

The Influence of Romanticism



READING 2A Compare and contrast works of literature that express a universal theme. **3** Evaluate the changes in sound, form, and dramatic structure in poetry across literary time periods. **RC-12(B)** Make complex inferences about text and use textual evidence to support understanding.

My Last Duchess Porphyria's Lover

Poetry by Robert Browning

VIDEO TRAILER



KEYWORD: HML12-944A

Meet the Author

Robert Browning 1812–1889

“A minute’s success,” remarked the poet Robert Browning, “pays for the failure of years.” Browning spoke from experience: for years, critics either ignored or belittled his poetry. Then, when he was nearly 60, he became an object of near-worship.

Precocious Child An exceptionally bright child, Browning learned to read and write by the time he was 5 and composed his first, unpublished volume of poetry at 12. At the age of 21 he published his first book, *Pauline* (1833), to negative reviews. One critic, John Stuart Mill, wrote, “With considerable poetic powers the writer seems to me possessed with a more intense and morbid self-consciousness than I ever knew in any sane human being.”

Poetic Pioneer Mill’s remarks embarrassed Browning, who vowed to keep his writing free from personal information in the future. Over the next several years, he concentrated on writing verse dramas for the stage. Discovering that he had a talent for developing character through speech, he also began to write a type of poem called the **dramatic monologue**. In his monologues, he typically portrayed either a historical or an imaginary

character in an emotionally charged situation. While critics attacked his early dramatic poems, finding them difficult to understand, Browning did not allow the reviews to keep him from continuing to develop this form.

Secret Love In 1845, Browning met the poet Elizabeth Barrett and began a famous romance that has been memorialized in both film and literature. Against the wishes of Barrett’s overbearing father, the two poets married in secret in 1846 and eloped to Italy, where they lived happily for the next 15 years. Their joyful relationship inspired the book generally regarded as Browning’s masterpiece, *Men and Women* (1855). Composed of 50 dramatic monologues, the collection reflects Browning’s passion for his wife, as well as his interest in painters, poets, biblical figures, and madmen.

Literary Renown After his wife’s death in 1861, Browning returned to England, where he concentrated on writing *The Ring and the Book*, a series of dramatic monologues based on the records of a 17th-century Roman murder trial. *The Ring and the Book* was published to impressive reviews, bringing Browning the recognition for which he had long waited.

Author Online



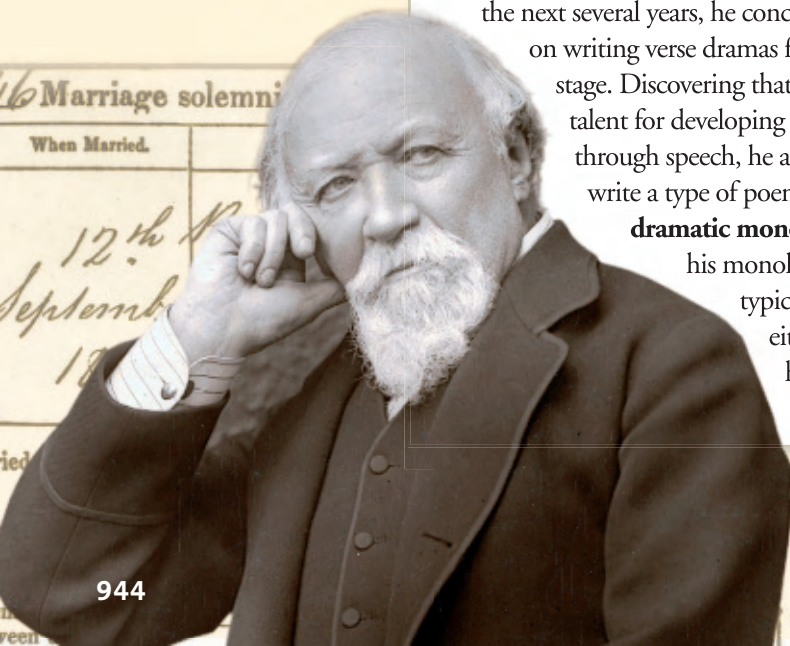
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DID YOU KNOW?

