

# Compare and contrast "my last duchess" and "porphyria" essay



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Robert Browning was one of the great poets of the Victorian age. He lived in the 19th Century from 1812-1889. Robert Browning wrote a large number of dramatic monologues, which were one of the very few types of evening entertainment in the 19th Century. The aim of a dramatic monologue is to see events from the character's point of view, as it is set in the 1st person perspective of the lead character. This viewpoint helps reveal and give the listener insight into the character's behaviour.

In the following text I shall be comparing and contrasting the monologues: "My Last Duchess" and "Porphyria's Lover". Both poems show different perspectives of a psychopath and the way each attempts to gain total control over their lovers. Although both poems contain the same subject matter, the settings are very different indeed. The poem My Last Duchess (MLD) has a very formal and almost regal presentation. MLD is set in the grounds of a stately home belonging to a very pompous and arrogant duke that has a sinister philosophy to life, which is revealed later on in the poem.

The language of the dialogue reflects the formal setting, for example the line "Will't please you sit and look at her?" The phrasing exudes ceremoniousness, and though hidden in a polite request, the reader realises that this is actually a cold order to, in the duke's eyes, an inferior. We are shown the formal setting of the poem, by the red tape tour of the duke's home through the art gallery, where he shows off his acquisitions as if trying to prove how absurdly wealthy and aristocratic he is.

This type of regal setting is heavily different to the rather more dramatic setting of Porphyria's Lover. Instead of the formal lavish surroundings of the

stately home in MLD, Porphyria's Lover (PL) starts in the middle of a violent storm in the middle of the countryside and instead of the stately home as in MLD; there is a humble cottage to be the setting of the poem. From the language of PL, we can tell a lot about the settings of this monologue. " The sullen wind was soon awake, It tore the elm-tops down for spite,

And did its worst to vex the lake. " The language has changed from regality and ceremony, in the seemingly safe stately home of the duke, in MLD, to the disturbing, uneasy and dramatic weather in PL. We gain an insight into the mood of the forthcoming poem in PL by the way Browning personifies the weather to give a somewhat brooding and dramatic atmosphere for the setting of PL. As the wind is personified as being ' sullen' and ' spiteful', we feel that there is a sense of danger in the air and the reader begins to feel wary yet intrigued.

Although the settings are different with MLD being aristocratic and ceremonious and PL being modest and stormy, the presentation and expression of the poems incite the curiosity of the reader; with the duke we are compelled to find out what sinister truth he is hiding behind his formality and with PL we are attracted to the danger Porphyria faces in the wild stormy night. This fascination is achieved through the imagery of the settings in PL and the charm and compelling behaviour of the duke in MLD. The two male characters in the poems have a lot in common.

Both the duke and the lover seem cold and unfeeling. In MLD the duke cold-heartedly speaks of the way ' he gave commands' to kill the duchess; this cruel manner of speech is repeated in PL where the lover speaks of how he '

strangled her'. Neither man seems to show any signs of remorse about what they have done. With the duke this is largely due to his own arrogance that he believes he has the power to do anything because of his '900-year-old name,' but with the lover, Browning portrays the character so that the reader does not quite know whether the lover knows the difference between right or wrong.

The lover did kill but he killed so emotionlessly, that we do not know if he should be condemned or committed. This is where there is a major difference between the poems. The duke appears to kill for the dowry of his bride, whereas the lover kills as he feels it is the only possible way to preserve the love his lover feels for him. They are both crimes of passion, but one is a crime of greed and the other is a crime of love. Another similarity of the men is the desire to have total control over their lover.

This lust of possessiveness is an extremely common trait in psychopaths and helps give us an insight into each of the character's motives for the crime. The lover gains control of his partner by cutting her head off. This may seem extreme in the views of a sane individual, but the lover saw it as the only way to preserve Porphyria's innocence and love. This obsession with ownership is proved when the lover stirs himself up as if preparing for the atrocity he is about to commit by repeating 'mine, mine' over and over again to himself.

The lover kills because he finally has total control, 'at last I knew Porphyria worshipped me,' but the duke kills to gain the control over his duchess.

Before his wife was murdered, the duke had her painted by a leading artist

so that he could put her with the rest of his works of art. This is because as a painting he finally has the trophy wife he requires and now has the aspect of domination that he could not achieve when his wife was alive.

This new mastery over his wife is gained by the fact that he alone can choose whom he reveals the painting to, ' since none puts by the curtain I have drawn for you but I'. His need for complete female submission to his will and recognition of his absolute power is again emphasised in the ironic conclusion to the poem where the duke deliberately draws the attention of the count's envoy to another of his trophies, ' Notice Neptune, though, Taming a seahorse, thought a rarity, Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me.

Browning's skilful and gradual revelation of the real character of the duke throughout the poem makes the sinister and ironic implication of the reference abundantly clear to the reader - the sculpture obviously represents yet another of his victims. In the poems, the two ladies also share the same characteristics of virtuosity and innocence. Both appear to be respondent, charming and gracious. This is shown in MLD where the lady feels joy and happiness for the simplest of things such as ' the dropping of the daylight in the west'.

The duke is unable to comprehend her simple joy as he is so cold-hearted and appears to be unresponsive to all forms of emotion. Both the women appear impulsive, loving, warm, responsive, innocent, graceful and happy, ' all and each would draw from her alike the approving speech'. The poems women both have the same traits and their lovers kill both of them. The

women also seem to be expressed as victims of society where there is little liberation or choice for them and they are both forced into the arms of psychopaths to gain the love they require, by the conventions of the Renaissance period.

Porphyria has slight differences to the duchess as she; instead of being described in images of freedom and purity such as her riding on ' the white mule she rode around the terrace' where the colour white is a symbol of innocence, is described more sensuously and in a more seductive manner with a certain teasing grace that compels her lover to commit the crime, ' she put my arm about her waist and made her smooth white shoulder bare'.

In all, the poems seem to follow the same basic structure of an obsessive psychopath who due to the desire to utterly possess their lover finds a way to preserve a perfect memory in death. Both poems follow the same structure but diverge from each other in the forms of setting and motive.

I believe that ' My Last Duchess' is the more powerful of the two poems as it involves a more subtle plot that is revealed more gradually through the poem and the machiavellian villain of the duke is quite disturbing as he has no remorse and is impenitent about his crime as he believes that his ' 900 year old name' and aristocratic upbringing justify his amoral behaviour, whereas in ' Porphyria's Lover', the lover simply commits a crime of passion, for love not money, and I believe he deserves a certain aspect of pity from the modern reader instead of the mingled revulsion and admiration felt by the reader for the duke