Unit-3 ❑ Robert Browning: (a) 'Porphyria's Lover' (b) 'My Last Duchess'

Structure:

2.3.0 Introduction

2.3.1 Browning and the Victorian Age

2.3.2 Browning's Works

2.3.3 Browning and the Dramatic Monologue

2.3.4 'Porphyria's Lover'

2.3.4a)1 Word meanings of 'Porphyria's Lover'

2.3.4a)2 Critical Commentary

2.3.5 'My Last Duchess'

2.3.5b)1 Word meanings

2.3.5b)2 Critical Commentary

2.3.6 Summing Up

2.3.7 Comprehension Exercises

2.3.8 Suggested Reading

2.3.0. Introduction

You have already gained substantial knowledge about Victorian poetry from Module 1, Unit 2. Therefore, you are now in a position to appreciate and discuss individual poets of the period. In the previous two units you studied the poetry of Tennyson and Arnold. Here you shall now study the poetry of Robert Browning. As soon as you read his poems you will realize the ways in which his poetry is different from the two others just mentioned. Although they all belonged to the same age their oeuvres differ remarkably in spirit. In the course of your study of Browning and his poetry you will also gain valuable insight into the different ways in which sensitive minds from the same age react to situations and compulsions inflicted upon them.

2.3.1.Browning and the Victorian Age

Robert Browning (1812 -1889) belonged to the Victorian age, spanning the years roughly between 1830 and 1900. It was an age marked by a number of developments in the political, social, economic and cultural spheres. First, it was the age of Queen Victoria's long, uninterrupted reign which witnessed great imperial expansion and ensured political stability for England. This was reflected in the social environment where Victorianism became an ethos in itself, entailing a set standard of public behavior. Decorum, propriety, correctness and moral righteousness were upheld with great zest. It was also an age of great economic well-being for some, but great economic distress for factory workers and peasants. The Industrial Revolution brought about a greater division between working classes and ruling classes. Caught in this conflicting world were the writers, thinkers and artists. Some hailed the overall prosperity of England while some deplored the unjust system. Scientific progress and new discoveries only heightened the divide, Darwin's theory of the evolution of man becoming the chief centre of conflict between complacent faith and skeptical questioning. Tennyson, the poet-laureate, hailed the greatness of his nation, but was also aware of progress 'halting on palsied feet'. Matthew Arnold was torn between faith and unfaith and found himself 'enisled'. Browning, though aware of all these developments, kept his work largely free of these conflicts, focusing on his own artistic evolution. Further, he had relocated to Italy after his elopement and marriage to Elizabeth Barrett Browning, a leading poet of the times. Against the backdrop of such diverse developments, Browning experimented with a variety of themes and forms, which were markedly different from the mellifluous poetry that people in England were used to since the Romantics and then, Tennyson.

Robert Browning

Born in this age of conflicting conditions, Browning, with his bold innovativeness, had to wait a long time to find his rightful place in the world of contemporary literature. Tennyson, his contemporary, enjoyed fifty years of success, while Browning

tasted success only in the last phase of his life, twenty years after the collected volume of 1849. It took a long time for Victorian England, as it continued to stick to conventional standards, to recognize the range of Browning's poetry. Browning was a poet ahead of his times who anticipated modern techniques such as impressionism and psycho-analysis in poems such as 'My Last Duchess', 'Porphyria's Lover', 'Home Thoughts from Abroad' and so on. His intellectual analysis of the human psyche was a disturbing feature for the complacent Victorian world.

2.3.2. Browning's Works

Robert Browning was born on 7th May, 1812 in Camberwell, England. He began his writing career with 'Pauline, a fragment of a Confession'. This was followed by 'Paracelsus' in 1834-35; 'Strafford', his first verse drama; and 'Sordello' in 1840. Between 1841 and 1846, Browning published a series of pamphlets with the title 'Bells and Pomegranates' containing his poems and plays. 'Porphyria's Lover' and 'My Last Duchess' were included in the third volume of 'Bells and Pomegranates' (1842). He married Elizabeth Barrett, a well-known poetess and an invalid, following a dramatic elopement in 1846, and moved to Italy. 'Men and Women' was published in 1855, which contained many of his earlier poems, including 'Porphyria's Lover'. Elizabeth Barrett Browning died in 1861, leaving behind a twelve year old son with whom Browning returned to England. His volume of poems, 'Dramatis Personae' was published in 1864. 'The Ring and the Book', his verse-novel, (1868-69), established Browning as a leading writer of his times. His last work, 'Asolando', was published on the day of his death on 12th December, 1889. Browning's four major volumes of verse include 'Dramatic Lyrics' (1842), 'Dramatic Romances and Lyrics' (1845), 'Men and Women' (1855) and 'Dramatis Personae' (1864) – all of which contain poems published earlier as well as new pieces. His first Collected Volume was published in 1849.