Robert Browning...

- became an ardent admirer of Percy Bysshe Shelley at age 12.
- achieved fluency in Latin, Greek, Italian, and French by age 14.
- wrote the children’s poem “The Pied Piper of Hamelin.”

(background) Marriage certificate of Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning



● POETIC FORM: DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE

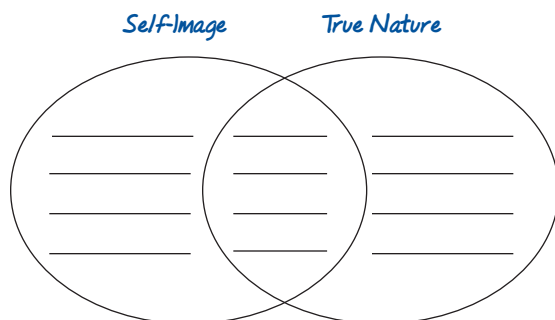
Critics praise Browning's mastery of the **dramatic monologue**, a poetic form in which a speaker addresses a silent or absent listener during a moment of high intensity or deep emotion. The speaker is usually a character distinct from the poet—for example, the Greek hero Ulysses in Tennyson's poem "Ulysses" (page 936). Browning's dramatic monologues require the reader to make many inferences: it is not always immediately clear who the speaker is, whom he is speaking to, and what setting they are in. "My Last Duchess" takes place in 16th-century Italy. The speaker is a duke who is negotiating with the agent of a powerful count to marry the count's daughter. What scene is created in your mind by the duke's first words?

*That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive. I call
That piece a wonder, now: Frà Pandolf's hands
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.*

As you read this poem and "Porphyria's Lover," continue to imagine the setting and action.

● READING SKILL: MAKE INFERENCES ABOUT SPEAKERS

Not only must readers make inferences about the setting and action in a dramatic monologue; they must **make inferences**, or logical assumptions based on evidence from the text, about the feelings, motives, and personality of the speaker. The speaker's words often reveal characteristics of which he or she is unaware. For example, what would be your thoughts about someone who told you, "I am the humblest man you'll ever meet. I'm much more humble than my older brother"? Would your image of him match his image of himself? For each of the following monologues, fill in a Venn diagram with your inferences about the speaker's self-image and true nature. In the space where the circles intersect, write self-perceptions of the speaker that appear actually true.



What are the perils of **JEALOUSY?**

"Jealousy," notes one writer, "is a tiger that tears not only its prey but also its own raging heart." Think about whether this description is accurate. What happens when the "green-eyed monster" strikes a person? How can jealousy threaten a love relationship?

DISCUSS With a partner, discuss what the emotion of jealousy feels like. Talk about the causes of jealousy and the different ways people respond to having this feeling. Then identify some of the worst consequences of jealousy in a love relationship. You might draw on stories from the news or from literature and film.



MY LAST DUCHESS

Robert Browning

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive. I call
That piece a wonder, now: Frà Pandolf's hands
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.
5 Will't please you sit and look at her? I said **A**
"Frà 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
10 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
15 Of joy into the Duchess' cheek: perhaps
Frà 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
20 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. **B**
25 Sir, 'twas all one! My favor 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
30 Would draw from her alike the approving speech,
Or blush, at least. She thanked men—good! but thanked

3 Frà Pandolf's: of Brother Pandolf, a fictitious friar-painter.

A DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE

Read lines 5–13 aloud. What scene do you imagine?

11 durst: dared.

