

Victorian era – influence of context upon texts

Sociology



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Question: The study of the Victorian era involved developing a greater appreciation of previous social and literary contexts. Discuss this statement with close study to the texts you've studied in class. The study of the Victorian era has informed my appreciation of previous social and literary contexts, as it reveals that texts do not exist in a vacuum, instead they are composed within very specific social, cultural and political contexts and as such their composers use the texts to both reflect and subvert the dominant values of the time.

The Victorian era, ranging from 1837 until 1901, was a phase that put a particular emphasis of being refinement, propriety, politeness and sexual prudishness and texts composed during this era reflect such aspects of the context. This is evident in Robert Browning's poems "Porphyria's Lover" and "My Last Duchess" which explore the strict class divisions and the patriarchal dominance within society; conveying messages which conform to the social paradigm of the context.

In comparison, Charles Dickens's short story "Mr Minns and his cousin" which challenges the social conventions of the era through its portrayal of the dire consequences when one accepts and follows the conventions of the era. Browning's poem "Porphyria's Lover" demonstrates how context and existing ways of thinking can shape meaning within a text.

Constructed in the Victorian era, this text explores ideas involving the social paradigm of the context, essentially conveying the consequences of challenging strict class structures placed on individuals through portraying the disastrous effect of upper and lower class interaction. The text's title, "Porphyria's Lover", which alludes to a disease highlights that the persona is

being infected by Porphyria to point where it makes him sick, suggesting that inter-class relationships are abnormal and unhealthy.

Porphyria is implied to be of higher social status than the persona through the diction in "When in glided in Porphyria" where the word glided gives the sense that she has the higher class elegance. Browning reinforces the persona's obsession with owning Porphyria as a commodity through the repetition of "mine" in "That moment she was mine, mine, fair" which highlights the compulsive and acquisitive nature of the lover, reiterating the Victorian society's obsession with the aesthetic qualities of an individual and objectifying women, further showing how texts are shaped by their context.

The periphrasis as seen in "No pain she felt; I am quite sure she felt no pain" reinforces how the lover becomes so dominant over the his female counterpart to the extent where he thinks he knows what she feels, highlighting male dominance within society. Similarly to "Porphyria's Lover", Browning's "My Last Duchess" presents ideas which adhere to the social conventions and values of the Victorian era through its portrayal of a patriarchal belief system.

Written through the Duke's inner dramatic monologue, Browning ensures that the speaker does not accommodate any response, immediately establishing the egotistical and self-obsessed persona through the speaker's dominant voice over the listener. The Duke's continuous use of personal pronouns as seen through the inclusion of "My" in the title "My last Duchess" and the repetition of "I" as seen in "I gave commands...I repeat...I avowed" further manifests the Duke's overwhelming possessiveness, showing the very nature of patriarchal dominance in society.

Furthermore, through his hyperbolic characterisation in his creation of the self-obsessed Duke and the use of parenthesis in "since none puts by/ The curtain I have drawn for you, but I" which offers the particular distinction as afterthought, Browning epitomises the disregard for gender equality in the era and further reiterates the patriarchal dominance within the context.

Furthermore, the bronze statue of "Neptune...taming the sea horse" alludes to Neptune's overpowering of Ceres to force her to marry him, symbolising the Duke's position as he overpowers the Duchess in their relationship; all of which reflect the patriarchal dominance within society. In comparison to Browning's poetry, Charles Dickens's short story "Mr Minns and His Cousin" challenges the social paradigms of the Victorian era through its portrayal of the dire consequences of adhering to the social conventions of the time.

The pathetic fallacy in "the sky was bright and clear" is immediately juxtaposed to Mr Minns's mood as seen in "everything and everybody looked cheerful and happy except Mr. Augustus Minns" foreshadows that Mr Minns will not be convinced by Mr Budding's plans to reel away Minns's fortunes after his death easily, despite their polite approach which conforms to the Victorian values. The approach of Budding's family to convince Mr Minns is seen through the hyperbolic praise Mr Minns in the dialogue "humble, a true gentleman...the great pleasure we all feel in seeing him...I beg to propose the health of Mr.

Minns". However, these undeserving compliments are met with Mr Minns disapproval which is seen in the cumulative listing "that neither the name of Mr. Octavius Budden, nor of Mrs. Amelia Budden, nor of Master Alexander Augustus Budden, appear therein." naming the relatives he chooses not to

put on his will. Being a short story, the consequences of adhering to societal values of being very polite are not drastic as in the poems, however the message of the negatives of adhering to the values does become evident, showing how Dickens believes these values negatively impact society.

Whilst Browning's poems "Porphyria's Lover" and "My Last Duchess" convey the dangers of challenging social conventions and reflect the patriarchal belief systems within society, Dickens's short story "Mr Minns and his cousin" reveals the harm in adhering to the social paradigms of the context and in doing so challenges the notions of the Victorian era. However what a close analysis of all three texts reveals is the significant impact of context and the belief systems of the time upon texts and the ways of reading them and essentially shows how drastically texts are shaped by their context.