AQA English GCSE

Poetry: Love and Relationships

Porphyria's Lover - *Robert Browning*

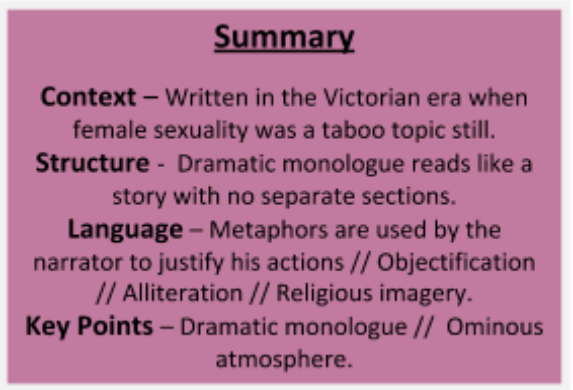
PORPHYRIA'S LOVER

Robert Browning

Brief Summary

Porphyria's lover is a dramatic monologue about a man who is unable to cope with his emotions towards his lover so strangles her. He proceeds to spend all night with her corpse and appears to be more in love with her when she is dead than alive.

Synopsis



- The speaker describes the violently foul weather
- A woman called Porphyria enters the speaker's cottage
- She removes her damp clothing and unties her hair
- Porphyria tells the speaker how much she loves him
- The speaker doesn't know what to do with his knowledge that she is in love with him
- He decides to strangle her with her own hair
- The speaker insists that she didn't feel any pain
- He then spends all night lying with her body and proudly announces that God hasn't stopped him

Context

Robert Browning (1812-1889)

Browning lived through the Victorian era so his writing is reflective of this time. At that time, scandals were constantly being published in the newspaper so Browning has to be extremely transgressive in his writing to shock a numbed listener. In his writing, Browning often uses speakers to depict fictional events so it is important to remember that Browning himself did not strangle a woman.

Porphyria's Lover

Pathetic fallacy is used from the start to establish a dark and disturbed tone which is reflective of a disturbed speaker.

The active verb "tore" is violent and furthers the effect of the pathetic fallacy. Suggests nature is at conflict with both itself and humans, which creates a disponent and unhappy implication for the state of the relationship.

The supernatural connotations of "glided" imply that the speaker does not view Porphyria as a human being. Porphyria is also a rare blood disease so her name helps to create a recurring theme of sickness. It may cause psychiatric symptoms, including hallucinations, which adds to the theme of madness. Browning might have been aware of this, as it was discovered a few years before the poem was written, and he had an interest in medicine. By placing this line directly after "heart fit to break", Browning is suggesting that she is the one to cause his heartbreak.

"Cheerless grate" could be a metaphor for the speaker's heart, and the emptiness he feels towards his lover, or his life in general.

She is exposing herself - this could link to exposing the truth and juxtaposes the heme of secrecy and lack of trust within the poem.

This line shows the moment that Porphyria opens herself up to the speaker. The act of

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,

The wind is personified as "sullen", showing how even nature is miserable here, and relates to the intrinsic link between romance and nature in literature from this time.

This use of pathetic fallacy shows the speaker's angry state of mind.

Porphyria brings joy into the speaker's world so she is the opposite to him; she represents good whilst he represents evil.

She has given the speaker warmth.

The use of enjambment here implies that these lines are a stream of consciousness due to the speaker being transfixed on Porphyria. "Soiled" has connotations of cheating and promiscuous behaviour, and implies the speaker's doubts that his lover has been loyal to him. The material focus on clothes, which hide the and could symbolically show hiding the truth - such as "dripping cloak and shawl" - helps reveal to the audience that the speaker has been paranoid about his lover's behaviour.

His silence foreshadows his inability to deal with her as a fellow person. The speaker also doesn't take responsibility for his lack of reply, showing that he does not take responsibility for his actions.

"smooth white" has angelic connotations, highlighting her innocence and vulnerability. This creates a sense of foreboding.

And give herself to me for ever.

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 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,

her untying her hair portends her death.

She is the active one nitially- Is Browning trying to suggest that the only way the speaker knows how to deal with a non-passive female is to kill her?

*It is odd here that he refers to her hair as **"yellow"** rather than blonde, this shows how he views her as an object, not a woman.*

Browning uses lexis from the semantic field of violence here.

