

A Comparison of Two Poems by Robert Browning: *My Last Duchess* and *Porphyria's Lover*

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Robert Browning (1812–1889) was a master of the ‘Dramatic Monologue’ style. These consist of a narrative told from the point of view of a character who is not the poet. This character talks about the situation that they are in, and from this the reader is meant to infer information about the personality of the narrating character. Browning is unquestionably one of the greatest writers of Dramatic Monologues, and it two of these, *My Last Duchess* and *Porphyria's Lover* that are the subject of this essay.

My Last Duchess is written from the point of view of a widowed Duke, who is currently discussing, with an envoy of a ‘Count’, the possibility of a future marriage with this Count’s daughter. They are sitting in an upstairs room in the Duke’s home, in what appears to be a private art gallery, where a portrait of the Duke’s last wife is mounted on the wall behind a pair of curtains. The Duke is mostly concerned with describing his last marriage, quite candidly, to the emissary. He tells how she was a woman who was friendly to everyone, and how she looked kindly on anyone who pleased her (lines 21–24):

She had
A heart – how shall I say? – too soon made glad,
Too easily impressed; she liked whate’er
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.

Central to their discussion is the lifesize portrait of the Duke’s ‘Last Duchess’. The artist, a certain Frà Pandolf, had painted a masterpiece, which displays the Duchess as beautiful as she was in real life. When the Duke pulls back the curtains for the emissary (line 10), there is a sense that he is still in control of her, and he is “undressing” her at his own whim.

As their discussion progresses, it is revealed that what the Duke basically wanted to do to his Duchess was to control her, absolutely. He decided that the favours that she did for other people that pleased her were out of his control. However, the mistake the Duke made was that he was too proud to ever tell the

Duchess that what she was doing was displeasing him. In lines 34–43:

Who'd stoop to blame
This sort of trifling? Even had you skill
In speech – (which I have not) – to make you will
Quite clear to such an one, and say, 'Just this
Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,
..Or there exceed the mark'

– E'en then would be some stooping; and I choose
Never to stoop.

These lines reveal that the Duke was too pompous to point out the “this or that” in her that “disgusts” him. He claims that he does not have “skill In speech”, but his real reason is that he regards this as “stooping” – Browning repeats the word “stoop” three times, so it is clearly the Duke’s major reason that he did not warn the Duchess about her behaviour.

Porphyria’s Lover is also about a love-related murder. A young man, who lives in a cottage (line 9 – thus showing his apparent lower status compared to the woman) is visited secretly by his lover Porphyria (line 27 – she sneaks out during a feast). He is upset, possibly because their relationship has no future. When she speaks to him repeatedly and he does not answer, he realises that she has actually fallen in love with him, so he contrives to kill her so he can “keep” this moment – he has no future with her otherwise. Lines 32–35:

at last I knew
Porphyria worshipped me: surprise
Made my heart swell, and still it grew
While I debated what to do.

The “thing to do” (line 38) is to murder her, by strangling her with “all her hair in one long yellow string” (lines 38–39).

One of the major differences between *Porphyria’s Lover* and *My Last Duchess* is how Browning deals with the murder of the woman by the man in each poem. In *My Last Duchess* Browning almost does not mention it at all; the statement describing the murder itself is caught between the Duke’s poetic language (lines 45–46):

This grew; I gave commands;
Then all smiles stopped together.

This statement is very simple, and also a euphemism. Afterwards, the Duke returns to discussing the portrait of his late Duchess, as he does in most of the poem.

A euphemism is the only element that the two murders have in common; in lines 37–38 of *Porphyria's Lover* Browning writes “I found A thing to do”. However, for the rest of the poem Browning describes the murder and its immediate aftermath, in detail, with very descriptive language, for example (lines 44–45) “Laughed the blue eyes without a stain”, (lines 47–48) “her cheek once more Blushed bright beneath my burning kiss”, and (line 52) “smiling rosy little head”. He uses an evocative simile in line 43, describing her closed eyes as “a shut bud that holds a bee”. Porphyria's lover is shown to be disgusting in a much more direct way than the Duke of *My Last Duchess*: strangling her is a cruel death, and almost certainly she did not feel “no pain” (line 42), and then he *kisses* Porphyria while she is *dead*.

In *Porphyria's Lover*, Browning uses Pathetic Fallacy – he makes the weather reflect the mood of the man in the cottage – there is a violent storm outside, and he is grumpy. It also emphasises that Porphyria has had to struggle at least a small amount in order to visit him: it is likely that the cottage is a long way away from where the ‘feast’ is taking place, and she has had to escape from this feast *and* make her way through the rain (“she was come through wind and rain” – line 30) to reach him. This reinforces how much she is in love with him.

There is no external environment in *My Last Duchess*, but there is an external observer: the emissary from the father of the Duke's next bride. He represents the outside world – including, in a way, the reader – looking in on the horrific affairs of the Duke, but like everyone else, he is unable to do anything about it, including bringing the Duke to justice; the type of Renaissance-period Italian duke that this duke was based on would have been totally above the law, and historically these types of murders have been known to occur ¹.

Towards the end of *My Last Duchess* continues to describe his possessions (for example, a statue of Neptune, (line 56) and his marriage to the “Count's” daughter, even as his position becomes more ironic: he as attempted to bring his last Duchess completely under his control by immortalising her in a painting that only he can choose who is permitted to see. However, by showing it off to the emissary (and, by extension, the wider world) he has lost control of her, because her beauty is still wondered at even in death. He could not bring himself to admit that he had married a “less than perfect” woman, so he attempted to “make her perfect” by keeping her in a picture (she was literally “painted on the wall” – line 1).

The language employed in the central stanzas of *Porphyria's Lover* is ex-

¹For example, Gesualdo da Venosa murdered his wife and her lover in 1590.

tremely sensual, especially for a Victorian poet such as Browning². He describes an extremely intimate scene with phrases such as “and made her smooth shoulder bare” and when the man “let[s] her damp hair fall”. Both these actions would have been considered very improper in normal Victorian circles. The only time in the poem where the Iambic tetrameter (with an A-B-A-B-B rhyming pattern) pauses is in line 21, in the middle of Browning’s description of the lovers, forcing the reader to notice the events of this passage, as they are important.

On the other hand, *My Last Duchess*’s rhyming couplets in Iambic pentameter do not stop in the poem; this gives the impression that the Duke is not stopping to think of the situation from the Duchess’ point of view. I think this is the main difference between the two poems: the Duke murders the Duchess because he is angry, and he is mistaken because he has not understood the Duchess’ thoughts. The ‘Lover’ considers Porphyria’s thoughts carefully, and comes to the conclusion that she never wants to leave him because she loves him so much, and therefore in order to keep things this way he must kill her. *He* is mistaken because he has committed murder.

When reading these poems, I feel revulsion at both characters – the murderous Duke and Porphyria’s homicidal lover. It is Porphyria’s lover who has attempted to justify his deeds properly, by claiming it was about Porphyria’s happiness rather than his, but it is also Porphyria’s lover who has committed his crime in the more horrific way, so he is no better than the Duke.

Approx. 1500 words.

²Browning (1812–1889) lived almost entirely during the reign of Queen Victoria (1837–1901)gths. The ‘Lover’ considers Porphyria’s thoughts carefully, and comes to the conclusion that she never wants to leave