

Porphyria's Lover

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"Porphyria's Lover" is a poem by Robert Browning which was first published as "Porphyria" in the January 1836 issue of *Monthly Repository*. Browning later republished it in *Dramatic Lyrics* (1842) paired with "Johannes Agricola in Meditation" under the title "Madhouse Cells." The poem did not receive its definitive title until 1863.

"Porphyria's Lover" is Browning's first ever short dramatic monologue, and also the first of his poems to examine abnormal psychology.^[1] Although its initial publication passed nearly unnoticed and it received little critical attention in the nineteenth century, the poem is now heavily anthologised and much studied.

In the poem, a man strangles his lover – Porphyria – with her hair; "... and all her hair / In one long yellow string I wound / Three times her little throat around, / And strangled her." Porphyria's lover then talks of the corpse's blue eyes, golden hair, and describes the feeling of perfect happiness the murder gives him. Although he winds her hair around her throat 3 times to throttle her, the woman never cries out. The poem uses a somewhat unusual rhyme scheme: A,B,A,B,B, the final repetition bringing each stanza to a heavy rest.

A possible source for the poem is John Wilson's "Extracts from Gosschen's Diary", a lurid account of a murder published in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1818. Browning's friend and fellow poet Bryan Procter acknowledged basing his 1820 "Marcian Colonna" on this source, but added a new detail; after the murder, the killer sits up all night with his victim.^[2]

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Psychological interpretations

Browning's monologues are frequently voiced by eccentrics, lunatics, or people under emotional stress. Their ramblings illustrate character by describing the interactions of an odd personality with a particularly telling set of circumstances. In both "Porphyria's Lover" and "My Last Duchess", Browning uses this mode of exposition to describe a man who responds to the love of a beautiful woman by killing her. Each monologue offers the speakers' reasons for the desired woman from subject to object: in "My Last Duchess", the Duke may have jealously murdered his wife, but keeps a portrait of her behind a

curtain so none can look upon her smile without his permission; in "Porphyria's Lover", the persona wishes to stop time at a single perfect moment and so kills his lover and sits all night embracing her carefully arranged body. It should be noted that in "My Last Duchess" the woman's murder is at best implied, while in "Porphyria's Lover" it is described quite explicitly by the speaker. The unchanging rhythmic pattern may also suggest the persona's insanity.

The "Porphyria" persona's romantic egotism leads him into all manner of monstrously selfish assumptions compatible with his own longings. He seems convinced that Porphyria wanted to be murdered, and claims "No pain felt she" while being strangled, adding, as if to convince himself, "I am quite sure she felt no pain." He may even believe she enjoyed the pain, because he, her lover, inflicted it. When she's dead, he says she's found her "utmost will," and when he sees her lifeless head drooping on his shoulder, he describes it as a "smiling rosy little head", possibly using the word "rosy" to symbolise the red roses of love, or to demonstrate his delusion that the girl, and their relationship, are still alive. More likely, however, is the thought that blood returning to her face, after the strangulation, makes her cheeks "rosy." Her "rosy little head" may also be a sly reference to the hymen; Porphyria leaves a "gay feast" and comes in from the outside world wearing "soiled gloves"; now her blue eyes, open in death, are "without a stain."^[3] The lover may also be a fetishist, indicated by the fact that he refers to her hair numerous times throughout the poem, and strangles her with it. He also refers to the "shut bud that holds a bee" which backs up the view of it being a sexual fetish.

Since the speaker may (as many speculate) be insane, it is impossible to know the true nature of his relationship to Porphyria. Theories, some of them rather bizarre, abound: some contemporary scholars suggest, for example, that the persona may be a woman; if so, the strangulation could stem from frustration with the world. An incestuous relationship has also been suggested; Porphyria might be the speaker's mother or sister. Another possibility is that she is a former lover, now betrothed, or even married, to some other man. Alternatively, she may simply be some kind lady who has come to look in on him, or even a figment of his imagination.

