

Browning's "Porphyria's Lover" is a poetry of absurdity

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I. INTRODUCTION

"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 published it in "Dramatic Lyrics" (1842) paired with "Johannes Agricola in Meditation" under the title "Madhouse Cells". The poem didn't receive its definitive title until 1863.

"Porphyria's Lover" has been Browning's ever shot dramatic monologue which deals with the abnormal psychology of Porphyria's lover. The poet uses this mood of exposition to describe a person who responds to the love of a beautiful woman by strangling her with her hair and describes the perfect happiness he finds through the killing of his beloved.

About The Title

The title of the poem "Porphyria's Lover" was changed several times and until 1863 it had not received its definitive title. The poem is first published as "Porphyria" indicates that Porphyria is the central character of the poem, otherwise her lover's intervention in the poem is unworthy who is unable to draw any sympathy from the readers, most probably because of this, his name is also not mentioned by the poet once although he performs the role of the narrator in the poem. The second title "Madhouse Cells" carries the information of the confused abnormal psychological state of a person who strangles his beloved to save her from the tumultuous contradictions of human nature, to preserve her in a moment of pure happiness and contentment and sits with her corpse the whole night. The Oxford Dictionary also defines "Madhouse" as 'a place of confusion'. If the title "Porphyria" throws the light on Porphyria, ignoring her diabolic lover who is also the narrator of the poem, then the "Madhouse Cells" stresses on the activities of an abnormal person. These two titles could not carry out the basic information about the poem what the poet wanted to mean. Browning got the final title "Porphyria's Lover" which could fulfil his demand for a good title. Both Porphyria and her lover have been fringed with the present title but no doubt Porphyria's lover has been introduced after her name, indicates that Porphyria has occupied a notable place not only in the poem but also in the society she dwells in.

The Central Idea of The Poem

The attention of the poem is the description of Porphyria's death. From starting, it is said that "Porphyria's Lover" is the poem of misinterpretation as the reason for Porphyria's death had remained a controversial topic. Critics have unfurled different critical views on the poem as well as prepared an analytical observation on it with their supporting reasoning. Everyone has his or her own prospectus of thinking and they present their views from different angles they have chosen. For readers it is a poetry of confusion. The path leading to a proper conclusion regarding that strangulation went undiscovered and the motive behind the Porphyria's death has labored under a false image for well over a century.

The critical analysis " Porphyria's Lover "

The "Porphyria's lover" is a poem of absurdity as it describes all the abnormal activities of an insane lover who tries to win his beloved forever by strangling her with her hair. Talking with a corpse, loving and kissing it, sitting with it whole night and waiting for the judgement of God; all these claim the characteristics of an absurd theme.

"The rain set early in to-night,
The sullen wind was soon awake,
It tore the elm-tops down for spite.

And did it's worst to vex the lake; "

If we go through the first four lines of the poem, we get a very horrific atmospheric opening. Here , Browning is using pathetic fallacy to relate the scene with the life and gives us a sense of indication that something bad omen is going to happen. Pathetic fallacy is a personification of nature which has become very clear in line two "The sullen wind was soon awake" , tries to mean that the "sullen wind" or disaster is coming to life. The rain is itself is minacious and the word "sullen" is very evocative , creating a gloomy, moody wind and a morose and dismal scene . Line three gives us a little more about the wind, how it "tore the elm-tops down for spite" , this is a cruel and petulant wind who causes damage for no good reason at all, just because it is frustrated and doing all these. The situation continues in line four also "And did its worst to vex the lake" as it tries to vex the lake , extending this idea of a petty, destructive and cruel creature determined to irritate and annoy those around it for no better reason. The starting lines of the poem set the stage for a dismal human mood.

The next two lines ----

"I listened with heart fit to break

When glided in Porphyria; straight" ---- unfurls the fact that the lover was eagerly waiting for Porphyria and tried to listen the sound of her footsteps.

"She shut the cold out and the storm,
And kneeled and made the cheerless grate
Blaze up, and all the cottage warm;"

The above lines tell us Porphyria has been to the cottage of her lover many times before and is comfortable building up the existing fire within the fireplace. Besides this, Porphyria literally lights up his life with love and affection .

"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,"

These lines metaphorically state that Porphyria takes off her social dogma and hierarchy and picked out her real existence from her form. The phrase "let your hair down" means to free the existence, to be liberated and to be free from social conventions.

