

PORPHYRIA'S LOVER KNOWLEDGE ORGANISER

Context – *Porphyria's Lover* was written by Robert Browning and was published in 1836.

Robert Browning – Robert Browning (1812-1889) was an English poet and playwright whose position as one of the foremost Victorian poets was characterised by his success with the dramatic monologue. Many of his poems utilise satire and dark humour, coupled with his extensive knowledge of historical settings. Browning had a love of history and European culture, and it is said that he could read, write, and converse in Latin, Greek, and French by the age of 14!



Porphyria – Porphyria is a group of diseases in which substances called porphyrins build up, which affect the skin or nervous system. In addition to numerous physical ailments, including dangerous rashes, seizures, and abdominal and chest pain, acute porphyria can also trigger a number of psychiatric conditions, such as agitation, mania, depression, and hallucinations. In the past, a number of other severe and violent mental illnesses, such as schizophrenia, were mistaken for porphyria.



Sexuality in Victorian Society – Robert Browning lived through the vast majority of Queen Victoria's reign. One of the features of Victorian society was the strict code of morality, including sexual restraint. The dark side of this repression was an obsession with sex – Victorian Britain had more brothels than schools and 80,000 working prostitutes. *Porphyria's Lover* reveals the dark side of sexuality. Terms such as 'shoulder bare' and 'passion free' would be seen as highly taboo.



Browning's Dramatic Monologues – *Porphyria's Lover* was Robert Browning's first foray into short dramatic monologues, a form for which he became synonymous. Dramatic monologues involve a speaker (not the poet) whose speech makes up the whole poem; the presence of an addressed auditor/s; and revelations about the speaker's character. Many of Browning's dramatic monologues, including *My Last Duchess*, involve characters with abnormal psychology.



Language/Structural Devices

Personification/ Pathetic Fallacy – Browning opens the poem by giving the weather emotions (pathetic fallacy), describing the unnatural feeling in the air that evening, as he sets the scene and the tone of the poem. The weather is described as being 'sullen' foreshadowing the gloomy tone of the night, and is also personified as attacking the surroundings. The personification of the storm may be seen as a warning to the lovers of the attitudes that society would hold over any relationship that they may begin.

Visual/ Colour Imagery – Colour is used throughout the poem to signify both life and death. Upon Porphyria's entrance into the cottage and her advances towards the speaker, the 'yellow' colour of Porphyria's hair is repeated – when coupled with her bare shoulder presents a sensual image. When she is alive, Porphyria's skin is presented as 'pale', and yet after she has died, the speaker reveals how she 'blushed' and her head was 'rosy', in line with the narrator's belief that by killing her he gave her what she wanted.

Quote: "The sullen wind was soon awake,
It tore the elm-tops down for spite,"

Quote: "About her neck; her cheek once more
Blushed bright beneath my burning kiss!"

Simile – A simile is used towards the end of the poem to portray how Porphyria's eyes firmly shut after her death – 'As a shut bud that holds a bee.' The use of a natural simile makes Porphyria seem as though she is still alive (as she is in his mind), the reference to a bud reflects her beauty, and the reference to a bee may also show the danger he possesses.

Vocabulary Choices – A number of the vocabulary choices that Browning makes whilst referencing the love between the speaker and Porphyria alludes to the fact that she is his social superior. He talks of her 'pride' and her 'vainer ties', which suggests that she has a high social standing, as does the fact that she appears to have come to him from a 'gay feast.'

Quote: "As a shut bud that holds a bee,
I warily oped her lids: again"

Quote: "From pride, and vainer ties dis sever,
And give herself to me for ever."

Form – *Porphyria's Lover* is a dramatic monologue, written in the first person. Rhyme is used throughout to create an ABABB rhyme scheme. It could be argued that this regular structure reflects the calm, regular heartbeat of the speaker, but yet its asymmetrical nature reflects their uneven personality. The poem adopts iambic tetrameter in metre, which occasionally fails in line with the speaker's instability.