2.3.3. Browning and the Dramatic Monologue

The Dramatic Monologue was a form that Browning had perfected in the course of his experiments with different forms of poetry and verse drama. In this, a speaker tries to justify his own position and convince the listener about his point of view and his actions. Most of his dramatic monologues are set in a particular milieu, a particular time. The historical setting is very important for a proper understanding of

the poem. In 'My Last Duchess', the setting of late Renaissance Italy is fundamental to our understanding of the Duke's character – specially the fine sensitivity to art and, on the other hand, his feudal, uncompromising, materialistic temperament.

A dramatic monologue is different from a soliloquy. In the former, the speaker's attention is directed outward, towards the listener whom he is trying to influence. In the latter, the attention is entirely directed inwards, where the speaker is trying to come to terms with his ideas and emotions and consists of internal debate, as in Hamlet's famous soliloquy, 'To be or not to be.' Further, the meaning that emerges from a soliloquy is exactly what the speaker is intending to communicate. In a dramatic monologue, the speaker tries to impose his established point of view, but, with the opposite result. The reader's/listener's reaction is contrary to what the speaker had aimed at.

A dramatic monologue is generally uttered at a moment of historical crisis when the speaker is desperate to convince his listener as in 'My Last Duchess' or trying to get out of a sticky situation as in 'Fra Lippo Lippi', or trying to justify his convoluted psychology as in 'Porphyria's Lover'.

A dramatic monologue, while consisting of an utterance by a single speaker, also contains elements of drama by making the presence and reactions of the listener/ audience palpable. In 'My Last Duchess', the presence and responses of the envoy are communicated to us throughout. Also, there is a sense of movement and unfolding of action as in 'Porphyria's Lover'.

Browning's dramatic monologues explore the psychological complexities of the speaker's mind, where the speaker unwittingly reveals his character while trying to mislead the listener. In the course of justifying and explaining his standpoint, Browning makes the speaker reveal his true nature through his diction/language, images, metaphors, turn of phrase etc. In fact, Browning established the technique of 'point of view' long before it was developed in prose fiction by Henry James, Virginia Woolf, and others in the twentieth century.

Browning's principal concern was the creation of dramatic speakers and dramatic situations. In the poems prescribed for you, we find some of the best illustrations of the dramatic monologue as developed by Browning.

2.3.4 'Porphyria's Lover'

This poem was first published as 'Porphyria' in the journal, *Monthly Repository*

in 1836. It was re-published in the collection of poems, *Dramatic Lyrics* along with 'Johannes Agricola in Meditation' under the general title of 'Madhouse Cells', as in the journal. It got its present title in 1863 when it was included in *Dramatic Romances*.

Possible sources for the poem include John Wilson's 'Extracts from Gosschen's Diary', report of a ghastly murder in 'Blackwood's Magazine, volume iii (1818), and Barry Cornwall's poem 'Marcian Colonna'.