"And, last , she sat down by my side

And called me, when no voice replied." ----- When Porphyria has reached the cottage ending up the awaited moments of her lover, he suddenly remains unresponsive to her. It is because of his inferiority complex rather than his pique . The lover is a mental patient, suffering from Avoidant Personality Disorder which is characterized by social discomfort and avoidance of interpersonal contact . He is bearing the feelings of not measuring up to standards, a doubt and uncertainty on Porphyria's love .

"She put my arms about her waist
And make her smooth white shoulder bare,
And all her yellow hair displaced,
And, stopping, mad my check lie there,

"And spread o'er all, her yellow hair," ----- if any critic remarks that the lover is impotent than it is just a baseless note as he keenly describes every efforts of Porphyria , carries the document of his thrilling sensation felt with Porphyria's involvement. The mental image of her lover is powerful, proof of romantic affection for Porphyria .

"Murmuring how she loves me ---she
Too weak, for all ! her heart's endeavor,
To set it's struggling passion free
From pride, and vainer ties dissever ,

And giver herself to me for ever." ----- Here the climax of the poetry suddenly twists into an unexpected gloomy direction. The logic behind the Porphyria's death begins to reveal itself within the line twenty-two where it is stated " Too weak for all," to set her "struggling passion free" . Porphyria expresses her feelings for him and also she has confessed that she wants to devote herself completely to him but she is too weak to do so because of pride and social convention . In the poem it is not mentioned that Porphyria is afraid of pride and social convention , it has been guessed as the word "Porphyria" comes from Greek word "Porphyry" means purple which commonly associated with royalty . Porphyria's name more likely suggest nobility, aristocracy and

high social status. Maybe Porphyria belongs to a higher social class than her lover, maybe he is an outcast or a misfit. She tells that she is unable to give in to her passions and here a sense has come in light that the "pride" which stops her in getting involved with her lover. J. T Best writes, "Porphyria suffers from the blood disease "porphyria" and her lover kills her out of mercy, not psychopathy." I respectfully submit that this remark is not at all acceptable as Robert Browning published this poem in 1836 while the group of blood disorder known as "porphyria" was not coined until 1889.

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 : " --- If we go through the above lines, we find a clear document of uncertainty, heartache and dejection, that has suddenly gushed into the lover's mind and his passion has gained control. He is obliged to doubt on Porphyria's love as she is too weak to love him because of pride and social convention. The lover is completely in depression and thought that loving Porphyria is vain that has become distinct in the line -- "For love of her, and all in vain", which leads the diabolic, insane lover to find out a way how to win porphyria's love forever. Ultimately he has taken the decision to cut off all the possible ways that may take Porphyria away from him.

"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; surprised
Made my heart swell, and still it grew

While I debated what to do." -- A debate is continuing in the mind of Porphyria's lover, is she really love him or not? Although she has come through wind and rain to meet him; yet to make it sure, he looks at her eyes and finds her "happy and proud". He gets surprised that Porphyria "worshipped" him which makes his "heart swell" when he is debating "what to do" to get Porphyria forever. He thinks of a strange way out to solve the problem of social barriers.

"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 neck around,
And strangled her. No pain felt she;
I am quite sure she felt no pain.

As a shut bud that holds a bee," ----- Looking at Porphyria, with confidence he tells, "she was mine, mine fair, perfectly pure and good,". Porphyria's lover wants her to remain same with him for ever and ever. He fears that she might not love him in the same manner if it becomes difficult for her to face the societal dogma and hierarchy. To capture the perfect moment forever, the eccentric lover decides something strange and winds her long golden hair into a string and winds it "Three times her little throat around" and strangles her. He is sure, "she felt no pain". Here the poet uses metaphor of "shut bud" that "holds a bee" for porphyria's death. According to him, she has been strangled with love and care; with a soft touch how a shut buds holds a bee.

"I wearily opened her lids: again
Laughed the blue eyes without a strain." ---- Then he opens her eye lids and finds the blue eyes laughing free from all strains, prides and social conventions.

"And I untightened next the trees
About her neck: her cheek once more
Blushed bright I 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," ----- The insane lover then makes her neck free from the knot of her hair and talks to her dead body dearly; propping her head up, kissing her and calling her cheek "blushed bright". He

calls her head "The smiling rosy little head" and proudly says that Porphyria is now happy enough as "it has its utmost will" which indicates that the lover is very much aware of the fact that Porphyria is crazy for his love.

"That all it scorned once is fled,
And I, its love, am gained instead!" ---- His haughty and acquisitive attitude have come out through the above lines when he says that social barriers and pride for which she was "too weak" to give herself to him forever has been uprooted successfully and instead of it he has gained her love forever.

