

Compare and
contrast Robert
Browning's dramatic
monologues 'My Last
Duchess' and '...



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Browning was writing at a time in the early Victorian Era, (around six years before Victoria came to the throne) when most poets were moving away from traditional Georgian styles of writing and more into the recognisably modern literature. This allowed Browning and other such poets to take advantage of the new revolutionary alterations in the format of literature and break off from the more common plots and typical features present in poetry prior to Browning's era.

At the time of Browning's writing, the moral stance of the populous, driven by the leaders of the time, was tightening and the public in general were becoming more serious. Responding to this narrowing of views, Browning wanted to shock the audience.

Browning took most of the inspiration for his poems from discoveries and ideas developed in the Renaissance period (meaning rebirth) which spanned 1450-1600 AD. This period was characterized by the influence of an optimistic forward-thinking approach to the potential of humans, which in turn encouraged knowledge of the arts, languages, and a generally broad and active education. This led to a great spirit of confidence and the urge to explore the potential that language, literature, and philosophy could offer and the heights that humans could reach.

Browning took these concepts from this much earlier time, and incorporated them as background for his own writing when exploring human reactions and displaying the extremities of insanity, for instance Porphyria's lover.

Browning exploited the ancient curiosity in the dignity of man and his perfection through his poetry by showing flaws, placing fiction above reality

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and revealing the unknown intentions of two extreme examples of the male quest for power.

In 'Porphyria's Lover,' Browning shows the lengths that people can go to, to prolong something that is dear to them, and in effect stop the pressures that time and society can bear; taking a hold and having lasting effect on someone's life. The poem shows the Lover's longing to preserve the moment at which he felt he had control over Porphyria and their situation.

Both poems are examples of Brownings most vivid dramatic monologues. 'Porphyria's Lover' is a fictional speech presented as a tracking of the thought processes and actions of a speaker who is separate from the poet, looking back to when the situation took place. Similarly, 'My Last Duchess' captures a time of reflection after the climax of the poem's plot. For instance in 'My Last Duchess', the topic of conversation is a previous Duchess of the Duke; that he had dealt with according to how he saw fit, and in 'Porphyria's Lover', Porphyria already lies dead when the speaker begins.

The central characters in both poems are similar in that they both possess the desire to have control: be that over a person or a situation. However they also pose stark contrasts to one another. The Duke chooses 'never to stoop' and is overly conscious of class and social etiquette. The Lover on the other hand is a total contrast to this.

Instead of trying to be magnificent and powerful, like the Duke, the lover is silent and eerie; he seems to be disinterested in life, sitting in the cold, with the 'sullen wind' and the door open. The two male characters are alike in

that they both seem to want to suppress and defeat the possibility of
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imperfections in their partners whom they so wish to become, and stay, perfect forever. As a solution to this they attempt to erase their frailties as though they never existed and in both cases, they see killing their partners as the only way to do so.

The way that the characters kill their wives reveals a tremendous amount about the type of person that they are and their intentions. The lover in 'Porphyria's Lover' kills Porphyria by winding her long golden hair around her neck in what seems to be a spur of the moment, leap of faith, to consume everything that stands in the way of their complete captivation with one another. He mistakes her love for him as worship and he acts instinctively to preserve the moment at which he had no connection with the world around him and he and Porphyria were consumed in one another. She had severed all emotional and social ties that were keeping her from the Lover and at that point he felt compelled to express the spark of passion between them by freezing it for eternity.

In contrast to this, The Duke kills his duchess through calculated and revengeful jealousy. He expresses anger and resentment towards her because he feels deprived of the power that he believes is his right to have over her therefore he feels that his authority is being undermined. He felt that she didn't pay him enough attention or respect him in a way that he felt he ought to considering his status in society. He feels that because she treats any gift given to her the same as the gift of his 'nine hundred year old name'; she is too easily pleased.

The Duke ordered for the Duchess to be killed. The fact that he uses such an impersonal method shows his detachment from the situation and from the modern readers idea of a marriage. It is however more appropriate for the unemotional, politically motivated marriage situation of renaissance Italy in which the poem is set. This is somewhat justified when we consider that the marriage would have been one of political alliance and not of love. We can appreciate his desire for a trophy wife to complete the package that makes up the Duke in his full stature. In this respect we can understand that he felt driven to despair with her imperfections and that she didn't live up to the expectations he had of her.