Porphyria's Lover

The rain set early in to-night,
The sullen wind was soon awake,
It tore the elm-tops down for spite,
And did its worst to vex the lake:
I listened with heart fit to break.
When glided in Porphyria; straight
She shut the cold out and the storm,
And kneeled and made the cheerless grate
Blaze up, and all the cottage warm;
Which done, she rose, and from her form
Withdrew the dripping cloak and shawl,
And laid her soiled gloves by, untied
Her hat and let the damp hair fall,
And, last, she sat down by my side
And called me. When no voice replied,
She put my arm about her waist,
And made her smooth white shoulder bare,
And all her yellow hair displaced,
And, stooping, made my cheek lie there,
And spread, o'er all, her yellow hair,
Murmuring how she loved me — she
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 for ever.
But passion sometimes would prevail,
Nor could to-night's gay feast restrain
A sudden thought of one so pale
For love of her, and all in vain:
So, she was come through wind and rain.
Be sure I looked up at her eyes
Happy and proud; at last I knew
Porphyria worshipped me; surprise
Made my heart swell, and still it grew
While I debated what to do.
That moment she was mine, mine, fair,
Perfectly pure and good: I found
A thing to do, and all her hair
In one long yellow string I wound
Three times her little throat around,
And strangled her. No pain felt she;
I am quite sure she felt no pain.
As a shut bud that holds a bee,
I warily oped her lids: again
Laughed the blue eyes without a stain.
And I untightened next the tress
About her neck; her cheek once more
Blushed bright beneath my burning kiss:
I propped her head up as before,
Only, this time my shoulder bore
Her head, which droops upon it still:
The smiling rosy little head,
So glad it has its utmost will,
That all it scorned at once is fled,
And I, its love, am gained instead!
Porphyria's love: she guessed not how
Her darling one wish would be heard.

And thus we sit together now,
And all night long we have not stirred,
And yet God has not said a word!

'Porphyria's Lover' is the first short dramatic monologue by Browning. It is uttered by a lover who strangles his beloved to death to eternalize 'that moment' when she was his –'perfectly pure and good'. The poem begins by describing a stormy night when Porphyria 'glided in' and 'straight/ She shut the cold out and the storm'. She lighted the fire in the grate and then removing her 'dripping cloak and shawl', she laid aside her 'soiled glove'. She then 'untied her hat' and 'let the damp hair fall' and sat beside the speaker, calling out to him. 'When no voice replied', she put his arm around her waist and made him rest his cheek on her bare 'smooth white shoulder' and 'spread o'er all, her yellow hair'. She murmured 'how she loved' him, struggling in her weakness to express her passion, having left behind a 'gay feast' to come to him 'so pale/ For love of her'. She had come to him, giving up pride and 'vainer ties'. The speaker then realizes that Porphyria 'worshipped' him and surprise made his heart 'swell' and he 'debated what to do'.

It was a moment of realization that she was all his – fair,/ Perfectly pure and good' and he found 'A thing to do'. He made a string with her long yellow hair and wound 'three times her little throat around' and — 'strangled' her ! In his mad glee at having found the means to stop time at a particular, perfect moment, he feels sure that 'she felt no pain'. Cautiously he opens her eyelids and found they held no pain, but 'laughed without a stain'. On untying the hair from around her neck, he finds the colour returning to her cheeks, 'burning bright beneath 'his kiss. He 'propped her head up as before', but this time it was his shoulder that bore her head. He thinks that 'the smiling little head' is happy that all that stood in the way of her love is 'fled' and she has gained him, her love. The speaker feels that Porphyria's 'one wish', that is, to be with him, has been answered and thus they sit together 'all night long'. The last line –'And yet God has not said a word!' –may be an expression of justification for his terrible act.

2.3.4(a) 1. Word meanings of 'Porphyria's Lover'

Sullen – bad-tempered and silent

Spite- desire to hurt someone

Endeavour – labour, hard work

Dissever –break, cause to separate

Prevail – be more powerful, hold sway

Restrain – keep under control

Tress - a long lock of hair

Droops –bend or hang downwards

Scorned –treat with contempt, look down upon

Stirred –moved slightly, woke up

2.3.4(a) 2. Critical Commentary

This is a dramatic monologue, uttered by a person of the most unusual kind of psychology. Here is a lover who tries to stop time at a moment of perfect bliss by murdering his beloved. The ramblings of the lover illustrate the peculiar thought processes in his mind. His response to beauty and love is almost psychotic, while the manner in which he commits the murder is almost in the manner of ritualistic sacrifice.

In the first half of the poem we listen to the speaker's description of Porphyria coming to him on a night of storm and rain, laying aside worldly thoughts of propriety. He is observing her, saying nothing. Porphyria is the active agent performing various actions while he is silently submitting to her directions. She 'made his cheek lie' on her shoulder', while he remains passive. All the actions seem to be part of an artistic process. Then when he looks into her eyes he thinks he sees a kind romantic idolatry. He debates' what to do' as he sees the worship in her eyes.

