

A Comparative Stylistic Analysis of Robert Browning's Poems with Special Reference to "My Last Duchess" & "Porphyria's Lover"

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Abstract

This research paper delves into a stylistic analysis of Robert Browning's seminal poems, "My Last Duchess" and "Porphyria's Lover." Both works are exemplary of Browning's mastery of the dramatic monologue, offering rich grounds for exploring his stylistic techniques and thematic preoccupations. The analysis of Robert Browning's poems "My Last Duchess" & "Porphyria's Lover" utilizes graphological, phonological, morphological, and lexico-syntactic features, this study aims to uncover how Browning crafts his narrators' voices and conveys their psychological complexities. The analysis will also consider the poems' use of imagery, irony, and narrative structure, highlighting how these elements contribute to the overall effect and meaning. "My Last Duchess" presents a portrait of a possessive and controlling Duke, whose speech reveals his authoritarian nature and moral ambiguity. In contrast, "Porphyria's Lover" explores themes of love, obsession, and madness through the perspective of a narrator who oscillates between tenderness and violence. By comparing and contrasting these two poems, the paper will illustrate Browning's nuanced portrayal of power dynamics and human emotions. Ultimately, this stylistic analysis will demonstrate how Browning's innovative use of the dramatic monologue form not only engages readers but also invites them to question the reliability and motivations of his speakers.

Keywords: Robert Browning, *My Last Duchess*, *Porphyria's Lover*, graphological, phonological, morphological, and lexico-syntactic features, power dynamics and human emotions, imagery, irony, and narrative structure.

Introduction

Style in literature refers to the unique way in which an author uses language to express ideas, convey tone, and create mood. It includes a variety of components, including rhetorical techniques, figurative language, grammar, syntax and diction (word choice). Style is the distinctive voice that differentiates one author's work from another's and can vary significantly even within a single author's body of work depending on the context, purpose, and audience.

Style is shaped by a combination of factors, including the author's personal preferences, the genre they are writing in, and the period during which they are writing. For instance, the ornate and elaborate prose of the Victorian era contrasts sharply with the concise and straightforward style of modernist writers. An author's style can be descriptive and detailed, terse and minimalist, or any number of variations in between. It is an essential aspect of literature because it affects how readers interpret and engage with the text. Through style, writers can evoke emotions, create vivid imagery, and impart deeper meanings.

Stylistics is the study of style in language, particularly within literary texts. It bridges the gap between literary criticism and linguistics, employing techniques from both fields to analyze and interpret the use of language. Stylistics seeks to understand how linguistic elements contribute to meaning, effect, and aesthetics in a text.

One key aspect of stylistics is the examination of linguistic features at various levels, such as phonology (sound patterns), morphology (word forms), syntax (sentence structure), semantics (meaning), and pragmatics (language use in context). By analyzing these elements, stylisticians aim to uncover the underlying mechanisms that create particular stylistic effects. For example, a stylistic analysis of poetry might explore how rhyme and meter contribute to the poem's overall mood or how metaphor and simile enhance its thematic depth.

Stylistics also considers the broader context in which a text is produced and received, including historical, social, and cultural factors. This contextual approach helps to explain why certain styles are prevalent in specific periods or genres and how readers' interpretations can vary based on their own linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

In literary criticism, stylistics provides a systematic and objective method for analyzing texts, complementing more subjective approaches. It allows critics to dissect how an author's stylistic choices impact the reader's experience and understanding of the text. In linguistics, stylistics enriches the study of language by applying linguistic theories to real-world texts, demonstrating how abstract linguistic principles function in practical, creative contexts.

In summary, style is the distinctive manner of expression in writing, while stylistics is the analytical study of this manner, seeking to understand the effects and functions of linguistic choices in texts. Taken together, they provide insightful perspectives on the complex interrelationship between language and literature.

Features of Stylistic Analysis

1. GRAPHOLOGY

Graphology, in the context of linguistics and literary studies, refers to the study of the visual aspects of written language. It focuses on analyzing how texts are visually presented, including aspects such as typography, punctuation, capitalization, spacing, paragraphing, and overall layout.

2. PHONOLOGY

The study of the systematically arranged and regular patterns of sounds in human languages is known as phonology in linguistics. It deals with the ways in which speech sounds function within a particular language and how they are used to convey meaning.