' Porphyria's Lover' starts by setting out a simple rhythm and ABABB rhyme scheme and introduces a series of short monosyllabic words and sounds in a regular iambic tetrameter. The poem is set out in one long flowing passage which can subsequently be split into what would effectively be twelve stanzas. This simple structure gives a sense of routine and gives us the impression of progressive and predictable plot. In contrast to this regulated construction, the main character and focus of the poem is not quite what we might expect him to be. This becomes clear when we look at the setting, expressed in the first few lines. The overt use of pathetic fallacy establishes the atmosphere for the rest of the poem:

' The rain set early in to-night,

The sullen wind was soon awake,

It tore the elm tops down for spite'...

This gives a sense of anger and destruction and encourages us to make subconscious assumptions about who and what the plot will focus on and indeed on the circumstances of the poem on the whole. It then comes as somewhat a shock when we discover later the Lovers passiveness because we expect from this intense snowball of bitter descriptions of the weather, for him to be wild and uncontrollable. This beginning builds up suspense, closely followed by Porphyria's entrance. As a result of this we immediately focus on Porphyria and her effect as a main character and the dominant partner in her relationship with the Lover.

The first time we come into contact with the character of Porphyria, we see that she 'glided' angelically into the scene immediately taking control of the situation. We see her interrupt the scene and provide comfort to the situation to contrast the rage and ferocity set up by the pathetic fallacy prior to her entrance.

Browning uses Porphyria's actions to reveal her character. For instance he says that she, 'shut out the cold and the storm.' This gives the impression that not only did she literally shut out the weather, but that she provided a release for the Lover from the world around them when they were together. It highlights his dependence on her and shows how she played to his weaknesses in an attempt to provoke a reaction from him.

Browning goes on to show Porphyria letting down her hair and taking off her soggy coat and hat, 'let her damp hair fall.' This is symbolic of her letting herself go and making herself available sexually. This allows an interest in sexual energy to prevail.

The Lover then goes on to explain how Porphyria sat down beside him and called his name to warrant no reply. He is detached from the picture which reinforces the idea that she is the dominant partner. ' She put my arm around her waist, / And made her smooth white shoulder bare' this demonstrates her superiority over him. This is similar to the title, which implies that the Lover is Porphyria's as opposed to her belonging to him, which suggests her supremacy.

In the next few stanzas (lines twenty one to thirty seven) we begin to understand the Lovers reasons for wanting to kill Porphyria. We learn that Porphyria has ties, which connect her to other things, which the Lover feels she has to sever in order for him to have a real relationship with her. The lover says, ' vainer ties dissever' he feels that until she is willing to cut herself off from the outside world completely, he cannot trust her. He then reveals his suspicions that there is another man after the love of Porphyria. He says, ' A sudden thought of one so pale / for love of her, and all in vain.' This shows the Lover's jealousy and lack of trust for Porphyria as he makes it clear that he longs for her to want him unconditionally, however he just doesn't feel that she has the capacity to do so.

The poem turns on a moment when he considers how Porphyria has braved the storm (perhaps metaphorically to defy convention) to be with him. He looks for desperate attempts to preserve the moment at which he is in control of their relationship, ' That moment she was mine, mine, fair.' He treats her like a treasured possession and this is the first point that we see the Lover making any effort to respond to Porphyria. He acts instinctively as

he feels compelled to react to what he feels is his one and only opportunity to feel Porphyria's true love.

We then see a dramatic role reversal as the Lover resumes dominance in the relationship and takes control of the pure moment he has managed to freeze in time forever. We see at the same time Porphyria passively allowing him to suppress her without realising exactly what it was that he was going to do.

The image of Porphyria when she is dead is one of beauty and elegance. The lover describes her eye as ' a shut bud that holds a bee,' this gives us the impression that her spirit was one of confidence and energy. However the fact that the lover feels compelled to constantly justify his actions shows that he has some doubts as to whether he did the right thing by acting on instinct. He believes that he has done what needed to be done in order to make the moment everlasting. The Lover refers to Porphyria with beautiful imagery and delicate descriptions. He sees Porphyria as a work of art, a canvass onto which he can imprint his ideas and (when she is dead) create his ideal partner.

He doesn't feel that God will punish him for killing Porphyria; on the contrary, he feels that God will commend him for giving Porphyria the opportunity to have her one wish granted and to live in spirit with the Lover for eternity. The whole thought process screams insanity. The two last lines state,

' And all night long we have not stirred,

And yet God has not said a word!'

This confirms suspicions of someone who is deranged as he feels complete justification in what he has done.

' Porphyria's Lover' was originally known by a different name, ' Mad House cells II' if the title had stayed like this then the reader would have interpreted the Lover differently from the outset giving a lesser sense of the plot unfolding. This title lets us understand the likelihood that the Lover would be in a Psychiatric home talking and recalling events for the benefit for a Doctor.