"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! ----

The whole night he was sitting with Porphyria's corpse and waiting for God's judgement. The last line contains the idea of reflection when he says "And God has not said a word". The line allows us to think, Porphyria's lover is passing through a mental contradiction if he has done something deeply immoral or not. If he did any immoral task or sin then why he has not been punished by God, why he has not received any judgement and divine retribution. It is a fabulous line as it just makes us really think about how and when evil-doers are punished. Although he continues a mental contradiction yet seems quite happy as he has won Porphyria forever and now whatever decided by God he is ready to accept willingly.

Imagery of the Poem:

"Porphyria's Lover" is a narrative poem told by a single narrator, Porphyria's lover. Here, Imagery is unable to touch the rooftop height but none can deny the proper use of imagery in various aspects of the poem. In this poem, Browning uses pathetic fallacy to bring the scene in to life which has become very distinct in first two lines. The words "sullen" and "awake" personify the weather. The image of Porphyria's "yellow hair displaced" carries sensual undertones. Elm trees have a long history in mythology and literature. The Elm trees have been used to represent idyllic life with the shade cast by their broad leaves. "The sullen wind rips down the elms" describes something unexpected troublesome situations. The word 'tress' refers to a braid of woman's hair which stands for a symbol of beauty and using that braid, he killed her beloved Porphyria. If some critics explain that Porphyria's lover was completely diabolic then how he actively used pronoun 'it' to dehumanize Porphyria after her death. 'God has not said a word' suggests a type of approval of the speaker's action. Since the speaker enforces the Victorian moral code where pre-marital sex is condemned as immoral and a great sin.

Structure of the Poem:

If we analyze the structure of the poem "Porphyria's Lover", up-to sixty lines it carries a narrative past-tense story-telling that comes to the present tense in the last three lines. The shifting to the present tense with "Thus we sit together now" is particularly powerful at giving the poem both a timelessness and yet also a sense of immediacy. The setting of the poem is quite violent. Here, Robert Browning, the poet uses pathetic fallacy to bring the scene to life. The violent nature outside has been juxtaposed with the violence in Porphyria's lover. If we go through the form of the poem, it is a dramatic monologue. It reads like a man on stage narrating the events while he is sitting with the corpse of his girlfriend. It is also a narrative -- Porphyria's lover narrates the story. It is not addressed to a specific reader and we feel very much that we are eavesdropping on the speaker, we are his captive audience. The poem is worthy of comparison to explore how other poets create an individual voice, albeit their own and Browning creates something that is much more constructed and much less "him". The rhyming pattern of the poem is ababb, the example of rhyming pattern in first five lines are -- To-night(A), Awake(B), Spite(A), Lake(B), Break(B). Browning wrote the poem in crisp iambic tetrameter. The four-beat meter gives the poem a jaunty ballad-like feel.

Browning's Porphyria's Lover can rightly be categorized as an absurd poetry as the narrator murders his beloved Porphyria just to capture a particular period of time when he finds her in worshipping him. The narrator cuts off all the obstacles faced by her in love with him and makes her free from social dogmas and aristocratic prides by strangling with her long hair. Is it possible for a normal person to strangle his beloved who has come to light up his life? How can a normal person select the way to win his beloved forever which has been selected by the narrator? Claiming that Porphyria hasn't got any pain during strangulation, talking with the corpse and kissing passionately, after strangulation waiting for the judgement of God -- all these strike the character of an absurd person. After a close observation it can be said that **Browning's 'Porphyria's Lover' is a poetry of absurdity.**

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About The Author

Since her schooling days she has been writing poetry, short story, novels and articles and many of them have been published in various local, national and international newspapers, magazines and anthologies. In collegiate days she has published an Assamese Novel "NisharNinad". She was awarded "The Best FictionWriter"(junior) in All Assam



based fiction writing competition. She worked as the Sub-Editor of "Kannan", an Assamese monthly magazine. She pursued Master of Arts in English. After her collegiate study, due to some problems, she had to stop penning. After a couple of years, for the readers who always try to track down her new books, she has decided to pen again.

Soon she is coming with three new books, "Chandrajeeta" a collection of Assamese poetry, "The Old House" an English novel and a significant English novel "A Hell Behind Three Kabuls"

Her poetry book "Sonata of Dreams " published by BlueRose Publisher, Delhi available in Amazon is one of the best selling books.