The poetic devices in this level are:

- Rhyme
- Alliteration
- Assonance
- consonance

3. MORPHOLOGY

The study of word formation and structure in a language is known as morphology in linguistics. It looks at how words are produced from smaller meaningful components known as morphemes, and how these morphemes combine to generate complex words. Morphological components include: Prefix and suffixes.

4. LEXICO-SYNTAX

Lexico-syntax refers to the combined study of lexical (vocabulary or words) and syntactic (sentence structure) elements within a language. It examines how lexical choices and syntactic structures interact to convey meaning and grammatical relationships in speech and writing.

<p>The semantic levels include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Metaphor• Simile• Personification• Irony• Tone• Anaphora• Hyperbole• Imagery• Symbol, etc.	<p>The lexical elements are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Noun• Pronoun• Verb• Adjective• Adverb.
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Poet's Biography

Robert Browning (1812-1889) was a prominent English poet and playwright known for his mastery of dramatic monologue, a form that allows deep psychological exploration of characters through their own speech. Born in Camberwell, London, Browning was largely self-educated, benefiting from his father's extensive library. His early works, such as "Pauline" (1833) and "Paracelsus" (1835), showcased his burgeoning talent, but it was his later works that solidified his reputation.

Browning's marriage to fellow poet Elizabeth Barrett in 1846 marked a turning point in his life and career. The couple moved to Italy, where Browning produced some of his most significant works, including "Men and Women" (1855). After Elizabeth's death in 1861, Browning returned to England, continuing to write prolifically. His magnum opus, "The Ring and the Book" (1868-1869), a narrative poem about a Roman murder trial, exemplifies his complex narrative style and psychological depth.

Browning's poetry often explores themes of love, power, jealousy, and madness, set against rich historical and cultural backdrops. His intricate language and use of dramatic monologue allow readers to engage deeply with his characters' inner lives. Browning had made a name for himself in Victorian literature by the time of his death in 1889, and he had a profound influence on English poetry.

Dramatic Monologue in “*My Last Duchess*” & “*Porphyria’s Lover*”

Robert Browning is widely recognized for his mastery of the dramatic monologue form in poetry. He innovatively used this form to delve into the minds and personalities of his characters, allowing them to reveal themselves through their own words and perspectives. In both "*My Last Duchess*" and "*Porphyria's Lover*," Robert Browning masterfully employs the dramatic monologue to explore the psyches of his speakers, delving into themes of power, control, and the darker aspects of human nature.

"*My Last Duchess*" is set during the Italian Renaissance and is narrated by a Duke who reveals a portrait of his late wife, the Duchess, to an emissary. As he speaks, it becomes clear that the Duke is possessive and jealous. He criticizes the Duchess for being too friendly and appreciative of others, hinting that he may have been responsible for her untimely death. The Duke's calm and composed manner contrasts sharply with the chilling implications of his words, highlighting his manipulative and authoritarian nature.

"*Porphyria's Lover*" tells the story of a man who is visited by his lover, Porphyria, on a stormy night. Porphyria, full of love and warmth, tries to comfort him, but he becomes overwhelmed by his desire to possess her completely. In a sudden and shocking act, he strangles her with her own hair to preserve a moment of perfect love. The lover believes that Porphyria is now his forever, and he feels no guilt for his actions, rationalizing that she felt no pain and that God has not yet punished him.

Both monologues delve into the minds of men who seek absolute control over their lovers. The Duke's concern is with social status and appearance, while Porphyria's lover is driven by a desire to eternalize a moment of perceived perfection. Browning's use of dramatic monologue allows readers to see the contradictions and self-deceptions within these characters, highlighting the destructive nature of their desires. Through their narratives, Browning

critiques the extremes of possessive love and the dangerous consequences of treating human beings as mere objects to be controlled.

Introduction to the Browning's Poems - "My Last Duchess" & "Porphyria's Lover"

My Last Duchess, published in 1842 as part of Browning's collection *Dramatic Lyrics*, is a chilling narrative delivered by the Duke of Ferrara. As he shows a visitor a portrait of his late wife, the Duke reveals his controlling and jealous nature. The poem subtly suggests that he may have had his Duchess killed due to her perceived indiscretions and failure to reserve her smiles exclusively for him. The Duke's arrogance and cold detachment create a compelling study of power, possessiveness, and the objectification of women in aristocratic society.