Other sources speculate that the lover might be impotent, disabled, sick, or otherwise inadequate, and, as such, unable to satisfy Porphyria. There is much textual evidence to support this interpretation: he describes himself as "one so pale / for love of her, and all in vain." At the beginning of the poem, the persona never moves; he sits passively in a cold, dark room, sadly listening to the storm until Porphyria comes through "wind and rain", "shuts the cold out and the storm," and makes up his dying fire. Finally, she sits beside him, calls his name, places his arm around her waist, and puts his head on her shoulder; interestingly, she has to stoop to do this. At the poem's midpoint, the persona suddenly takes action, strangling Porphyria, propping her body against his, and boasting that afterward, *her* head lay on *his* shoulder.

In line with the persona's suggested weakness and sickness, other scholars take the word "porphyria" literally, and suggest that the seductress embodies a disease, and that the persona's killing of her is a sign of his recovery. Porphyria, which usually involved delusional madness and death, was classified several years before the poem's publication; Browning, who had an avid interest in such pathologies, may well have been aware of the new disease, and used it in this way to express his knowledge.^[4]

Much has been made of the final line: "And yet, God has not said a word!" Possibly, the speaker seeks divine condonement for the murder. He may believe God has said nothing because He is satisfied with his actions. God may be satisfied because: He recognises that the persona's crime is the only way to keep Porphyria pure; or, because He doesn't think her life and death are important compared to the persona's. The persona may also be waiting in vain for some sign of God's approval. Alternatively, the line may represent his feelings of emptiness in the wake of his violence; Porphyria is gone, quiet descends, and

he's alone. The persona may also be schizophrenic; he may be listening for a voice in his head, which he mistakes for the voice of God. It has also been postulated that this is Browning's statement of "God's silence," in which neither good nor bad acts are immediately recompensed by the deity.

The final line may also register the persona's sense of guilt over his crime. Despite his elaborate justifications for his act, he has, in fact, committed murder, and he expects God to punish him – or, at least, to take notice. The persona is surprised, perhaps a little uneasy, at God's continued silence.

"Porphyria's Lover" as tableau vivant

The mirrored effect produced by Porphyria's modelling of the persona in the first half, and the persona's reciprocal modelling of her after strangulation is indicative of a popular Victorian art form in which humans were used as art to recreate actual paintings. This is indicative of the allegorical content of "Porphyria's Lover" in which both characters imitate the process of artistic creation: when art is created or published, it is dead and forever unchanging. In the last few lines of the poem, Porphyria is manipulated in much the same way as the speaker was in the first few lines of the poem. Tennyson shares similar ideas in "The Lady of Shalott", as do other Victorian authors who contribute to the popular conversation about the artistic processes.

See also

- *My Last Duchess* – A wealthy nobleman delivers a monologue telling a guest that he had his former wife killed because everybody and everything she saw seemed to make her happy. Now, she exists only as a painting on the wall, which he usually keeps concealed behind a curtain so none but he can see the look of happy welcome on her face.
- *Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister* – A comic monologue in which a monk spews out venom against one of his colleagues, Brother Lawrence; in the process, he merely reveals his own depravity while showing what a good, pious man his "enemy" is.
- Maggie Power – Novelist who wrote a book with the same title as the Browning poem.
- "Where the Wild Roses Grow" – A contemporary song sharing similar themes.
- "Lizzie's Lover" – A short story by Ruth Rendell.

Full text

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:
 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 forever.
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:
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
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!

References

1. Browning, Robert. *Browning: Pippa Passes and Shorter Poems* (Joseph E. Baker, Editor). New York: The Odyssey Press, 1947, p. 89.
2. Ross, Catherine. "Porphyria's Lover", *The Explicator*, Winter 2002, p. 68(5)
3. Ross, *ibid.*
4. Popowich, Barry L. "Porphyria is Madness". *Studies in Browning and his Circle*, May 1999, pp. 59–65.

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External links

- John Wilson's "Extracts from Gosschen's Diary" (<http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks06/0606631.txt>). Full text from Project Gutenberg.
- An article (<http://www.cswnet.com/~erin/rb6.htm>) from the academic journal *Explicator* which compares "Porphyria's Lover" and "My Last Duchess" to Shakespeare's *Othello* and interprets both as critiques of male sexual possessiveness.



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