*Browning uses **temporal deixis** in **"for ever"** to demonstrate the speaker's desire to play God.*

This references the theme of consumption which is often used in relation to possessive men; women are viewed as objects to consume.

*She is granted **active verbs** here in **"Happy"** and **"proud"** however, they are still in relation to him.*

The metaphor shows the intensity of the speaker's desire.

*Browning uses **plosive alliteration** in **"perfectly pure"** in order to foreshadow the act of violence about to be committed by the speaker.*

*Her hair becomes a **"long yellow string"** showing that she is wholly an object to him at this point. Browning uses enjambment in order to*

***"Murmuring"** could imply fear, shyness or flirtation. The ambiguous nature of this verb reflects the speaker's (and listener's) lack of understanding of Porphyria.*

***"vainer ties"** can be interpreted in multiple ways. Some believe that it is referring to Porphyria having ties to a rich family or perhaps another lover. Others think that the speaker is berating her for not wanting to sleep with her.*

*Browning uses **plosive alliteration** in **"passion"** and **"prevail"** which implies that there is danger in these feelings.*

The wind and rain have previously been personified as violent so for her to not succumb to them shows her subversion of the archetypal submissive female.

*The religious connotations of **"worshipped"** demonstrate the power imbalance present in the relationship as well as showing the speaker's **hubris.***

*Repetition of the possessive pronoun **"mine"** emphasises the speaker's possessive nature.*

*The **enjambment** used here reflects the irrationality of the speaker's actions.*

*Her hair becomes a noose, she is punished by her own beauty. The adjective **"little"** infantilizes Porphyria, emphasising her vulnerability.*

*He thinks that he is doing a good thing. The plosives in the repetition of **"no pain"** serve to in fact emphasise*

show that the speaker is acting impulsively upon his thoughts.

*There is no **emotive language** used here, showing that the speaker is remorseless.*

This reference to spring is ironic as there is no longer ife contained within her. The idea of something being trapped within something beautiful reflects Porphyria being strangled with her own hair.

*The verb **"untightened"** implies that the speaker sees his actions as reversible.*

This shows the speaker to be at peace now she has to rely on him rather than the other way around.

This links back to the previous flower imagery, he sees her to have come alive in death.

*Browning uses **triadic structure** in the **"w"** sounds used in **"one wish would"** to emphasise the idea of what Porphyria wanted.*

*The speaker has 'played God' in the poem and is now claiming to have got away with it. This example of **blasphemy** would be shocking to a contemporary listener.*

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!

***"pain"**, showing the speaker's misguidedness.*

He now views her as pure and perfect.

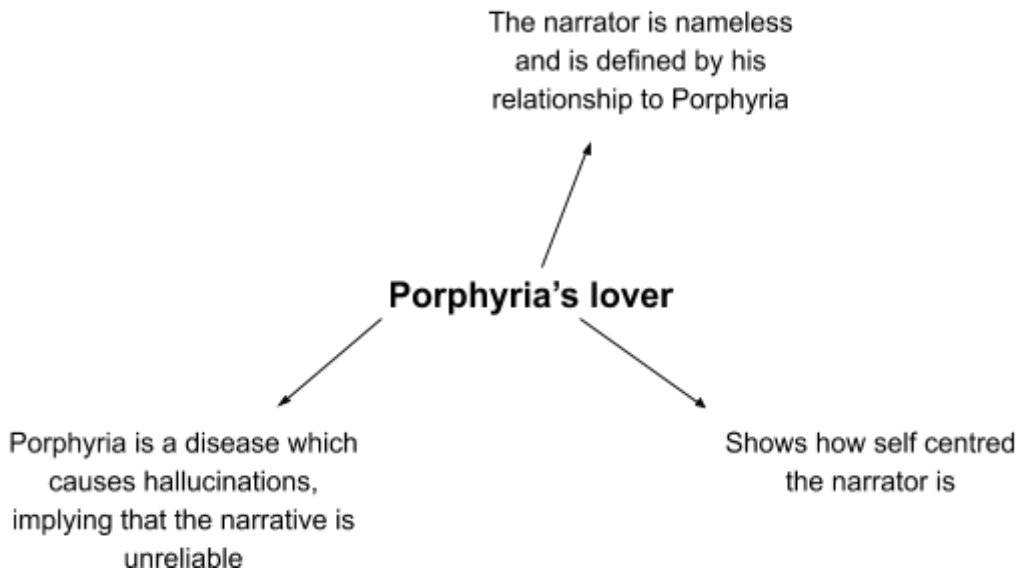
*The connotations of **"burning"** suggest that he is like the devil and she has been punished for loving him. Heavy "b" sounds emphasise the speaker's creepiness.*

