

Characterisation – my last duchess



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Browning's "My Last Duchess" draws the reader into a masterfully crafted, multi-faceted, dramatic monologue in which the speaker, the Duke speaks directly to the reader, and used to reveal his mannerisms. Characterisation is revealed via Browning's vivid and violent imagery coupled with metaphors and enjambment. "Porphyria's Lover" is another such poem (also by Browning) which utilises a dramatic monologue to depict a disturbing story. However in this gives the reader a dramatic insight into the twisted mind of an abnormally possessive lover, who wishes the moment of love to last forever.

At the start of this poem the Duke comes across as a person of intelligence, poise, breeding and manners. If we delve deeper into both the title and the first 4 lines, however, we find our first curious passages: That's my last duchess painted on the wall, Looking as if she were alive. I call That piece a wonder, now; Fra Pandolf's hands Worked busily a day, and there she stands. (lines 1-4) We see in these lines a sense of possession; ownership over his wife, even after her death she remains "his last duchess".

The Duke owns not only her memory but her image, as if her physical image, her beauty was a trophy to display for selected guests much the way that the people of the East were brought back to England as specimens for study and display. We are also allowed our first glimpse into the character of the Duchess in lines 2-3. In a similar way the lover in "Porphyria's Lover" is an abnormally possessive lover, passionate and obsessive. From the knowledge of the characters you are given through the poems you see that they are both possessive and this is the reason why both of the characters kill their lovers." She was mine, mine, fair, / Perfectly pure and good".

This is what the lover said before he killed Porphyria. He kills her because at that precise moment in time he has complete power and control over Porphyria and wants to preserve this. Browning uses a simile extremely effectively in “ Porphyria’s Lover” to describe the body of Porphyria. He says “ As a shut bud that holds a bee”. This gives the reader the image that her soul is still alive but her body is dead.

The bud is shut and the bee is still alive inside of it. The Duke says, “ I call/That piece a wonder, now;” and the clear double entendre is in his choice of the word “ piece”. It is clearly understood to refer to the painting, much the way one would refer to a “ piece of art”, however, in the mid 19th century as well as today, the word had a pejorative connotation when used in reference to a women, in this case the woman in the painting, the Duchess, seems to be the object of rancor and ire for the Duke, and yet he refuses to relinquish his claim to even her memory. The tone in these poems is important as it acts as a contrast to the content of the poem. In “ My Last Duchess”, Browning uses a soft tone and describes the Duke having the Duchess killed subtly, “ This grew; I gave commands;/ Then all smiles stopped together.” Browning describes this without changing the tone.

However in “ Porphyria’s Lover” the tone is normal and soft throughout the poem until the point in which the Lover murders Porphyria, “ In one long yellow string I wound/ Three times her little throat around”. This is bold compared to “ My Last Duchess”. In addition, here the use of enjambment is effective because it gives the reader the image of the yellow hair being wrapped around Porphyria’s neck Browning use enjambment effectively in both poems. More so in “ Porphyria’s Lover”. The lines do not employ end-

stops; sentences and other grammatical units do not necessarily conclude at the end of lines.

This happens more so in “ Porphyria’s Lover”. The lover describes Porphyria removing her wet hat, “ untied/ Her hat and let the damp hair fall”. The use of enjambment here gives the image of her long blonde hair falling from beneath her hat. This is effective because it gives the reader the image of her hair moving out of position. Because the Duke is relating the story we may see his morally derelict character through his speech and dialect. In lines 8-21 it is revealed that that the expression and flush on the face of the duchess in the painting was a reflection of “ passion” and “ joy”, primal and earthy emotions to which the well-bred Duke is unaccustomed to expressing openly.

The manifestation of these emotions in the painting, however, was not instilled solely by her husband, the Duke, but also by the comments of the artist, Fra Pandolf. In “ My Last Duchess” Browning use diminutive language to describe the way the Duke behaves. He says “ Even had you skill/ In speech- (which I have not)”. He uses this rhetorical question to deliberately lower himself when talking to the Count’s ambassador to impress him. He is willing to change his personality completely from arrogant and self-obsessive to courteous.

The Duchess does not care about stooping to different levels. In a similar way to the duke, Porphyria is able to lower herself so that her lover will love her, “ She put my arm around her waist,/ and made her smooth white shoulder bare”. she gives all of her love and attention to the Lover. The

atmospheres in the poems are quite different due to how the men react around their lovers.

We first learn of how devoted to her lover Porphyria is when she first enters the cottage. She arrives through the stormy weather. Browning uses personification to describe the wind. “ It tore the elm-tops down for spite,/ And did its worst to vex the lake”. If Porphyria has come through this weather just to see her lover, he must be special to her.

By the Lover thinking that Phorphyria worships him he thinks that he is above her (in class) as you only worship someone of a higher and more dignified class. In ‘ My Last Duchess’ the Duke is of a higher class than the Duchess because she chooses to stoop. In “ My Last Duchess” the Duchess is giving the same amount of love and attention to all the people giving her compliments and gifts including the Duke. He is annoyed by this and says “ My favour at her breast,/ The dropping of the sun in the West/ The white mule she rode with round the terrace- all and each draw from her alike the approving speech.

“ The relationships in these two poems are completely different. Porphyria and her lover are very close and affectionate and passionate whereas the Duke and the Duchess are cold and almost distant to each other. This relates to the atmosphere and mood being different. In “ Porphyria’s Lover” the lover describes Porphyria’s dead body as “ little”. Browning uses diminution here to portray the image of the lover having absolute control. After looking at the two poems, it is clear that the speakers have many similarities and differences.

So what we are left to contemplate, at this point, is that the Duke, proud, arrogant, stately and weighed with the obligations of aristocratic birth, must take action. The façade of civilization is complete in the Duke as only the human animal can give orders to have one kill another. The duke is at last in complete control of the duchess, which is what he was accustomed to having. When the Duke kills the joy that defines the “ depth and passion” of her being (line 46), he alone is the sole object of her “ joy” and “ blushes” as he controls the curtain which covers the painting. The speaker in ‘ Porphyria’s Lover’ loved Porphyria a lot and spoke fondly of her, Characterisation revealed many of their similar traits.

such as obsession, possessiveness and a need for control over people. The Duke was unable to “ tame” and control his wife and the lover was unable to possess Porphyria and these common characteristics of the two speaker’s lead to the death of their loved ones. The main contrast was the social status of the speakers. The Duke was very wealthy, lived in a mansion and was of high social status, whereas Porphyria’s lover was not particularly rich and lived in a small cottage. Some of their personality traits also differed.

The Duke was more arrogant and full of pride and I think this was due to his wealth. however the Duke was not always as kind about his wife, and often spoke negatively about her. They also had similar traits such as obsession, possessiveness and a need for control over people. The Duke was unable to “ tame” and control his wife and the lover was unable to possess Porphyria and these common characteristics of the two speaker’s lead to the death of their loved ones.