Similarly, in ' My Last Duchess' the audience listens to a conversation between the Duke and a nameless envoy, who are making the final arrangements for the Duke's second wedding. Strangely, the Duke unveils a portrait of his former wife whom he discusses with the envoy. Through the Duke's rambling conversation, we learn that he is self-centred, arrogant, and utterly chauvinistic, revealing aspects of both power and weakness to defend himself against criticism.

The Duke is a materialistic, proud man. He has a high rank in nobility and a well-respected name. Thus, he tries to portray himself as powerful and sophisticated. But his underlying motives shine through and we see the Duke as jealous and possessive.

The Duke was formerly married and this marriage ended tragically. His last Duchess attracted the eyes of many people and had a smile for everyone and everything she saw. This infuriated the Duke –

“ She smiled, no doubt,

Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without

Much the same smile?"

The Duke felt that he always had to be in the spotlight, his pride was injured when the Duchesses attention was given to other things in the same way that she gave it to the Duke.

He felt he should be the only one in his Duchess's life to cause her to express joy or any sort of emotion,

" All and each

Would draw from her alike the approving speech,

Or blush at least. She thanked men - good! But thanked

Someone I know not how - as if she ranked

My gift of a nine hundred year old name

With anybody's gift."

The Duke feels de-valued by her willingness to express gratitude for insignificant gifts equally to the gift of his company. He was envious of his wife and angry that she didn't fulfil his expectations of what a wife should be. Unfortunately for the Duchess, her innocent charm pushed the Duke to a desperate remedy.

The Duke implies that his wife was wrong not to appreciate him more. He says that he could have taught her to behave like a duchess of the time but he wouldn't lower himself to accepting a wife who was not perfect,

" And if she let

Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set

Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse

- E'en then would be some stooping; and I choose

never to stoop."

The Duke eventually decides that he cannot live with the duchess and all her imperfections and is driven to the point at which he feels that there is not other solution than to give instructions for her killing,

" I gave commands;

Then all smiles stopped together."

From this statement, we can infer that the Duke became enraged to the point he hired someone to kill his wife. We know that the marriage would have been one of political alliance between two kingdoms and that the Duke would have no problem replacing the duchess.

The way that the Dukes references to his Duchess change shows how very quickly his opinion of her deteriorated once they were married. Lines one, three and forty six highlight this decline in worth and progression to object

status. In line one the Duke refers to the Duchess as a 'Duchess,' line three he refers to her as a 'wonder' and on line forty six she is simply 'smiles' the very object that drove the Duke to kill his wife. It shows that she very quickly becomes a possession and something that the Duke valued as less than human.

However, all this had not changed or caused the Duke to reflect. He is consciously aware of the fact that in this upcoming marriage, he will act in the same way as he feels he did nothing wrong. That is the whole purpose in showing the envoy the portrait. It is a forewarning to what will happen to the next wife if she does not listen to her master - she will end up suffering a similar fate. He feels that as a portrait, his last Duchess can at last be the trophy wife she never was when she was alive.

The Duke claims that he does not care about the money he is making from this marriage, he only wants another young, beautiful woman to control,

"The Count your master's known munificence

Is ample warrant that no just pretence

Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;

Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed

At my starting, is my object."

Women are not people to the Duke, but rather creatures to tame, which he implies when he shows the envoy one of his other possessions,

“ Notice Neptune though,

Taming a sea horse, thought a rarity,

Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me.”

The Duke was a women-thirsty, power-hungry man. He compares himself to Neptune, God of the Sea, and makes it clear that he would take drastic measures to insure his success in further endeavours.

In conclusion, ‘ Porphyria’s Lover’ is definitely the more dramatic of the two poems, and the one which is most disturbing. I think that the reason why ‘ Porphyria’s Lover’ is so distressing is not because of what we know about the Lover and his mental state, but more what we don’t know. The Lover is a mysterious, un-named character whom we know nothing about other than what he does to Porphyria. Everything we know about his mental state we have to assume from how he reacts to Porphyria, and then her body after he kills her.

The worst thing about this poem is how the lover is able to distance himself from the situation of blame because his thought processes and series of actions seem very rational and logical. He justifies his actions by listening to the voices in his head and seems to be disconnected from any sort of conscience. This in some ways allows the reader to empathise with the lover and understand how he was driven to kill Porphyria. This gives the character a human quality that we the audience can relate to.

‘ My last Duchess’ on the other hand is very blunt about the fact that the

Duchess was killed and the Duke possesses very strong opinions about what
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a wife should be. His relentless approach to mould the Duchess and then discard her when she wasn't perfect creates an instant feeling of blame and anger towards the Duke. He wanted to create a perfect wife and went about it in a brutal and unforgiving way. The Duke was ultimately a product of his environment and his behaviour and remoteness was not uncommon in men of that era.