

Porphyria's Lover

Robert Browning

OVERALL SUMMARY

Browning uses a **first-person** voice to recount the tale of a man strangling his lover since his is **overwhelmed** by his love for her. The speaker lies with his love's body for the remainder of the night, **embracing** it as he would if she were living.

LINE SUMMARY

- Lines 1-5: the speaker describes the stormy weather **ravaging** (overwhelming) the night-time.
- Lines 6-15: The speaker's lover Porphyria arrives from the **treacherous** (stompy) weather, soaking wet and lights a fire, takes off her gloves and her shawl, unties her hair and sits beside the speaker.
- 15-25: his lover puts her hand on his waist, moving her hair to expose her bare shoulder, motioning for him to lay his head there. She whispers words of love to him.
- 26-35: the speaker is **overcome** by his love for her and unsure what to do with such strong emotions.
- 36-42: he strangles her, claiming he is sure she felt no pain.
- 43-60: he spends the rest of the night with her **deceased** (dead) body, propping her head up and embracing her. He remarks that he has not heard from God, since his terrible act.

CONTEXT

- After reading of a murder similar to the one we see in the poem, Browning felt **compelled** (drawn) to write his **darkly gothic poem** to address the Victorian era's **repression** (not talking or thinking about) yet **obsession** regarding sex and how it cultivated a morbid tendency.
- Browning has been labelled as a **forefather** (founder) for the **pre-Raphaelite art movement**, which was obsessed with the **female form** (body) and sexuality. Women like the Porphyria can be seen partially undressed with their long yellow /red hair in the paintings of **Dante Gabriel Rossetti, John Everett Millais and Gustav Klimt**.
- The Victorians were a **repressed** generation of people and that meant that their view of sex and sexuality was, at times, **dark and gothic**.

PORPHYRIA'S LOVER

Robert Browning

The rain set early in to-night,
The sullen wind was soon awake,
It tore the elm-tops down for spite,
And did its worst to vex the lake:
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;
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
And called me. When no voice replied,
She put my arm about her waist,
And made her smooth white shoulder bare,
And all her yellow hair displaced,
And, stooping, made my cheek lie there,
And spread, o'er all, her yellow hair,
Murmuring how she loved me — she
Too weak, for all her heart's endeavour,
To set its struggling passion free
From pride, and vainer ties dissever,
And give herself to me for ever.
But passion sometimes would prevail,
Nor could to-night's gay feast restrain
A sudden thought of one so pale
For love of her, and all in vain:
So, she was come through wind and rain.
Be sure I looked up at her eyes
Happy and proud; at last I knew
Porphyria worshipped me; surprise
Made my heart swell, and still it grew
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
 Three times her little throat around,
And strangled her. No pain felt she;
 I am quite sure she felt no pain.
As a shut bud that holds a bee,
 I warily oped her lids: again
 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,
 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,
 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,
 And yet God has not said a word!

Key Themes & Analysis

EMOTIONAL AND SEXUAL REPRESSION

- Browning shows **hyper-masculinity** (very) and its association with **emotional and sexual repression** to be a **product** (result) of a **patriarchal (society ruled by men) and oppressive society**.
- Upon the entrance of his lover, he recounts how **"she shut out the cold"**, **dismantling** (tearing down) the **pathetic fallacy** that was at play with the stormy weather and showing how his lover is able to **overshadow the impact of nature** and warm a room even in the harshest of storms.
- He **over-romanticises** her. We view the lover **through the lens of the male speaker** and thus she is **de-humanised**, turned into an **object of worship** rather than an actual human being. The poem objectifies her through its **male gaze** and thus forces us to objectify her by extension.
- She is not more powerful than nature, that is simply how the speaker sees her; he sees an **unrealistic, de-personalised, idolised version of her**.
- He describes her **"smooth white shoulders"**. He breaks her down to **individual components** of her body rather than seeing her as a whole thus objectifies her. Her **"white shoulders"** connote **innocence** and **virginity** which makes her seem more like a male fantasy than a real person.
- Her **"yellow hair"** is **reminiscent (reminds us) of the women of pre-Raphaelite paintings**, and the colour yellow and its sunny, jovial **connotations** juxtaposes against his **perverted, predatorial** view of her.
- But when the speaker is **overcome** by emotions that his society has conditioned him to **repress**, he responds erratically, strangling her and cradling her body as she **"blushed bright beneath [his] burning kiss"**. Browning uses a **repeated plosive sound** through the letter 'b' which mirrors the violent act which he has just committed.
- Furthermore her **"blush"** **connotes** life, which juxtaposes against her death and shows the speaker to be in a frenzied state of delusion
- Browning shows that repressing natural human emotions such as **arousal** and **passion**, as the Victorian encouraged, to have dire consequences.
- The speaker can be related to **Freud's** view of psychological repression where repressed emotions are pushed into the subconscious where they can, **unbeknownst** to us, influence our actions, as we can see with the speaker.
- Freud believed that **deeply repressed desires** manifested into the ID, the uncontrollable animalistic part of man. We see the speaker as a **personification of the ID** Freud described.