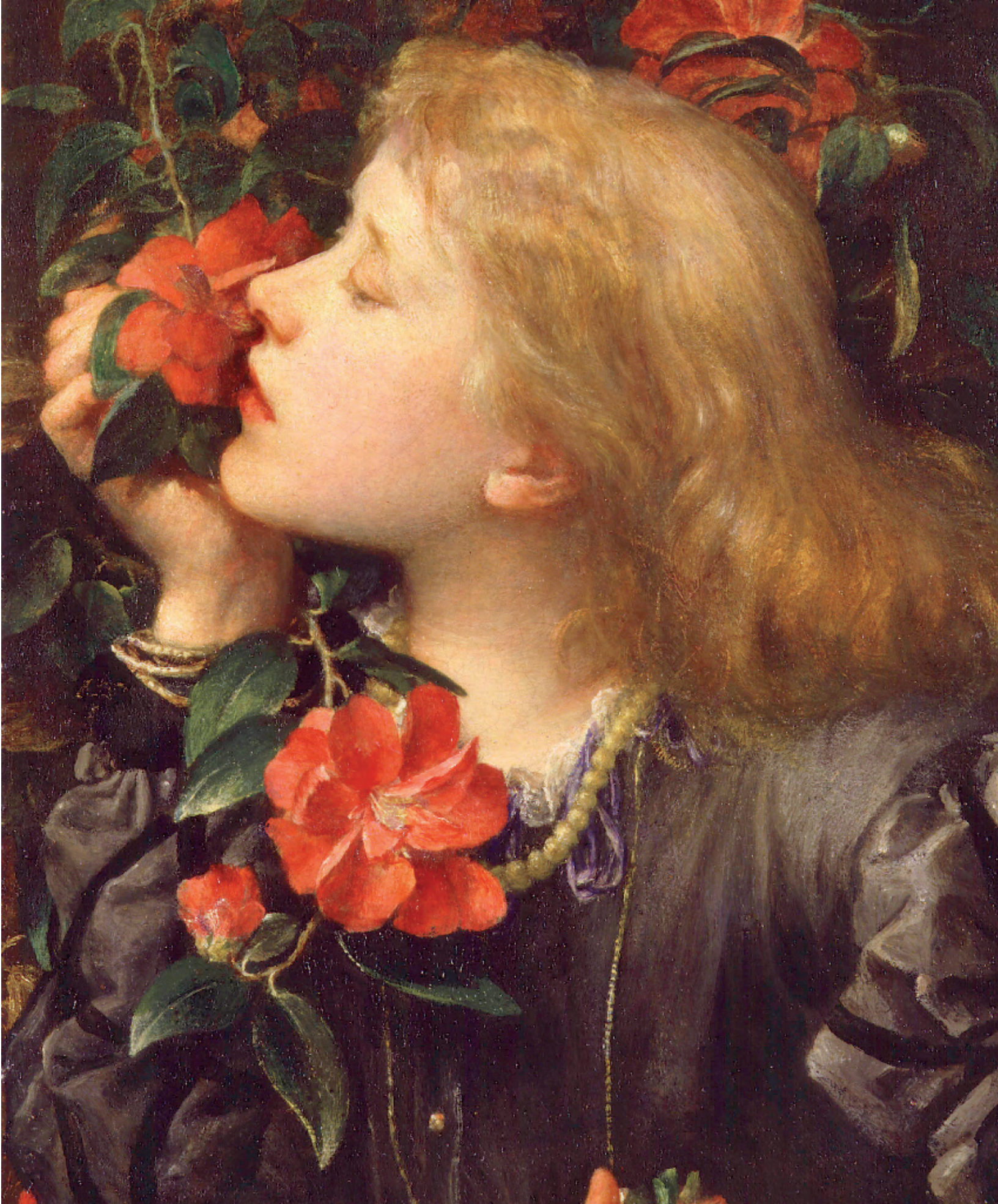
16 mantle: cloak.

B MAKE INFERENCES

Note how the duke feels about his wife's tendency to be easily pleased. What do you infer about his nature?

27 officious: offering unwanted services; meddling.

Detail of *Choosing* (1864), George Frederic Watts. Oil on strawboard, 18⁵/₈" × 14". © National Portrait Gallery, London.



- 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
35 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
40 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, **C**
Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without
45 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
50 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,
55 Taming a sea horse, thought a rarity,
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me! **D**

35 trifling: actions of little importance.

41 forsooth: in truth; indeed.

C MAKE INFERENCES

Reread lines 34–43. What ideas do you form about the duke from his insistence that he will never “stoop”?

49 munificence (myōō-nĭf'ĭ-sens): generosity.

50 just pretense: legitimate claim.