In the next section we witness a horrific tableau where he strangulates her in a ritualistic manner, commensurate with her 'worship'. The repeated reference to her hair adds to the sense of ritual. Here, too, there seems to be an imitation of artistic creativity. We are shocked into realizing that we are audience to a murderer. He tries to justify his action by claiming that it was Porphyria's 'darling one wish'. There is an element of Romantic egotism in his claim that she wished to be dead and that she 'felt no pain'. Perhaps there was fear of losing her to the world which prompted the unnatural act. Through the narration of events, the speaker is redefining the roles of Porphyria and his own. She becomes the passive receiver while he takes on the role of doer, who remakes Porphyria as an eternal object of adoration. And as the masterful agent, he feels that even God is silenced. At the same time, the mention of God's silence does evoke a sense of uneasiness.

As a dramatic monologue, this poem is different in not being addressed to any particular audience. There is no definite placing in time and place. The setting and situation is rather reminiscent of Keats's 'The Eve of St. Agnes', with lovers meeting at night in stormy weather. There is a projection of the speaker's mood onto the world of nature. However, as in his other dramatic monologues, the utterance is made at a moment of historical crisis. There is also the characteristic attempt at justification, while leaving the reader to draw his own conclusions.

The poem has a neat structural division with Porphyria as the active agent in charge of the action in the first half and a neat reversal of roles in the second half. Browning makes subtle use of contrast, by replacing the 'soiled gloves' of the first part by the eyes 'without a stain', as if his act of murder has purified her eternally. Also, she had made him rest her cheeks against her shoulder and later he 'propped her head' on his. There are many such little details which act collectively in bringing out the changed positions of the protagonists. It is to be noted that the speaker is looked at in the beginning and is speaking in the second half. The rhyme scheme of ababb adds to the effect of a tableau being played out. Browning makes extensive use of transferred epithet as in 'sullen wind' or 'cheerless grate' with great effectiveness. The language is simple yet highly hypnotic in its effect, vividly bringing out the romantic setting, followed by the artistically executed murder. The arrangement of the dramatic action in the poem unobtrusively brings out the abnormal psychology of the speaker.

As is typical in a dramatic monologue, there is a sense of dramatic movement in the course of the poem's unfolding. Porhyria arriving at her lover's place, laying aside her wet cloak, letting drop her wet hair, placing his hand around her waist, making him rest his head on her shoulder – all these movements are meticulously described in the first half where both the speaker and the audience watch with anticipation. A dramatic turn follows after this, when the speaker discovers the worshipful adoration in her eyes. Now it is the speaker who performs the actions in the drama and the audience is led to a state of hypnotized shock by the artistically executed murder of Porphyria. So, this is Porphyria's lover!

Also, the monologue is uttered in a moment of crisis, a typical feature of Browning's dramatic monologues, when the lover has just killed his beloved and is compelled to justify his act to the world. Further, the response of the audience or the reader is distinctly unlike that which the speaker had intended to produce. However,

unlike Browning's other dramatic monologues, the response of the audience is not recorded or indicated within the poem. Also, the place and time against which the poem is set, is not indicated, which is usually found in his other poems. But it is one of Browning's shortest and finest dramatic monologues which is open to a variety of psychological interpretations and responses.

2.3.5. 'My Last Duchess'

This poem was first published under the general title 'Italy and France', with the contrasting poem, 'Count Gismond'. It had its present title in 1849, and in 1863 was included in 'Romances'. Browning collected the material of this poem while preparing for 'Sordello'. The Duke is modelled on Alfonso II, the fifth Duke of Ferrara and the last of the Este family. Alfonso was born in 1533 and married Lucrezia de Medici, daughter of the Duke of Florence, in 1558, when she was only fourteen years of age. She died in1561 in mysterious circumstances. In 1565, the Duke married the daughter of Ferdinand I, the Count of Tyrol and whose capital was Innsbruck. The emissary of the Count to whom this dramatic monologue is addressed is Nikolaus Madruz.