Porphyria's Lover, also published in 1842 in *Dramatic Lyrics*, presents an equally dark and intense exploration of love and madness. The poem portrays a stormy night when Porphyria pays a visit to her sweetheart. In a twisted act of passion, he strangles her with her own hair to preserve a perfect moment in their relationship. Unlike the Duke, Porphyria's lover is not motivated by jealousy but by a desire to freeze time and possess Porphyria forever in an idealized form. His calm rationalization of the murder reveals his disturbed mind, blending tenderness with violence.

Both poems highlight Browning's mastery of the dramatic monologue form, using a single speaker to provide insight into their psyche while telling a compelling and often disturbing story. The publication of these works in the mid-19th century marked a significant contribution to Victorian poetry, showcasing Browning's ability to probe the depths of human emotion and morality.

Stylistics Analysis of Robert Browning's Poems

1. GRAPHOLOGY LEVELS

There are single long well-knit stanza and each comprises fifty-six & sixty lines. He has used different punctuation marks in them:

Question mark (?) -The poet has used Question mark signs five times in the poem "My Last Duchess"

Line 5: Will 't please you sit and look at her?

Line 22: A heart how shall I say?

Line 35: This sort of trifling?

Line 45: Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;

Line 47: As if alive. Will 't please you rise?

Exclamation mark (!) – It is a punctuation mark used to indicate strong emotion, emphasis, surprise, or exclamatory statements in writing.

In the poem, “*My Last Duchess*”, poet has used exclamation mark two times:

Line 25: Sir, 'twas all one! My favour at her breast,

Line 31: Or blush, at least. She thanked men—good! but thanked

Line 56: Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!

In the poem, “*Porphyria's Lover*”, poet has used exclamation mark two times:

Line 55: And I, its love, am gained instead!

Line 60: “And yet God has not said a word”!

Colon (:) – It is a punctuation mark used primarily to indicate that what follows it elaborates on, explains, or lists items that are introduced by what precedes it.

In “*Porphyria's Lovers*”, poet has used colon mark six times in the poem.

Line 4: And did its worst to vex the lake:

Line 29: For love of her, and all in vain:

Line 37: Perfectly pure and good: I found

Line 44: I warily oped her lids: again

Line 48 : “Blushed bright beneath my burning kiss”:

Line 51: Her head, which droops upon it still:

Semi-colon (;) – It is a punctuation mark used to separate and connect independent clauses (parts of a sentence that can stand alone as complete sentences) and to clarify complex lists or series where items contain internal punctuation such as commas.

The poet used semi-colons nine times in the poem “*My Last Duchess*”:

Line 3: That piece a wonder, now; Fra Pandolf’s hands

Line 12: How such a glance came there; so, not the first

Line 15: Of joy into the Duchess’ cheek; perhaps

Line 23: Too easily impressed; she liked whate’er

Line 38: Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,

Line 42: E’en then would be some stooping; and I choose

Line 44: Whene’er I passed her; but who passed without

Line 45: Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;

Line 51: Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;

The poet used semi-colons five times in the poem, “*Porphyria’s Lover*”

Line 6: When glided in Porphyria; straight

Line 9: Blaze up, and all the cottage warm;

Line 32: Happy and proud; at last I knew

Line 33: Porphyria worshipped me; surprise

Line 47: About her neck; her cheek once more

Comma (,): It is a punctuation mark used in writing to indicate a brief pause or separation between elements within a sentence.

The poet has used commas twenty-eight times in the poem, “*My Last Duchess*” like-

Line 1: That’s my last Duchess painted on the wall,

Line 3: That piece a wonder, now; Fra Pandolf’s hands

Line 4: Worked busily a day, and there she stands

Line 7: Strangers like you that pictured countenance,

In *Porphyria’s Lover*, poet has used commas thirty times. Like-

Line 1: The rain set early in to-night,

Line2: The sullen wind was soon awake,
Line3: It tore the elm-tops down for spite,
Line 7: She shut the cold out and the storm,

Full-Stops (.): It is a punctuation mark used at the end of sentences. Its primary function is to indicate the end of a complete thought or sentence.

The poet has used full-stops fourteen times in the poem, "*My Last Duchess*" like-

Line 2: "Looking as if she were alive. "
Line 4: "Worked busily a day, and there she stands."

The poet has used full-stops eight times in the poem, "*Porphyria's Lover*" like-

Line 5: "I listened with heart fit to break."
Line 15: "And called me. When no voice replied"

Apostrophe (‘): It is a punctuation mark used primarily in English to indicate possession or to mark contractions and some plurals.

