

Valencic 1

Trials and hearings take place frequently in our society today. In a trial, it is the job of two lawyers to persuade a jury to see a situation a certain way, regardless if it is the right way, the truthful way, or if it is even the way they themselves see it. It is then the jury's obligation, after listening to both sides of the story, to make a decision based on the evidence presented, and in most cases, the evidence is either not presented in its entirety or overwhelmingly slanted to fit one side's particular case. Therefore it is up to the juror to be able to throw away the false information, and to pick out the shreds of truth and make a conclusion based on them. This process, which is extremely common in today's society, was also common in the Victorian Age, in Victorian poetry, in the use of dramatic monologue. Perfected by Robert Browning in the mid nineteenth century, dramatic monologue very closely mirrors modern society's legal institution. In comparison, the reader is the jury, the speaker of the poem is the lawyer, and, thinking more abstractly, the author, Robert Browning in this case, represents the case as a whole. The decision the jury must make between what is actually right and what the lawyers imply to be right is the same one the reader of a dramatic monologue must make. Browning's *Dramatic Lyrics* is a collection of poems in which many are written in dramatic monologue. "Porphyria's Lover" is a poem from *Dramatic Lyrics* critics often cite when explaining dramatic monologue. Because of it, the reader is pulled between what the speaker thinks is right and what really is. Robert Browning's perfection of dramatic monologue and use of a dramatic mask in his poem "Porphyria's Lover" create in his audience a conflict between sympathy and judgement (Magill, 335).

To fully understand and comprehend Browning's "Porphyria's Lover," one must understand dramatic monologue. Robert Langbaum makes a few observations about dramatic monologues. One of his observations is that speakers in them never change their minds. A second observation is that

Valencic 2

the speaker uses his dramatic monologue to pursue a meaning for himself, and learn something about himself as well as learn something about reality (qtd. in Lucie-Smith, 16). In a dramatic monologue, "everything the reader hears is limited to what the speaker sees, thinks, and chooses to tell" (Magill, 338). Agreeing with Magill, Ian Scott-Kilvert says, "[the reader is] provided with no reason to suppose the speaker's words are not to be taken at face value, even though [he knows] that [he is] receiving one man's version of events, which is necessarily incomplete" (360). When reading a dramatic monologue, the reader must come to a conclusion about facts and issues raised in the poem by making use of material presented in the poem (Scott-Kilvert, 360). A final textbook definition of dramatic monologue is from John D. Cooke. He writes that a dramatic monologue ". . . condenses a complex psychological study and a tense situation of conflict into a single climactic speech" (157). In applying this concept to "Porphyria's Lover," the tense situation of conflict is simply the fact that the speaker just strangled the woman who loves him, and who he loves. In the poem, the reader, observing only the perspective of the speaker, is led to believe that his killing Porphyria was ". . . perfectly pure and good" (Browning, 37). According to the speaker, Porphyria felt no pain while he was killing her using her own "long yellow string" of hair (39). Everything the speaker says, implies that his decision was the right one, and the only one possible. Magill (338) says, "Exultant that he has done the perfect thing, he [the speaker] ends his speech with the words, 'And yet God has not said a word!'" Critics are quick to accuse Browning of failure to construct his own framework of ethical and moral values in his poems and characters. This is because his character is not representing himself. Browning hides behind a sort of dramatic mask that conceals his own feelings, beliefs and morals from his audience, so the character can be a unique one, not modeled after Browning, even if the

morals are wrong according to traditional standards.

Valencic 3

After reading "Porphyria's Lover" and learning what the speaker's thoughts about himself and his actions are, one must realize that his sense of moral judgement is obviously somehow impaired. To even conceive the thought that killing a loved one would make an unfortunate situation better, would surely involve some sort of derangement. Says Magill: "The careful reader of this poem will find much evidence to indict the speaker as a madman . . ." (338). Such evidence include the fact that Browning (60) mentions God in the closing line: "And yet God has not said a word!" This mention reveals to the reader that the speaker expects some form of punishment from God. It also admits that subconsciously, he has a feeling of guilt (Magill, 338). Browning's failure to give his character moral values that are traditionally viewed as acceptable places a burden on the reader to either use his own judgement or to sympathize with the speaker. This tension created in the reader between sympathy and judgement is a conflict that he must overcome before making a final judgement on the poem itself. Much of the poem that is evident on the outside, without delving into the deeper psychological aspects of it, can cause sympathy for the speaker. Lines like:

I listened with heart fit to break.
When glided in Porphyria;

(5-6)

and

But passion sometimes would prevail,
Nor could tonight's gay feast restrain
A sudden thought of one so pale
For love of her, and all in vain

(26-9)

Valencic 4

are ones that can cause the reader to possess sympathetic feelings toward the speaker. Since, as previously stated, Browning fails to pass judgement of his character; the job is left to the reader. Judgement of the speaker can be defined by the poem as a whole and the speaker's actions in it that help the reader to judge him. To accomplish this, the reader must examine his own moral values to determine to what degree, or if at all, the murder of Porphyria was performed out of madness. By using words like "fair" (36), "pure" and "good" (37) to describe a murder lead the reader to believe in the speaker's insanity. He killed the girl, because they wanted to be together, but because of certain circumstances, possibly class conflict, couldn't be. This is expressed in the last few lines of the poem, "Porphyria's love-- she guessed not how / Her darling one wish would be heard" (56-7). The wish, in that line, being her wish to be with him. The speaker figures that now they'll be together forever, not realizing that death means that Porphyria is gone forever.

The way the reader of Browning's dramatic monologue must make a decision of the speaker's moral character, is parallel to the way the juror must make a decision in a court case. In the court case, the evidence is often material, or the spoken word of witnesses. In Browning's dramatic monologue, the evidence is only what goes on in the mind of the speaker.

By creating the literary technique of dramatic monologue, "Browning's reputation among his contemporaries was very much of the kind which is accorded to a teacher of sage" (Lucie-Smith, 14). His influence was widespread, affecting writers such as Kipling, Masfield, Frost, Hardy, Pound, and Eliot (25). "Browning's writing is one of the things which is most apt to repel contemporary readers," says Lucie-Smith (17). Perhaps this is because the modern reader does not understand dramatic monologue, and the thinking and decision making process involved in reading a poem with dramatic monologue. This abstract way of writing, to portray ideas that are not his own, that are

Valencic 5

possessed solely by the speaker, possibly cannot be comprehended by the modern reader. By comparing dramatic monologue, and other techniques used by Browning in poems like "Porphyria's Lover," to situations and events, like our modern legal institution, it is possible to better understand it and its importance to literature. Because, according to Lucie-Smith, " Robert Browning, more than any other Victorian, is responsible for the direction taken by our own literature, and foreshadowing many of its characteristics" (29).