THE GOTHIC

- Browning uses **gothic poetic techniques** to make his poem feel more ominous.
- He opens with a **pathetic fallacy** that immediately sets the tone of the poem as dark: **"the rain"**.
- The name of his lover increases a sense of **foreboding** **"Porphyria"** being an illness which causes delirium and hallucinations. This heightens the speakers deranged delusions.
- The supernatural is a common theme in the gothic and the way his lover **"glided in"** **evokes** that theme, making her seem ghostly.
- The idea of the speakers **"heart swell[ing]"** is, at its surface, romantic, but with some analysis the **metaphor** seems **ominous** in relation to the context of the poem and the imagery become grim rather than whimsical.
- Furthermore, a symptom of Porphyria is chest pain which relates back to the idea that this might all be a hallucination, making the poem seem Gothically **sinister**.
- The **absence of God** at the end of the poem adds to the poems gothic nature, for supernatural entities seem more powerful in the absence of God.
- It also creates the idea that sin can be committed without need for **atonement** and that the absence of God has **dire** consequences. It creates the idea that men, without divine rulers, will **descend into murderous chaos**.
- Browning uses gothic poetic techniques to create a sense of ominous foreboding in his poem. He addresses the topic of **sexuality** from a dark angle, showing what will happen to man without the restrictions put into place by religion.

Form

IAMBIC TERAMETRE

- The poem begins in **iambic terametre** creating an **anticipation** for a regular rhythm which then is left **unfulfilled**.
- It adds the effect of setting up the poem to be a sonnet (a love poem) which it does not turn out to be as the speaker descends into **murderous madness**.
- The lack of regular rhythm mirroring the chaotic murderous mindset of the speaker, his unhinged delusions even being reflected in the rhythm

RHYME

- The rhyme scheme is **unevenly weighted**, with an ABABB, CDCDD, EFEFF etc which makes the speaker sound **delirious** and **disjointed**.
- There is an unsettling regularity within the rhyme, perhaps to emulate the **unsettling calculated nature** of the speaker- his murder of Porphyria perhaps being a calculated intended act to which the speaker can forever have ownership over her.

DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE

- This poem is another **dramatic monologue** with an **unfiltered** access into the speakers inner thoughts and **thus it catalogues his descent into madness**.
- It gives the reader a chilling insight into a murderous mind

Structure

RHYMING COUPLETS

- Browning uses **rhyming couplets**, and indeed ends his poem with them, which gives his poem a sort of fable /proverb like feel e.g., **"stirred"** and **"word"**.
- The final rhyming couplet exacerbates this calculated and manipulation from the speaker, almost tantalising the reader with his **permanent objectification and ownership of Porphyria**– an act we can assume as a reader an educated male would have gotten away with at the time.
- Rhyming couplets encourage the reader to search for the moral within the poem and gets them to focus on the words which are rhymed, which are often **monosyllabic and nouns or verbs**.

ENJAMBEMENT

- The lines of the poem add up to long complex sentences meaning there is a large amount of **enjambement** used. This creates the idea that the speaker loves to hear himself talk and often rambles, quite **narcissistically**.
- Alternatively, it could convey his **unwavering love** and infatuation with Porphyria that spills onto each line– his love cannot be contained for her.

Comparisons

The Farmer's Bride	THEME	FORM	STRUCTURE	CONTEXT
Similar	The objectification of women Both the Farmer and the lover see women purely as objects and dehumanise them through their first-person narrative. Both poets critique the men of their society that their speakers represent. Gothic Both poems have an element of the gothic with their melancholic weather and their themes of women suffering.	Monologue Both poems take the form of a dramatic monologue giving us unfiltered access into the speakers' innermost thought and feelings Metre Both poems have a metre that is iambic	Enjambement Both poems use enjambement to make time feel as though it is moving slowly	Key issues Both poems concern the objectification of women but are written by men and women respectively
Different	Love Browning's speaker is far more devotional in his language, interested in love and passion and he objectifies his love because his ability to love is fundamentally flawed. Whereas the farmer views his wife as	Metre Mew's poem is mostly pentameter whereas Browning uses tetrameter	Stanzas Browning writes in one continuous stanza whereas Mew splits her poem into multiple. Browning's speaker as a result sounds far crazier than the farmer and definitely is	As above Mew approaches misogyny from a female perspective and Browning from a male and as a result their characterisation are drastically different. With Browning's speaker being more passionate and Mew's aloof .

Winter Swans	THEME	FORM	STRUCTURE	CONTEXT
Similar	Devotion Both speakers give the impression that they are devoted to their lovers, that they value them, even if, in the case of Browning's speaker, it is in an objectifying way.	Monologue Both poems take the form of a monologue giving us unfiltered access into the speakers' innermost thought and feelings Metre Both poems make use of rhyming couplets to accentuate certain lines	Enjambement Enjambement is used to create feelings of conflict.	Key issues Both poets write about love and conflict, issues which the poets have particular interest in.
Different	Devotion continued However, the speakers seem to assert their devotion in different ways. In Sheers' poem the speaker seems to genuinely value their lover and cares about reconciling their conflict, whereas in Browning's the speaker loves their love theoretically , loving the idea of them more than them as a person, because, they murder them.	Rhyme Browning's poem, while it has an irregular rhyme scheme , it has one. Whereas Sheers lacks most forms of rhyme.	Punctuation Sheers' poem ends with a full stop creating a sense of finality whereas Browning ends with an exclamation, accentuating the poems shocking end.	As above However, Browning shows more concern the idea of conflict stemming from repressed sexuality , whereas Sheers is more interested in miscommunication causing conflict.