The Brownings: Study Questions

“My Last Duchess”

1. What passages in the Duke’s monologue suggest he is an intelligent, cultivated Renaissance nobleman?
2. What passages suggest that he is egotistical, tyrannical, and ruthless?
3. According to the Duke, what was his last duchess like?
4. What does he mean when he says, “She had / A heart . . . too soon made glad” (lines 21-22)?
5. The critical point in the Duke’s monologue come in lines 45-46: “This grew; I gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together.” What seems to have been the duchess’s fate?
6. Why do you think Browning suggests this fate so indirectly and ambiguously?
7. In what meter and rhyme scheme is the poem written?
8. Why do we hardly notice this regularity of form?
9. What lines offer examples of writing that gives the impression of actual speech?
10. At the end of the poem, the Duke asks the envoy to notice another work of art, a bronze sculpture showing “Neptune . . . / Taming a sea horse” (54-55). What does this work of art suggest about the theme of the poem as a whole?

“Porphyria’s Lover”

1. What sets the mood of this dramatic monologue quite early on?
2. How do we know that Browning shared something in common with his American contemporary, Edgar Allan Poe?
3. What is the mood of the poem in lines 6-35? What images create that mood?
4. How is the title ironic?
5. Why does the speaker strangle Porphyria?
6. Explain how the earlier image of the two of them together is reversed in the last fifteen lines.
7. What is the effect of the emotional contrast in the poem?
8. What do you make of the closing line of the poem?

“Sonnet 43”

1. Explain how this is a fine example of the sonnet form.
2. In how many ways does the speaker love?
3. Explain how the closing lines conflate the Petrarchan and Shakespearean styles.