

Porphyria's lover and my last duchess study

Literature



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The two poems that I am comparing are Porphyria's Lover and My Last Duchess, both early nineteenth century dramatic monologues by Robert Browning. A dramatic monologue is a poem in which only one person speaks, but the presence of another person is usually felt. The narrator reveals a great deal about himself without any apparent intention of doing so.

In both of these dramatic monologues, it appears that the speaker has murdered their mistress and is reflecting upon their actions while contemplating the image of their lover's beautiful face. Both are selfish men who were jealous of their victims. The two speakers came from very different backgrounds, one a rich and powerful Duke, the other a low-born worker living in rural simplicity.

Porphyria's Lover is a love story told in the words of a simple man obsessed by his love for a woman of noble birth. The first five lines describe the weather on a miserable, wet evening. This is Browning's use of pathetic fallacy, giving the works of nature human feelings - the feelings of the speaker.

" The sullen wind was soon awake,

It tore the elm tops down for spite,

And its worse to vex the lake:"

The speaker is longing for his lover and feeling miserable but then she arrives. The whole mood changes from darkness and cold, to warmth and light. His mood change is shown by " she shut the cold out", both in the cottage and his mind. The class difference between Porphyria and her lover

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is indicated by the description of her wet clothing, "soiled gloves" show she was a fine lady. He does not speak to her and she seems to make the first moves,

"She put my arm about her waist,

And made her smooth, white shoulder bare,"

Her actions are provocative and overtly sexual; she is dominant, controlling the action, while he passively allows her to position his head and body. She tells him how much she loves him and how she has left the "gay feast" at her home, and come to him "through wind and rain" - a symbol for the difficulty in moving from one social class to another, because she could feel his need for her:

"A sudden thought of one so pale

For Love of her, and all in vain:"

Suddenly the speaker realises that Porphyria really does love him, he is ecstatic, full of pride and joy. However he realises that she is only his for that short time, she will have to return to her own class and he will be without her again. He cannot bear this thought. Earlier in the monologue he has referred to Porphyria's weakness,

"Too weak, for all her heart's endeavour,

To set its struggling passion free

From pride and vainer ties dissever,

And give herself to me forever."

He believes that her real desire is to be with him and she is only barred from doing this by her sense of duty, which keeps her with her own social class.

In an instant, the speaker decides to preserve this moment of true love by murdering his lover. He strangles her with her own hair. As she lies dead in his arms he opens up her eyes,

" As a shut bud that holds a bee,

I warily oped her lids:"

This simile suggests that the lover feels that he has set Porphyria free by killing her. She is now free from all the social constraints that prevented her from following her true love. He says that her eyes,

" Laughed the blue eyes without a stain,"

She was happy at last with no regrets.

Now the positions are reversed. The man is dominant; he kisses her passionately and places her head upon his shoulder. He is initiating the action, controlling what happens. He describes her cheek as:

" Blushed bright beneath the burning kiss:"

And refers to her " smiling, rosy little head", these make him sound like a powerful man with a submissive girl.

He truly feels that he has fulfilled her dearest wish by 'freezing' her feelings for him in time. No one can separate them again. He even feels that God would approve of her act, that he is justified.

" And yet God has not said a word!"

The man speaks this monologue the morning after he has murdered his lover. His love for her drove him to this crime of passion and he is seeking to justify his actions.

Unlike Porphyria's Lover, the monologue My Last Duchess is not a love story. The speaker is the Duke of Ferrara, a self-centred, arrogant man from a noble family, living in a grand palazzo. In contrast with the rural cottage occupied by the lover of Porphyria. He is speaking to an emissary who has come to negotiate the Duke's marriage (he has recently been widowed) to the daughter of another powerful family. He is showing this man around his palace, when he stops before a painting of his late wife. The reader can assume that the lady is dead,

" Looking as if she were alive"

Like the murdered lover in the previous poem.

The Duke begins describing the painting and the portrait sessions with the famous artist, there does not seem to be much regret for the loss of his wife. He keeps her portrait behind a curtain.

" since no one puts by

The curtain I have drawn for you but I"

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In this way he can control who looks at her and can appreciate her beauty. The Duke is slowing that his jealousy of his wife's admirers and his possessiveness, like that shown by Porphyria's Lover. The visitor has commented on the lovely expression on the Duchesses face. The speaker then remarks that it was not just " her husband's presence" that caused his wife's joyous blush. She was pleased by the complements paid to her by the painter.

