

"her darling one wish  
would be heard": how  
dramatic monologue  
illustrates distort...



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Of the consequences of maintaining an obsessive nature, its ability to cloud rational judgements and encourage humanity to surrender to his darkest, innermost impulses serves as one of its most tragic aspects. Robert Browning explores this concept through his poems "Porphyria's Lover" and "My Last Duchess." Following the entry of Porphyria into the narrator's cottage in "Porphyria's Lover," she verbally affirms her love for the him; as he believes Porphyria's love will inevitably fail, the narrator turns to murder and necrophilia thereafter in an effort to preserve this moment for which her affection felt genuine. In a similar vein, the Duke of Ferrara at the beginning "My Last Duchess" reveals to his visitor, whose purpose is to negotiate the Duke's marriage with another family, a portrait of his former spouse, who he had killed due to her inability to, in his mind, stay faithful and maintain affection towards him. Browning illustrates how the inherent obsessive and contradictory nature present in both narrators dismantles their sanity, encouraging them to rationalize their decisions, no matter the extent they violate morality.

Browning employs lustful, contradictory diction with dramatic monologue as the lens in "Porphyria's Lover" to exhibit the underlying manic mentality within the narrator, and how he perceives his own crime as an ultimate testament to his love towards Porphyria. In the opening lines, the narrator describes her as having "made her smooth white shoulder bare...spread o'er all, her yellow hair," and that she "worshipped" him (17-20, 33). The narrator's unnerving focus on the minute details of Porphyria's sensual behavior as she undresses characterizes her as an object to satisfy his lust, which from his perspective, she approves of. Following her verbal admission

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of affection to the narrator, he strangles Porphyria using her hair (41). The narrator, in support of his own personal yearning for Porphyria, turns to murder in the moment that she declares her love in an effort to bind her to himself eternally. This exemplifies the major contradiction within the narrator, in that while he is pleased that he has obtained Porphyria's affection, he hates the possibility of her eventual feelings towards him weakening, and has chosen to preserve this ideal version of Porphyria instead of having to face that potential reality. The narrator additionally claims that this was a fate that Porphyria herself desired (57). The narrator interpreted her assertion of devotion to him as a definitive truth that it was her wish to be sealed in that instance of purity; this emphasizes how the narrator's obsession with Porphyria has convinced him that his murder is a gesture that illustrates his love for her.

Moreover, Browning utilizes irony in "My Last Duchess" to highlight that while the Duke is unable to possess affectionate feelings towards anybody who fails to fit his ideal standard, he is incapable of quelling his obsession with them. In the initial lines, the Duke describes the painting of his former duchess as having "the depth and passion of its earnest glance" (7). While these comments initially suggest a positive appraisal, the remainder of the poem divulges that these words are ironic; they reveal the Duke's innermost bitterness and displeasure towards this woman since she did not adequately comply to his view of perfection, and additionally illustrates how prominently she remains in his mind. The Duke presents himself as a captivating and personable individual through his eloquence (13-14). In spite of the Duke's apparent lack of morality through the murder of his former wife, he still

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upholds a charming persona while defending his actions, which demonstrates his underlying internal obligation to control his world. Towards the end of the poem, the Duke claims that he "[chose] never to stoop" (43). The Duke chose not to profess his concerns and complaints to his wife in a confronting manner while she was alive as he believed that act would be beneath his standard; however, he instead chooses to communicate them passively following her death, which in reality, is further away from accommodating his standard.

The obsession both narrators have with their objects of aggression and their perceived lack of control over the situation instills within each of them a distorted sense of rationality, stimulating a desire to suspend love in its ideal moment that provides, in their minds, a just cause to take severe measures. The narrator characterizes the murder of Porphyria as a crime approved by God (60). In spite of this clearly amoral act, the narrator himself views it solely as a means of extending his love to Porphyria and preserving her in a state that he perceives as perfect; his belief that not even the highest authority categorizes the act as sinful exemplifies his distorted reality. Similarly, the Duke has turned his former duchess into a painting that he perceives as being an ideal image of her (13-15). As with the narrator's desire to freeze Porphyria in a genuine condition, the Duke has done same by displaying the most optimal version of his former duchess, which illustrates that while he harbors resentment for the actual woman he had killed, he still maintains an obsession for his version of her ideal-self.

Through the obsessive and contract nature present in both narrators, Browning demonstrates how their skewed perception of rationality encourages them to take extreme measures in an effort to achieve perfection in their lives. The use of language and irony in "Porphyria's Lover" and "My Last Duchess," respectively, illustrate the underlying mental dismay that affects the narrators and the consequences that those have on the women they surround themselves with. The chief failing in both characters lies within their demand for power, a demand that drives them to take any means necessary to satisfy.