My Last Duchess

FERRARA

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.
Will't please you sit and look at her? I said
"Fra Pandolf" by design, for never read
Strangers like you that pictured countenance,
The depth and passion of its earnest glance,
But to myself they turned (since none puts by
The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)
And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,
How such a glance came there; so, not the first
Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, 'twas not
Her husband's presence only, called that spot

Of joy into the Duchess' cheek; perhaps
Fra Pandolf chanced to say, "Her mantle laps
Over my lady's wrist too much," or "Paint
Must never hope to reproduce the faint
Half-flush that dies along her throat." Such stuff
Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough
For calling up that spot of joy. 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.
Sir, 'twas all one! My favour at her breast,
The dropping of the daylight in the West,
The bough of cherries some officious fool
Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule
She rode with round the terrace—all and each
Would draw from her alike the approving speech,
Or blush, at least. She thanked men—good! but thanked
Somehow—I know not how—as if she ranked
My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name
With anybody's gift. Who'd stoop to blame
This sort of trifling? Even had you skill
In speech—which I have not—to make your 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"—and if she let
Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set
Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse—
E'en then would be some stooping; and I choose
Never to stoop. Oh, sir, she smiled, no doubt,
Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without
Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;
Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands
As if alive. Will't please you rise? We'll meet

The company below, then. I repeat,
The Count your master's known munificence
Is ample warrant that no just pretense
Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;
Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed
At starting, is my object. Nay, we'll go
Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though,
Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me

'My Last Duchess' was written in the summer, or early autumn of 1842. It is placed in the Renaissance, when art was deeply appreciated, especially painting. The Duke is the speaker, addressing the envoy of the Count of Tyrol, who has come to discuss marriage negotiations between the Duke and the Count's daughter. As the Duke takes the envoy on a tour of his house, he points to a picture of the 'last duchess', i.e., Lucrezia de Medici, painted by Fra Panfdolf, an imaginary painter. The point to note here is that the Duke had commissioned a priest, and not any other painter, to paint a picture of his wife. The Duke is full of admiration for the painting and calls 'that piece a wonder'. He asks the envoy to sit and look at the painting with care and states that he mentioned the name of the painter as 'Fra Pandolf' deliberately, because he did not want ordinary people looking at her. In fact, even now, after her death, no one but he can remove the curtain that covers the painting. He explains that his wife was very easily pleased and the envoy may be wondering as to what had 'called that spot of joy' in her cheeks. He goes on to explain that something as insignificant as the priest saying, by way of courtesy, that her wrist was too beautiful to be covered by the mantle or that the painter's brush can never reproduce the 'half-flush that dies along her throat', could make her glad. In fact, according to the Duke, she had a heart that was 'too soon made glad'. She 'liked whate'er she looked on, and her looks went everywhere'. She considered his 'favour' for her at par with other little things such as 'the dropping of the daylight in the West' or the 'fool' who brought cherries for her or the white mule she rode on. She was equally thankful towards all and 'ranked' his 'gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name' with 'anybody's gift'. She did not realize the worth of being married into such an old family. Incidentally, her family did not have such an illustrious lineage as his. But the Duke was too proud to correct her lack of discernment and even if he had that 'skill in speech', he would not have bothered to make his 'will' clear to 'such an one'. And

even if she were prepared to correct herself where she missed or exceeded the mark, he would still think that there would have been some stooping and he had chosen 'never to stoop'. He says that she always smiled when he passed her, but then, she smiled on everybody else who passed her. As she continued in this manner, he 'gave commands' and 'all smiles stopped together'. The Duke ordered her death as he found her unworthy of the honour of being the wife of a Duke with a 'nine-hundred-years –old name'. And now, in this painting she looks 'as if alive'.

After describing the last Duchess and her fate, the Duke asks the envoy to rise and go below where the others are. He slyly refers to the generosity of the Count in the matter of dowry and hypocritically states that it is his daughter in whom he is actually interested. As they go down together, the Duke draws the attention of the envoy to a sculpture of Neptune, identified with the Greek sea-god, Poseidon, taming a sea-horse, which Claus, an imaginary sculptor from Innsbruck, the capital of Tyrol, had 'cast in bronze' for him.

