Robert Browning

Alan Haffa

Robert Browning, 1812-1889

- Father was a clerk for the Bank of England; library of 6,000 books

- Highly allusive poetry with many inter-textual allusions.

- 1844: read a poem by Elizabeth Barrett praising his poetry; courtship through letters

- 1846: marriage and move to Florence

- Famous for "dramatic monologue" technique

Browning's Poetry

- Having read Shakespeare, he was taken with the idea of personality as staged and variable; dedicated to write in an objective way where he assumes various persona

- Use of narrative voice in lyric accomplishes this objectivity

- *Dramatic Lyrics*, 1842, announced the poems were "lyric in expression," but they are "the utterances of so many imaginary persons, not mine."

- Dramatic monologue: Marvel and Tennyson had used it, but B. perfected it; situated in time and place; focus on an emotional moment; characters are often unappealing, yet they draw out sympathy
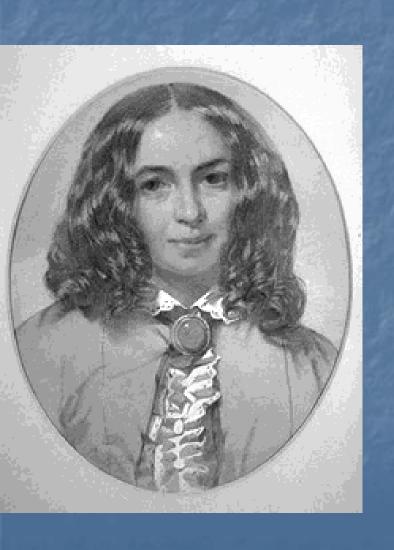
My Last Duchess

- Duke of Ferrara displays a painting of his wife to an acquaintance (substitute for reader) and narrates a disturbing backstory.

- The words of the Duke draw us in and gradually reveal his true character.

- The Duke is revealed as an insecure, jealous and violent husband.

- The story he tells is shocking both because of what he implicitly confesses but also his lack of remorse and the fact that he fears no consequences.

- Highlights the hypocrisy of the Victorian Age and its attitude towards women.

- https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43768/my-last-duchess

Questions on *Porphyria's Lover*

- https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46313/porphyrias-lover
- Does the narrator love Porphyria?
- Why does the narrator kill Porphyria?
- Did the murder shock you? Why?
- How does Browning poetically convey the madness of the narrative voice?
- What attitudes toward love, sex, and violence does the poem suggest?
- What is the point of such a grotesque poem?

Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 1806-61

- Self educated: Greek, Latin, French, Portuguese, Italian; Child Prodigy; Isolated

- Father forbade marriage; disinherited

- Interests included Social Issues such as Child Labor, Women's Rights, Oppression of the Lower Class, Slave Trade, Italian Independence

- *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, document her love for Robert; 1845-7

Elizabeth's *Aurora Leigh*, 1856

- Verse Novel in blank verse: http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/barrett/aurora/aurora.html

- Tells the story of a female writer

- Raises the questions faced by a female artist: how to write in a canon dominated by men? How can a woman establish her artistic authority? How to reconcile being a mother, wife, and poet

- Romantic Devotion to Art and Escape from Societal Restrictions

- For More Information: http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/ebb/alov.html

Sonnet XLIII

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.

I love thee to the depth and breadth and height

My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight

For the ends of Being and ideal Grace.

I love thee to the level of everyday's

Most quiet need, by sun and candle-light.

I love thee freely, as men strive for Right;

I love thee purely, as they turn from Praise.

I love thee with the passion put to use

In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.

I love thee with a love I seemed to lose

With my lost saints, -I love thee with the breath, Smiles, tears, of all my life! - and, if God choose,

I shall but love thee better after death.

Sonnet XIV

If thou must love me, let it be for nought
Except for love's sake only. Do not say
I love her for her smile--her look--her way
Of speaking gently,--for a trick of thought
That falls in well with mine, and certes brought
A sense of ease on such a day–
For these things in themselves, Belovèd, may
Be changed, or change for thee,--and love, so wrought,
May be unwrought so. Neither love me for
Thine own dear pity's wiping my cheek dry,--
A creature might forget to weep, who bore
Thy comfort long, and lose thy love thereby!
But love me for love's sake, that evermore
Thou may'st love on, through love's eternity.

- Response to Pascal's *Pensee* 567