The Duke then proceeds to recount a list of his complaints about the former Duchess.

" She had

A heart - how shall I say? Too soon made glad,

Too easily impressed; she liked what'er

She looked on and her looks went everywhere"

He criticises her, for the lovely smile she gave everyone, her politeness to others and for the pleasures she felt in all the kindnesses shown to her. She was happy with everything, sunsets, a branch of cherry blossoms and her " white mule". We have an indication of his irritation,

" Sir, twas all one! My favour at her breast,

The dropping of the daylight in the West."

We sense that the Duke wanted to feel more valued than simple works of nature and perhaps Porphyria's Lover felt that she would have valued him more had he been wealthy.

The Duchess was equally pleasant with everyone, but the Duke felt that she failed to adequately recognise his worth. For example she seemed to appreciate his " nine hundred years name" no more than any other gift she received. The Duke obviously felt that she should have been much more appreciative of him and all that he had brought to the marriage, than of anybody else.

The Duke tells his visitor that he never shared these feelings of dissatisfaction with his wife. We are left to wonder why he feels the need to share them with this stranger. Perhaps he intends for the man to convey them to the prospective Duchess, as a warning. He is a haughty man, and says that to have told her she did not please him " would be some stooping; and I choose never to stoop". Class was an issue for both the rich Duke and Porphyria's lowly lover.

The situation continued to irritate him,

" Oh Sir, she smiled, no doubt,

Whene'er I passed her' but who passed without

Much the same smile? This grew;"

Then he says the chilling words,

" I gave commands,

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Then all smiles stopped together."

We are left to assume that he had her killed, although, her death is not mentioned specifically. This is indeed a heartless planned action. She did not please him so he had her removed so that he could move on. Nowhere in the speech does he speak of her with affection. He simply refers to her portrait as " my last Duchess", not his late wife. " Last" infers that he is ready to move on to his next Duchess.

Later, as they move away to join the rest of the party, the Duke unconsciously reveals his true priorities by first showing his interest in a large dowry from the rich Count and then mentioning the Count's " fair daughter's self". However Porphyria's Lover is full of tender words that the narrator uses to describe his mistress. His actions are done out of love and passion not jealousy and irritation.

The Duke wants a wife who will feel privileged to have such a rich and cultured husband and who will save all her " earnest glances" for him.

In the closing lines the Duke points out a bronze sculpture of Neptune taming a seahorse. A symbol of male domination of the beautiful and natural creature. He could be suggesting that his new wife must be submissive or else she will be tamed as he tamed his late wife.

There are striking contrasts between these two monologues. Although they both describe beautiful women who are now dead, one woman has been killed in an act of hot-blooded, passionate murder, while the other is a victim of cold-blooded, premeditated execution. In Porphyria's Lover, the reader

feels sympathy for the speaker as he is so passionate about Porphyria and wants to immortalise her, whereas in My Last Duchess the reader has no sympathy for the Duke who has supposedly killed his wife because she merely irritated him and did not boost his ego.

The setting of the two monologues could not be more different: a simple rural cottage in Porphyria's Lover and a large palace in filled with expensive art in My Last Duchess. Although obviously from different classes both men are extremely selfish. In Porphyria's Lover the speaker murders Porphyria because he does not want anyone else to have her and is driven mad by his love for her. In My Last Duchess, the Duke is selfish because he wants his Duchess to give all her smiles and affection to him, and value him more than anything else.

The speaker in Porphyria's Lover does not show his love for Porphyria until the end of the monologue, after he had murdered her, when he seemed to become very passionate. In contrast, in My Last Duchess, the Duke does not seem to show any passion for the Duchess at all. If he shows any passion at all, it is for his art collection, which makes me think that was how he saw the young Duchess, a work of art, something that he owned and could show off, and something that he could also discard when it no longer pleased him.

The speaker in Porphyria's Lover, reveals himself to be someone who speaks his heart and does not 'fence around' the truth like the Duke. Although the Duke says he does not have skilled speech, its is obvious that his diction is carefully chosen through out. He is almost inviting the listener to disagree with him.

" Even had you the skill

In speech - (which I have not)"

The speaker in Porphyria's Lover uses a much simpler diction, as he will not have been as well educated as the Duke. Both men are murderers, one because of love, which he feels, could never be accepted because of the social divide, the other as a result of jealousy, arrogance and spite, again occasioned by the difference in class.