*The **alliterative "h"**'s used create a difficult sound for the listener alluding to the horrific nature of the poem. Clearly, the speaker is sociopathic who is not concerned about his actions.*

*Use of **"its"** shows how Porphyria is now an object not a person.*

*This is the only point in the poem where the speaker refers to his (now dead) lover with a **collective pronoun** - 'we' - and this suggests that they have only been united together as a couple after her death when he is able to take full control of both of them.*

The title



Perspective

The poem is written in the first person. **The speaker is an extreme example of typically masculine traits; he is controlling and emotionally repressed.** Whilst in contemporary literature these attributes are commonly left unchallenged, in Porphyria's lover, Browning shows the extreme result of this. Whilst most listeners would be shocked by the description of femicide, Browning ends the poem with an example of blasphemy to increase the reader's understanding of the speaker's error.

The poem is written from the first person however, it is a dramatic monologue so is from the perspective of a fictional narrator rather than Browning himself.

The opening

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

"The sullen wind was soon awake"

The first stanza begins with a heavy emphasis on the weather. Browning **personifies the weather** by describing the wind as ***"sullen"*** as well as trying to ***"vex the lake"*** and tear ***"the elm-tops down for spite".*** This use of **pathetic fallacy** sets an **ominous tone** to foreshadow the coming

horrific events. This tone is then shattered by the entrance of Porphyria who is given supernatural traits by the description of her having ***"glided"*** into the cottage.

Structure and Form

The poem tells a story in **chronological order,** from Porphyria arriving, telling the speaker she loves him, him killing her and then the speaker spending the night with her lifeless body. The lack of stanzas suggests a passive unfurling of events which the speaker views as only natural. This combined with the first person narrative implies that **the narrative is a stream of consciousness.**

There is only one instance of Browning using the **collective pronoun** ***"we"*** - the two characters are always presented separately which separate pronouns used to refer to them such as ***"she"*** and ***"her".*** This displays the intense disconnect between the couple in their relationship, and only changes right at the end of the poem. This emphasises that the relationship is very destructive and broken.

The poem takes the form of a **dramatic monologue** as there is one person relating a story - this was a common form that Browning would write in. The poem is written after the lover is dead, which is typical of his dramatic monologues as it tackles an event and recounts it just after it has occurred.

The poem is one of Browning's earliest, arguably before he began to develop a concrete style, and therefore is void of many of his typically colloquial language features common in his work later on. The natural form of the poem, **mirroring speech**, contrasts with the very ordered structure of the verse with the strict **ABABB** scheme. This works to represent the intentionality behind the speaker's portrayed madness. The meter is often in **iambic tetrameter** - which is an unstressed, then stressed syllable, with four stressed beats in one line.

Language

<u>Objectification</u>
Browning's use of language in Porphyria's lover demonstrates the speaker's conception of Porphyria as an **object**. Upon her entrance she is not described herself, only her ***"dripping cloak and shawl".*** This implies that the speaker does not see Porphyria as a living human. The speaker's objectification of Porphyria shifts from implicit to explicit after he kills her. He now uses **colour imagery** to describe her ***"blue eyes without a stain".*** This shows that now she is dead and is an object in his eyes she fulfills conventional ideas of perfection.

Can you find any more examples of the speaker's objectification of Porphyria?

<u>Alliteration</u>
Alliterative phrases are used in the poem to highlight certain phrases. Browning combines **alliterative** ***"w"*** sounds with **triadic structure** in ***"one wish would"*** so cause the listener discomfort. The horrific content of the poem is emphasised by Browning in ***"her head".*** **Plosive alliteration** is used in ***"perfectly pure"*** to create violent undertones to what is explicitly a positive comment.

Religious imagery

Although religion is not a main theme of the poem, its underlying presence could be interpreted to represent the speaker attempting to suppress their **religious guilt.** Porphyria's ability to ***"shut the cold out"*** has **hubristic connotations** foreshadowing the lack of religious morality in the poem.