The poet has used apostrophe ten times in the poem, "*My Last Duchess*" like-

Line 1: "That's my last Duchess painted on the wall"
Line 3: "That piece a wonder, now; Fra Pandolf's hands"
Line 13: "Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, 'twas not"
Line 14: "Her husband's presence only, called that spot"

The poet has used apostrophe three times in the poem, "*Porphyria's Lover*"

Line 20: "And spread, o'er all, her yellow hair"
Line 22: "Too weak, for all her heart's endeavour"
Line 27: "Nor could to-night's gay feast restrain"

Quotation marks (" "): are punctuation marks used in writing to indicate speech, quotations, titles of certain works, and other elements.

The poet has used quotation marks four times in the poem, "*My Last Duchess*"

Line 6: “Fra Pandolf” by design, for never read

Line 16-17: Fra Pandolf chanced to say, “Her mantle laps

Over my lady’s wrist too much,”

Line 17-19: “Paint Must never hope to reproduce the faint

Half-flush that dies along her throat.”

Line 37-39: “Just this or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,

Or there exceed the mark”

2. PHONOLOGICAL LEVELS

Rhyme Scheme: The rhyming scheme of the poem, “*My Last Duchess*” is AA-BB-CC-DD, which is written in iambic pentameter. Similarly, The rhyming scheme of the poem, “*Porphyria’s Lover*” is ABABB, which repeats with new A and B rhymes every five lines and it is written in iambic tetrameter.

Poet has used rhyming words in the poems are:

<u>My Last Duchess</u>	<u>Porphyria’s Lover</u>
Wall, call; Hands, stands; Said, read; durst, first; paint, faint; each, speech; skill, will; this, miss; breast, west; let, set; meet, repeat; go, though.	Awake, lake; straight, grate; warm, form; shawl, fall; vain, rain; fair, hair; found, wound; before, bore; head, fled; how, now.

Browning has used various sound devices in his poems like alliteration, assonance and consonance:

MY LAST DUCHESS		
<u>Alliterations</u>	<u>Consonance</u>	<u>Assonance</u>
<p>“dropping of the daylight”, “Oh, sir, she smiled”, “all smiles stopped together. There she stands”, “she liked whate’er she looked on, and her looks went everywhere,” “notice Neptune.”</p>	<p>“Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though”, “curtain I have drawn,” “ask me if they durst,” “hope to reproduce,” “half-flush,” “herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set her wits,”</p>	<p>“Of mine for dowry will be disallowed”, “never read,” “mantle laps,” “forsooth, and made excuse--e’en then would be some stooping, and I choose never to stoop.”</p>

PORPHYRIA’S LOVER		
<u>Alliteration</u>	<u>Consonance</u>	<u>Assonance</u>
<p>“Blushed bright beneath my burning kiss”, “passion sometimes would prevail”, “Perfectly pure”, “her heart”</p>	<p>“To set its struggling passion free”, “And all her yellow hair displaced”</p>	<p>“And kneeled and made the cheerless grate”, “And made her smooth white shoulder bare.”</p>

3. MORPHOLOGICAL LEVELS

In these two poems, poet has used new words through prefixes and suffixes.

Suffixes

- i. Droops Droop + s
- ii. Guessed Guess + ed
- iii. Listened Listen + ed

iv.	Kneeled	Kneel + ed
v.	Soiled	Soil + ed
vi.	Displaced	Displace + ed
vii.	Stooping	Stoop + ing
viii.	Perfectly	Perfect + ly
ix.	Struggling	Struggle + ing
x.	Hands	Hand + s
xi.	Looking	Look + ing
xii.	Impressed	Impress + ed

Prefix

xiii.	Utmost	Ut + most
xiv.	Untighten	Un + tighten
xv.	Instead	In + stead

4. LEXICO-SYNTACTIC LEVELS

- **SEMANTIC LEVELS:**

a) Personification

In *Porphyria's Lover*, poet used the personification of the blue eyes having emotions when they laugh.

Line 45: "Laughed the blue eyes without a stain."

In *My Last Duchess*, Duke personifies the wall painting and he finds more life in a motionless object than his spirited wife.

Line 2: "There she stands / As if alive."

b) Simile

In *My Last Duchess*, Duke compares the painted image of the Duchess to a living person.

Line 1-2: "That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive"

In *Porphyria's Lover*, the line contains a simile that compares the act of opening Porphyria's eyelids to the careful opening of a flower bud that contains a bee.