2.3.5(b) 1. Word meanings

Fra–Brother of a missionary sect, priest

Design – on purpose

Pictured- painted

Countenance-expression, appearance

Durst- dare

Mantle – cloak

Officious – interfering in an obtrusive way

Lessoned – taught, corrected

Forsooth – indeed

Stooping - lowering one's standard, bending

Company – gathering, guests

Munificence - great generosity

Warrant – justification, authority

Pretence – claim

Avowed – openly stated

Rarity – a rare or precious thing

2.3.5(b) 2. Critical Commentary

Placed in the Renaissance, 'My Last Duchess' works out a delicately delineated portrait of the Duchess and more subtly, of the Duke. As in 'Porphyria's Lover', here too, Browning anticipates Impressionistic art in his depiction of the object of discourse as a work of art. The 'aesthetic' man, i.e., the Duke is trying to convince the envoy of his masterful presence, which actually indicates his need for assurance on that head. He tells the story of the last duchess in order to inform the envoy about what he expects from his future bride, perhaps. In a dramatic manner, he unveils the picture of his former wife, pointing out its artistic merit and then moves on to discuss her nature and conduct which he found unbecoming for the wife of a Duke with a 'nine-hundred-years-old name'. In the course of defining her lapses, he unwittingly reveals his own insecurity which prompted him to give 'commands' so that her smiles which she bestowed on all were 'stopped' forever. The Duke in his insane logic feels that he did the right thing in killing her, thereby preserving the dignity of his family's name and preserving her beauty in art. The Duke's attitude illustrates Freud's theory of obsessional neurosis. The psychological complexity of the Duke is brought out in his blind belief that he can never be wrong, that he is to decide the fates of others. He even controls the actions of such insignificant people as the envoy who m he orders to 'sit' or 'rise'. He behaves as a theatrical producer. He even monitors the responses of the envoy towards the portrait of the last duchess, prompting him to notice her wrist, her cheeks, the 'faint half-flush that dies along her throat'. These reveal his own sexual frustration in failing to have been the sole proprietor and controller of her life. Despite being a connoisseur of art and beauty, his elevated aesthetic sense does not protect him from sinking into the lowest depths of depravity, insecurity and cruelty. The Duke's theatrical rhetoric produces a series of dramatic shocks and as Robert Langbaum has pointed out, the last ten lines 'produce a series of shocks' that reveal the Duke's character which leave the reader 'panting after revelation'. Before we have time to recover from the shock of his crime we find him ruthlessly exposing his greed by referring to the dowry he expects from his future bride and his intention of exercising control by the reference to the sculpture of Neptune taming a sea-horse.

In the course of narrating the story of the last duchess, the Duke reveals his supreme arrogance and his distorted view of aristocratic lineage. He is harsh, cruel, heartless and ruthless, with inhuman pride. The swift change of topic in his discourse reflects his complete indifference and absence of feeling towards others. There is no trace of guilt, no regret, no fear. He is almost lunatic in his egotism and blindness. At the same time, he has the cool, practical logic of a heartless man. In a business-

like, practical way he introduces the subject of dowry. For him, marriage is a business transaction to be negotiated. He is also avaricious. His extreme greed is brought out in the reference to the Count's munificence'. His calculating nature and hypocrisy is revealed in his claim that his daughter's 'fair self' is all that interests him. In drawing the envoy's attention to Neptune taming a sea-horse there is a note of misgiving regarding his expectations from his new bride.

The Duke utters the monologue at a critical point in his life, when he is about to take a decision about his second marriage. He wants to make his position clear regarding his relations with the last duchess. The scene and situation is indicated in the title and the first few lines with the utmost economy, where the Duke leads the envoy from his future bride's home to view the portrait of his 'last duchess'. The Duke's typical Renaissance attributes such as love of art, painting and pride of aristocratic lineage are brought out right at the beginning. The moment of historical crisis in his life has the effect of splitting the speaker's personality into opposing elements and the conflict of these leads to revelation of character. There is an indirect exploration of psychological processes in the Duke's mind. Presence of audience forces the speaker to assume a stance or mask according to the effect he wants to make on the listener.

Throughout the poem, the presence of the listener is made palpable through references to his reactions, expressions and movements. The element of drama, both in content and presentation is strongly present, while the monologue offers the audience a chance to glimpse into the hidden recesses of an abnormal mind. In this, it is a perfect dramatic monologue.

