by

calling the man an " officious fool. " In addition, it also shows how possessive he is, as he finds anyone providing gifts for his Duchess below himself.

The Duke describes the Duchess as an object at the start of the poem; " That's my last Duchess painted on the wall", and portrays her to be disobedient as she does things that the Duke finds displeasing i. e. smiling at strangers in the same way that she smiles at him; " She had a heart - how shall I say? - too soon made glad, too easily impressed", " 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.

This indicates that his love for the Duchess is not a normal love, as we would expect from a love poem, but a possessive love, as if he loves an object, not a living being. This can also be seen through the way he boasts about his wealth and his collections of valuable items - " Notice Neptune, though, taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity, which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me! " When it comes to describing the Duchess to other people, in this case a servant, the Duke talks about the Duchess very carefully and gives subtle hints about her that gives the impression that she was a not fit for the title of Duchess.

By using these subtle hints to describe the Duchess, it shows us that he has planned this conversation over in his mind many times before, so he can lead the listener to take the side of the Duke in believing that the Duchess was not worthy of her title. His way of speech indicates that he is good with words however, he states the opposite in the poem - " Even had you skill in speech - (which I have not)", and uses this to subtly flatter himself. The

painting of the Duke's last wife, or Duchess (hence the title ' My Last Duchess') has much significance in the poem.

The poem uses pathetic fallacy, or describing the painting in a way that it seems almost alive. However, the Duke describes the painting of the Duchess in a way that shows her at her best, however, he moves on to tell of how she would blush at the slightest remark, "'twas not her husband's presence only, that called that spot of joy into the Duchess' cheek", something that the Duke found to be of annoyance. The painting symbolizes the love that the Duke had for his wife, and all his others - possessive.

The title itself shows how the Duke loved the Duchess as an item rather than a person. My' shows how she is his by rights, ' Last' leaves the listener to question had there been previous wives you to believe that he has had many Duchesses before this one and ' Duchess' depicts the way a Duchess should behave in the eyes of the Duke, and emphasizes that his last Duchess did not act in that manner. This is a surprising way to deal with the theme of love within a poem, as ' My Last Duchess' strays away from the typical representation of love we expect to see in a love poem and replaces it with a possessive love.

The Duchess was almost like an accessory to the Duke, more of an object than a living being. ' Porphyria's Lover' also has a possessive lover, whom is similar in many ways to the Duke in ' My Last Duchess'. The main connection between Porphyria's Lover and the Duke is their possessiveness and control over women. However, the difference between the two is that the Duke wants his partner to behave how he wants her to, a more controlling love,

whereas the lover of Porphyria wants to keep a moment perfectly preserved and shows a less controlling love, but rather a caring love.

Our expectations at the start of ' Porphyria's Lover' are ones of a happy relationship, with signs that Porphyria may be doing something that she should not i. e. cheating on a husband. The line " I listened with heart fit to break" shows that this is an arranged meeting between Porphyria and her lover, which hints at the idea of a forbidden relationship. However, with that said it sets the scene as being bad weather conditions, " The rain ser early in to-night", " the sullen wind was soon awake... and did its worst to vex the lake", which more often then not leads to tragedy in most cases.

We can tell that the unnamed lover of Porphyria adored her, as the poem subtly described the way that he watched and took in every movement she made. This is emphasised by the repetition of the word " and" at the start of each line, followed by an action made by Porphyria, e. g. " and laid her soiled gloves by, untied", " and called me, when no voice replied. " However her lover does not move nor speak, just watches unresponsively.

In response to this, Porphyria tries to grab his attention by placing his arms around her and seducing him - " And made her smooth white shoulder bare. This suggests to us that she loves him, and cares for him; this can be shown by the way that she warms the cottage up, as if she were his wife. However Porphyria's lover's lack of response makes us feel sad, and makes the heart sink, as you feel bad for Porphyria being in what appears to be in a one sided relationship. That is up until the lover makes the rash decision of delicately

strangling her to death with her own hair, in order to capture the moment knowing that she is in love with him, " and give herself to me forever".

This is a surprising way to present love, as at first it seems to be a one sided relationship, which is not what we expect love to be. The surprising thing however, is the way that Porphyria trusts her lover, and believes that he is just playing with her hair innocently, yet he was waiting for the moment at which he knows that she loves him, and that is the moment, which he wants to preserve forever, so he strangles her. This kind of love is surprising, as you would not expect someone to kill his or her lover.

However the reason as to why gradually becomes clearer, as we understand the lovers possessive type of love. Possessive love is a main feature in both poems; yet, the love we expect from a typical love poem is also present in both poems. The Duchess does not see the Duke as an object, but as a person instead. She does not see him as an accessory for herself, although that is the way the Duke sees her. In this relationship, the Duke is in control, and if the Duchess displeases him, she is punished for it; " just this or that in you disgusts me" the Duchess is treated as if she were a child.

It is the Duchess' polite mannered nature to stoop and apologise in order to please the Duke, however he sees this as below a Duchess' duty " and I choose never to stoop" and in the end it is the attempts of the Duchess' to please the Duke that ends up in her death. We can tell from ' Porphyria's Lover' that Porphyria, is a caring, loving and affectionate person from the way that she shows love towards her lover, for example the way that she makes the cottage cosier in the same way a wife would for her husband "

She shut the cold out and the storm, and kneeled and made the cheerless grate blaze up, and all the cottage warm.

However, we also know that she is sinful in the eyes of the Bible, as we discover that she already has a husband - " From pride and vainer ties dissever, and give herself to me forever. " Although she has a husband already, she displays her love to her lover as if he was her only love, however he does not return her affection in the way we would expect him to, instead he just admires " she sat down by my side and called me.

When no voice replied, she put my arm about her waist. He shows his affection in his own way by preserving the moment forever, " in one long yellow string I wound three times her little throat around, and strangled her" a poetic death. My expectation of love poetry is that it creates a joyous feeling, one that I can relate to, and has a happy tone, with a happy conclusion. However, ' My Last Duchess' and ' Porphyria's Lover' do not meet these cliché examples of what love is within a love poem. Instead, they display a much more surprising variation of love, one that presents the aspect of loving an object, or possessive love, rather than the love of another.

Another presentation of a contrasting love is represented within ' Porphyria's Lover'. The idea of killing the person you love, goes against the expectations of love, however killing your love just to preserve that special moment forever, is a surprising, and very controversial way of presenting love within a love poem. However, it is this controversial love is what made Browning's poems so appealing to his readers in Victorian times. The idea of a forbidden

and possessive love strays away from the expected path of a love poem, something that was very engaging to the audience of Browning's time.