Line 43-44: "As a shut bud that holds a bee, I warily oped her lids"

c) Metaphor

In *My Last Duchess*, it is a metaphor for sunset. It compares the setting sun to something that drops or falls, emphasizing the natural and inevitable end of the day, just as the Duchess's life has ended.

Line 27 – "The dropping of the daylight in the West,"

In *Porphyria's Lover*, Poet has used metaphor of "propping" Porphyria's head reflects the lover's need to assert control and dominance over her even in death.

Line 49-51: "I propped her head up as before,
Only, this time my shoulder bore
Her head, which droops upon it still:"

d) Imagery

In *Porphyria's Lover*, poet gave the description of the rain and wind appeals to the sense of hearing, making the reader imagine the sounds of a stormy night.

Line 1-2: "The rain set early in to-night,
The sullen wind was soon awake"

In *My Last Duchess*, poet allows the reader to visualize the portrait of the Duchess, highlighting its lifelike quality.

Line 1-2: "That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive."

- **LEXICAL LEVELS:**

The lexical levels present in both the poems are:

<u>NOUN</u>	<u>VERB</u>	<u>ADJECTIVE</u>	<u>ADVERB</u>
• Fire	• painted	• Early	• To-night
• Blaze	• will'd	• Sullen	• Soon
• Hair	• notice	• Spite	• Down
• Shoulder	• pass	• Vain	• Straight
• Eyes	• stoop	• Cold	• Passionately
• Cheek	• chose	• Cheerless	• Murmuring
• Passion	• looked	• Yellow	• Warily
• Kiss	• thanked	• Smooth	• Myself
• String	• asked	• White	• Perhaps
• Throat	• began	• Little	• Well
• God	• noticed	• Fair	• Never
• Heart	• turned	• Painted	• Certainly
• Duchess	• set	• Alive	
• Duke	• tore	• Deep	
• Portrait	• vex	• Neat	
• Name	• shut	• Good	
• Hands	• made	• Happy	
• Curtain	• glided	• Golden	

Conclusion

Robert Browning's poems "*My Last Duchess*" and "*Porphyria's Lover*" are exemplary in their use of dramatic monologue to explore the psychology of their narrators, revealing dark and complex aspects of human nature. Both poems delve into themes of power, control, and the objectification of women, yet they do so in distinct stylistic manners that offer a rich comparative analysis.

In "*My Last Duchess*," Browning employs a single, continuous narrative from the perspective of the Duke, who reveals his authoritarian and jealous nature while speaking to an emissary

about a portrait of his late wife. The poem's structure as a dramatic monologue allows the Duke's character to unfold gradually through his own words. The enjambment and caesuras within the line's mimic natural speech, adding to the realism of the Duke's conversational tone. For instance, the Duke's casual yet chilling mention of giving "commands; / Then all smiles stopped together" underscores his manipulative and lethal control over his wife. The formal, controlled verse mirrors the Duke's obsession with power and perfection.

Conversely, "*Porphyria's Lover*" features a more immediate and intimate narrative. The poem begins with a vivid, stormy setting that reflects the turbulent emotions of the lover. Browning's use of imagery and sensual descriptions establishes a stark contrast between the warmth of Porphyria and the lover's cold, calculating mind. The shift from describing Porphyria's loving actions to the lover's sudden decision to strangle her with her own hair is abrupt, highlighting the lover's unstable psyche. The poem's rhyme scheme, ABBAB, and the regular meter create a sing-song quality that belies the horror of the events, thus intensifying the dramatic effect.

Both poems reveal the male narrators' desire to immortalize their lovers in a static, idealized form. In "*My Last Duchess*," the Duke prefers the painted image of his wife, which he can control and display at will, over her living presence. In "*Porphyria's Lover*," the act of murder is a means to preserve Porphyria in a moment of perceived perfect love and submission. This objectification is a critical point of convergence in the stylistic portrayal of the narrators' psychologies.

While the Duke in "*My Last Duchess*" speaks with calculated arrogance, emphasizing social status and power, the lover in "*Porphyria's Lover*" is driven by a delusional desire for eternal possession. Browning's masterful use of dramatic monologue, vivid imagery, and rhythmic control in both poems serves to expose the deeply flawed and dangerous attitudes of the narrators toward their female counterparts. This comparative stylistic analysis underscores Browning's critique of Victorian notions of ownership and the objectification of women, rendered through the darkly compelling voices of his characters.

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