And, in the attempt to justify his treatment of his former wife, he reveals more of his own failings than he would have done at any other time. His intention of conveying what he expects from his second wife by pointing out the lapses of the last duchess, has just the reverse effect. He lets slip a number of his character traits which at any other time he would have tried to conceal, such as his greed, arrogance, hypocrisy, insecurity and insane jealousy. This revelation of character is the fundamental object of Browning's dramatic monologues. It is done in an oblique way with great subtlety and dramatic effect. While the Duke thinks he is making a grand impression on his audience, he is actually exposing his frailties and grievous lapses. He ends up bringing out the last duchess's goodness, while trying to dismiss her. For him, the real person was insignificant, but her life-like portrait makes her 'seem alive'. She has become an object of art for the connoisseur.

Browning's handling of the dramatic monologue is best brought out through his

use of language. The Duke in all his pride of superior artistic taste leads his listener to look upon the portrait of his dead wife and appreciate the 'piece' which is a 'wonder'. And at the same time, he makes the envoy understand that the merit of the work of art should not be confused with the subject of that work. It is through a subtle use of language that the Duke tries to monitor the responses of his listener. The metaphor of art acts as a continuing motif through the poem, culminating in the reference to the statue of Neptune taming a sea-horse. The vulnerable duchess who could not be tamed as he wished had to pay with her life and become transformed into an object of art. And the sculpture of Neptune sends a veiled message as to what he would want from his future bride. The imagery of Neptune taming a sea-horse is in contrast to the duchess riding her 'white mule' on the terrace. Strength is pitted against vulnerability.

Browning makes use of subtle irony in revealing the character of the Duke by making him utter the most damaging things about himself while he felt he was making a great impression by his self-satisfied account of his opinions and actions.

The unobtrusive rhyming couplets and the syntax of the lines help in creating a dramatic effect as well as the rhythm of speech. The run-on lines with pauses here now and then especially convey a sense of conversational rhythm. The dominating presence of the Duke is brought out through the swift changes of subject and tone. The lover of art and beauty who fails to love humanity begins and ends his monologue with peremptory orders to notice works of art – first, a painting of the duchess he killed and, second, a statue of Neptune in the act of taming, as he wished to do with the last duchess and proposes to do with the next.

2.3.6. Summing Up

Both the poems 'Porphyria's Lover' and My Last Duchess' are extremely intriguing, interesting and terrifying studies in abnormal psychology. While the former reveals the peculiar psychology of a lover with his self-claimed power over time through the killing of his beloved at a moment of perfect love, the latter reveals the twisted psychology of a person who kills his wife for the absence of perfect and complete surrender to him.

2.3.7. Comprehension Exercises

● **Long Answer Type Questions-20 Marks**

1. Analyse the Duke's character in 'My Last Duchess'.

2. Comment on Browning's handling of the dramatic monologue as found in 'Porphria's Lover' and 'My Last Duchess'.
3. Analyse either of the two poems as a dramatic monologue.
4. Attempt a critical appreciation of 'Porphyria's Lover'.
5. Discuss Browning's use of language in the two poems. Is it different from the language used by other Victorian poets? How?
6. How far can you call Browning a 'typically' Victorian poet? Discuss with illustrations from the two poems.

● **Medium Length Questions-12 marks**

1. Give an account of the way the Duchess's story is unfolded.
2. Give an account of the murder of Porphyria as narrated by the speaker.
3. Comment on the character of the speaker in 'Porphyria's Lover'.
4. Consider either of the two poems as a study in abnormal psychology.

● **Short Questions-6 marks**

1. How does the speaker justify his action in 'Porphyria's Lover'?
2. Which trait in the duchess's character made the duke angry?
3. Comment briefly on the concluding image in 'My Last Duchess'.
4. Why did the lover kill Porphyria?

2.3.8. Suggested Reading

1. Jack, Ian. *Browning's Major Poetry*
2. Venn, William D. *Browning Handbook*
3. Langbaum, Robert. *The Poetry of Experience*
4. Berdoe. *The Browning Encyclopaedia*
5. Willey, Margaret. *Men and Women*
6. Phelps, W.L. *Robert Browning – How to Know Him*
7. Gibson, Mary Ellis, ed. *Critical Essays on Robert Browning*. G.K. Hall & Co., New York, 1992.
8. Armstrong, Isobel. *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics, and Politics.* Routledge, London, 1993.