Structure – The poem has a rough story arc. In the beginning, the setting is described. The reader is told that the poem takes place in a cottage on a stormy night. The rising action is Porphyria's entry, untying her hair and putting his hands around her waist. The climax is the murder itself. The denouement involves the speaker sitting with the corpse, untying her hair and putting her back in position.

Quote: "The rain set early in to-night,
The sullen wind was soon awake,"

Quote: "And kneeled and made the cheerless grate
Blaze up, and all the cottage warm;"

Themes – A theme is an idea or message that runs throughout a text.

Romantic Love – The predominant idea across the poem is that both Porphyria and the speaker claim to love one another, and desire acceptance of their feelings from each other. Both consider love differently – there are doubts whether Porphyria's love is genuine, and the speaker sees love as objectifying and possessing another.



Mental Illness – It becomes increasingly clear throughout the poem that the speaker is not mentally stable. Paranoid about whether he will keep Porphyria forever, he neglects making a choice over whether to trust her advances, he murders her so that he can keep her forever. The name Porphyria also alludes to mental illness.



Line-by-Line Analysis

| STANZA | LINE | POEM | ANALYSIS |
|--------|------|--|---|
| 1 | 1 | The rain set early in to-night, | Lines 1-9: The opening lines provide the setting and the tone for the poem – it is evening, and the wind is described as 'sullen', giving the reader an idea of the tone to be presented. The wind is personified through the idea that it is doing its best to destroy and annoy its surroundings out of spite. Nature is clearly at odds with itself and people. The speaker tells the reader of his own despair, before in came Porphyria to change the mood – she makes the cottage and the speaker warm. She shuts out the cold. |
| | 2 | The sullen wind was soon awake, | |
| | 3 | It tore the elm-tops down for spite, | |
| | 4 | And did its worst to vex the lake: | |
| | 5 | I listened with heart fit to break. | |
| | 6 | When glided in Porphyria; straight | |
| | 7 | She shut the cold out and the storm, | |
| | 8 | And kneeled and made the cheerless grate | |
| | 9 | Blaze up, and all the cottage warm; | |
| | 10 | Which done, she rose, and from her form | Lines 14-17: After setting the fire, Porphyria removes her clothes, suggesting that she is offering herself to the speaker. The speaker describes each item of clothing as she removes it, demonstrating how transfixed he is by her. She sits beside him and further offers herself to him. As he does not respond – she places his hands around her waist and bares her shoulder. The use of the words 'waist', 'shoulder', and 'bare' would be seen as extremely provocative as they have sexual connotations – at odds with Victorian morality. |
| | 11 | Withdrew the dripping cloak and shawl, | |
| | 12 | And laid her soiled gloves by, untied | |
| | 13 | Her hat and let the damp hair fall, | |
| | 14 | And, last, she sat down by my side | |
| | 15 | And called me. When no voice replied, | |
| | 16 | She put my arm about her waist, | |
| | 17 | And made her smooth white shoulder bare, | |
| | 18 | And all her yellow hair displaced, | |
| | 19 | And, stooping, made my cheek lie there, | Lines 18-29: Porphyria continues to try and seduce the speaker, laying his cheek against her hair. When she has tried everything and the speaker has still not responded, she begins to 'murmur' her love for him. The speaker at this point reveals the reason for his reluctance – he feels that her love is 'too weak.' The idea of her being unable to break 'vainer ties' may suggest that society would not accept their union, and her love is not strong enough to break these societal ties. The storm described at the beginning of the poem perhaps reflects this – the wrath of the weather represents society. He thinks that even if she wants to love him now, she never would 'for ever.' It seems she has left some 'gay feast' to be with him, but he is still not convinced of her commitment to him. |
| | 20 | And spread, o'er all, her yellow hair, | |
| | 21 | Murmuring how she loved me – she | |
| | 22 | Too weak, for all her heart's endeavour, | |
| | 23 | To set its struggling passion free | |
| | 24 | From pride, and vainer ties dis sever, | |
| | 25 | And give herself to me for ever. | |
| | 26 | But passion sometimes would prevail, | |