51 dowry (dou'rē): payment given to a groom by the bride's father.

54 Neptune: in Roman mythology, the god of the sea.

D DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE

What **tone** and actions are suggested in lines 47–56?

Literary Analysis

- 1. Make Inferences About Speakers** Describe the speaker's attitude toward his former wife, offering evidence from the poem.
- 2. Draw Conclusions** What do you think happened to the duchess? Support your answer.
- 3. Interpret Symbolism** What larger ideas are suggested by the description of the bronze sculpture of Neptune (lines 54–56)?

PORPHYRIA'S LOVER

Robert Browning



Mary Ann, Wife of Leonard Collman
(1854), Alfred Stevens.

The rain set early in tonight,
The sullen wind was soon awake,
It tore the elm-tops down for spite,
And did its worst to vex the lake:
5 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;
10 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
15 And called me. When no voice replied, **E**
She put my arm about her waist,
And made her smooth white shoulder bare,
And all her yellow hair displaced,

4 vex: to disturb; trouble the surface of.

6 straight: immediately.

8 grate: fireplace.

E MAKE INFERENCES

Why do you think the speaker does not reply to Porphyria?

And, stooping, made my cheek lie there,
 20 And spread, o'er all, her yellow hair,
 Murmuring how she loved me—she
 Too weak, for all her heart's endeavor,
 To set its struggling passion free
 From pride, and vainer ties dissever,
 25 And give herself to me forever. **F**
 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:
 30 So, she was come through wind and rain.
 Be sure I looked up at her eyes
 Happy and proud; at last I knew
 Porphyria worshiped me: surprise
 Made my heart swell, and still it grew
 35 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
 40 Three times her little throat around,
 And strangled her. No pain felt she;
 I am quite sure she felt no pain. **G**
 As a shut bud that holds a bee,
 I warily oped her lids: again
 45 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,
 50 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,
 55 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,
 60 And yet God has not said a word! **H**

F DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE

Lines 22–25 refer to earlier events. What is Porphyria unable to do, and what might the “vainer ties” be?

G MAKE INFERENCES

What do you infer about the speaker from his thoughts and actions in lines 36–42?

Language Coach

Etymology A word's **etymology** is its history. The word *tress* may come from a Greek word meaning “threefold.” How might this etymology help you understand the meaning of *tress* in line 46?

H DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE

Why might Browning have chosen not to suggest the presence of a listener in this poem, as he did in “My Last Duchess”?

Comprehension

1. **Recall** What is the setting of “Porphyria’s Lover”?
2. **Summarize** Briefly recount the events in the poem.

Literary Analysis

3. **Interpret Motives** What causes the speaker in “My Last Duchess” to distrust his wife? Is his reaction reasonable? Provide examples from the poem to support your interpretation.
4. **Draw Conclusions** Why does the speaker in “Porphyria’s Lover” kill her? Do you think the speaker feels guilty about what he has done? Explain your reasoning.
5. **Make Inferences About Speakers** Describe the feelings, motives, and personality of the speakers in “My Last Duchess” and “Porphyria’s Lover.” How does each man’s self-image differ from his true nature? Refer to the diagrams you completed as you read the poems.
6. **Analyze Dramatic Monologue** The speakers in these dramatic monologues are intensely involved in the events described. What would be the impact of each poem if Browning had chosen an outside observer as the speaker?
7. **Evaluate Style** In “My Last Duchess,” how does the language create the sense that a person is speaking aloud to someone? What features remind you that the work is a poem, not an overheard conversation? Cite specific details.
8. **Synthesize Themes** How does the desire for possession of a woman motivate each of the speakers in these dramatic monologues? What does this desire reveal about each speaker?

Literary Criticism

9. **Critical Interpretations** The critic Robert Langbaum has argued that a Browning dramatic monologue combines “sympathy” and “judgment.” In your opinion, does Browning want the reader to feel sympathy and also judge the duke and Porphyria’s lover? Explain.

What are the perils of **JEALOUSY?**

Jealousy appears to be inspired by love, but it often springs from other emotions. What are some of the hidden causes of jealousy?



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