

Porphyrias lover my
last dutchess



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The Victorian era was a time marking the beginning of a new age, perspectives were opened up to a new level, science played a significant role in society and literature was at a turning point, converting from its usual uplifting and inspirational angle to a more realistic and rational manor. My Last Duchess and Porphyria's Lover are two examples of texts that are able to demonstrate this revolutionary style of writing in that the author, Robert Browning both challenges and ridicules the aspects of religion and what was seen as proper behaviour of that time. Both poems are written in the form of a dramatic monologue which, in turn, creates an opportunity for the reader to notice the changes in tone, speed and the overall control the character has when speaking. The use of only one person speaking also exposes the dominance held over the conversation which is important in the understanding of both poems.

My Last Duchess is a poem which starts off in the middle of a conversation being held by the Duke and an emissary from the Duke's next hopeful wife's family; a man who the Duke had to impress in order to have her hand in marriage. The main focus of the poem is on the Duke's previous wife and her story in his eyes; at first he is showing off a painting of her but, as he goes into the details of the emotions behind the artwork, his true persona is exposed. The Duchess is seen to him as being an uncontrollable flirt who would happily accept compliments from men and thank them in a way which he does not know how to, an act which was simply unacceptable in those days. Moreover the fact that he wasn't able to control her feelings was the basis of his anger, the result being the numerous delusional ideas he created in his mind that the Duchess was an unfaithful adulterator who

valued his gift of a nine-hundred year old name the same as any old gift she received. He felt that because he gave her the honour of holding such a noble name without her having to earn it, she should honour him and be a devoted wife; an act which was not uncommon for the women of that time. Throughout the poems, Browning consistently shows how chauvinist the male characters are in the way that they believed all women should be submissive and that they were of no more value than a mere object for them to win. For people living during the 19th Century Victorian Era, it was not uncommon for families to be large and patriarchal. Along with encouraging hard work, respectability and religious conformity, an individuals (let alone the family's) social status was an aspect of life that was constantly worked at to reach the top of the social ladder.

This can be witnessed during Porphyria's Lover in that the female character; obviously of a high social status within the community, is committing an adulterous act with a man of a somewhat lesser class. In order to keep her from dishonouring not only herself but her family name, it seems as if the cottage they meet in is familiar to them in that they know it is in a secluded area, and never worry or even consider the risk of being caught. The word sullen in the second line of the poem gives an accurate indication of the way in which the lover acts toward Porphyria.

The lover gives the impression that he is more of a social outcast which may be one of the contributing factors as to why they meet in secret. The lines "She shut the cold out and storm, She Kneeled and made the cheerless Grate" gives an indication into how life outside the cottage to him is cold and angry, this may be due to a past experience which led to him being socially

unacceptable within the community; an act which in those days, resulted in the person either having to move away or lose all former reputations.

Porphyria, however, was an exception who saw a more appealing side to him and was also the one person who brought any light and comfort into his life, she did all things in her power to be of most importance to him whether it be lighting the fire, wrapping herself around him and even bearing more skin than was appropriate for that time. The main difference between the male characters in the poems *My Last Duchess* and *Porphyria's Lover* is that in *My Last Duchess*, the story slowly unfolds giving away hints as to what really happened to the duchess and how she died, these clues then eventually lead to the final revelation which, although not exposed in direct forms, is obvious that the Duke played a part in her murder. This is compared to the male character in *Porphyria's Lover* who although seems suspicious throughout the poem, comes across as being somewhat in love with Porphyria and that suspicion is quickly forgotten. The end result is indeed a shock discovery and leaves the audience in disbelief that it happened so quickly, particularly the fast that there was such a lack of emotion put into it.

In all, Browning achieved his goal of revealing the hardships undergone by women in the Victorian era, a concept which was known to all about the dominance men had in the relationship, but chosen to be kept oblivious to the situations in an attempt to keep order and peace within the social society. Although controversial in their content, *My Last Duchess* and *Porphyria's Lover* are two poems which were written for the sole purpose of exposing not only Robert Browning's views of society but the opinion

of the people too swept up in the image battle to speak out against what was seen as proper, respectable behaviour.