| | 27 | Nor could to-night's gay feast restrain | |
| | 28 | A sudden thought of one so pale | Lines 30-37: The speaker at last realises that her love for his genuine – she has come through 'wind and rain' to see him and has 'happy and proud' eyes. The speaker uses the metaphor 'made my heart swell' to describe his elation. As he still hasn't responded to her, he realises he has a decision to make about what to do. The repetition of 'mine, mine' suggests he is possessive over her – he believes that 'in this moment' he can do as her pleases with her, yet also implies that he is worried that she won't be his forever. |
| | 29 | For love of her, and all in vain: | |
| | 30 | So, she was come through wind and rain. | |
| | 31 | Be sure I looked up at her eyes | |
| | 32 | Happy and proud; at last I knew | |
| | 33 | Porphyria worshipped me; surprise | |
| | 34 | Made my heart swell, and still it grew | |
| | 35 | While I debated what to do. | |
| | 36 | That moment she was mine, mine, fair, | |
| | 37 | Perfectly pure and good: I found | |
| | 38 | A thing to do, and all her hair | Lines 38-51: The next lines come completely out of the blue, as the speaker grasps her blonde hair and wraps it around and around her throat (three times – gives an impression of how tightly he wound it) in order to strangle her to death. His concern for her is ironic – the repetition giving the impression that he cares about the fact that she did not die in pain. In only a few lines, the reader's view of the speaker has shifted from a lovesick man to a deranged killer. The simile describes how her eyelids have shut tight 'As a shut bud that holds a bee. Yet he opens them again to reveal her blue eyes ('laughed' gives an indication of his paranoid tendencies – worried that she was laughing at him). His true nature becomes further clear as he re-positions her dead body as it were. |
| | 39 | In one long yellow string I wound | |
| | 40 | Three times her little throat around, | |
| | 41 | And strangled her. No pain felt she; | |
| | 42 | I am quite sure she felt no pain. | |
| | 43 | As a shut bud that holds a bee, | |
| | 44 | I warily oped her lids: again | |
| | 45 | Laughed the blue eyes without a stain. | |
| | 46 | And I untightened next the tress | |
| | 47 | About her neck; her cheek once more | |
| | 48 | Blushed bright beneath my burning kiss: | Lines 52-60: The speaker's words reduces Porphyria to a mere object. He also states her desires (her 'utmost will') even though she is unable to desire anything anymore – the speaker is delusional and the reader no longer trusts his viewpoint. He believes that he did her a favour by killing her as all 'scorns' are now removed and he is 'gained instead!' The speaker reveals how he has laid with the corpse all night, (the reasons she has 'not stirred', in his mind, is because she is relaxed) and that 'God has not said a word!' – he has concluded that he did the right thing in killing her. |
| | 49 | I propped her head up as before, | |
| | 50 | Only, this time my shoulder bore | |
| | 51 | Her head, which droops upon it still: | |
| | 52 | The smiling rosy little head, | |
| | 53 | So glad it has its utmost will, | |
| | 54 | That all it scorned at once is fled, | |
| | 55 | And I, its love, am gained instead! | |
| | 56 | Porphyria's love: she guessed not how | |
| | 57 | Her darling one wish would be heard. | |
| | 58 | And thus we sit together now, | |
| | 59 | And all night long we have not stirred, | |
| | 60 | And yet God has not said a word! | |

Poems for Comparison

| Love's Philosophy | Influences on the Poet |
|---|--|
| <i>Porphyria's Lover</i> can be contrasted with this poem in relation to the theme of <u>Romantic Love and Desire</u> | <i>Robert Browning was one of the most recognized and respected poets of his time. The Victorian period that he lived in and his upbringing made him the dramatic and intelligent poet that he was. His most famous types of poetry were his lyrical and romantic poems. Browning influenced poetic society with his dramatic monologues, long poems, and silent listener techniques. He can be compared to Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Alfred Lord Tennyson, other literary figures of the time. Therefore, because of Browning's unique and sometimes absurd poetry, people have been fascinated with his writing and still are today. www.poetryfoundation.org</i> |
| <i>Porphyria's Lover</i> can be contrasted with this poem in relation to the theme of <u>Mental Illness</u> | |