There is a hubristic reference in ***"Porphyria worshipped me"*** and this is highlighted by use of **plosives and sibilance**. The poem ends with the exclamation ***"God has not said a word!"*** to leave the listener with the lasting impression of the speaker's hubristic tendencies.

Comparisons

When We Two Parted

Similarities	• In "Porphyria's lover", Browning makes explicit references to death in ***"Three times her little throat around, // And strangled her".*** In "When we two parted", Byron makes more implicit references to death to compare his relationship to it in the **auditory imagery** in ***"A knell in mine ear".***
Differences	• In "Porphyria's lover", the speaker describes his lover's body in a way which makes her seem alive in the metaphor ***"Laughed the blue eyes without a stain."*** and ***"The smiling rosy little head".*** The opposite is true in "When we two parted", in which something living (his love) is made to seem physically dead. Byron does so through his use of lexis from the semantic field of death in ***"Pale grew thy cheek", "In silence I grieve"*** and ***"foretold // sorrow to this".***

Sonnet 29- 'I think of thee!'

Similarities	• Both speakers have an unhealthy fixation on the object of their affection. In "Sonnet 29", this is shown through the active verbs ***"twine"*** and ***"bud"*** which imply that her love is smothering. Browning's speaker is equally transfixed and this is shown by the way in which he objectifies Porphyria in ***"her smooth white shoulder bare"*** and ***"spread o'er all her yellow hair".*** • There is natural imagery used in ***"Porphyria's lover"*** in the pathetic fallacy used in ***"The sullen wind was soon awake"***, ***"It tore the elm-tops down for spite"*** and ***"did its worst to vex the lake".*** In "Sonnet 29", Barrett Browning uses the **extended metaphor** of nature. Her love is symbolised by ***"wild vines, about a tree"*** and ***"the straggling green which hides the wood".*** • In both poems, the speaker is unfulfilled and then they become fulfilled in their relationship. In "Porphyria's lover", initially, the speaker is unsettled by Porphyria's autonomy which is shown in ***"Too weak, for all her heart's endeavour, // To set its struggling passion free".*** Eventually the speaker is shown to be satisfied in the exclamatory ***"And I, its love, am gained instead!".*** Likewise, in "Sonnet 29", the speaker is initially desperate to be with her lover and this is shown by the poem beginning with ***"I think of thee!"***, a repetition of the title, which shows how she is only able to think of her lover rather than be with him. The turning point in the sonnet however, leads to a subverted repetition of the opening line in ***"I do not think of***

	thee – I am too near thee.”, this shows the speaker’s change in situation from disillusionment to satisfaction.
Differences	• In “Sonnet 29”, the speaker recognises that her obsession is unhealthy for their relationship. At the **turning point** in the sonnet, she states that ***“I will not have my thoughts instead of thee”*** showing how she admits that thinking constantly about her lover will ruin their relationship. The speaker in “Porphyria’s lover” does not have the same self awareness and this is shown by the final hubristic line ***“And yet God has not said a word!”*** which demonstrates the speaker’s lack of remorse. • In “Sonnet 29”, Barrett Browning employs the **rigid sonnet form** whilst **Browning’s poem is continuous and not separated into stanzas**. This shows that “Sonnet 29” is a more conventional depiction of love than “Porphyria’s lover” which also sporadically employs **iambic tetrameter.**

The Farmer’s Bride

Similarities	• The speakers in both poems are similarly characterised as a possessive, objectifying male. Browning’s speaker fulfils this role because of his assumption of Porphyria’s feelings in ***“No pain felt she”*** and the repetition in ***“she was mine, mine”.*** Mew shapes a similar speaker by showing him presenting his wife as a small animal in ***“flying like a hare”***, ***“like a mouse”*** and ***“shy as a leveret”.*** Given that the speaker is a farmer so takes advantage of animals to make a living, this implies that he is abusing his wife. • The type of love presented in both poems is destructive. This is shown in “Porphyria’s lover” in the physical destruction of Porphyria in ***“Her head, which droops”.*** In “The farmer’s bride”, the woman is mentally rather than physically destroyed which is shown in her silence in ***“She sleeps up in the attic there // Alone, poor maid.”*** • Both poems are similarly long, showing the speaker’s obsessive tendencies. • In “Porphyria’s lover”, Browning shows how the speaker’s love is not reciprocated in Porphyria’s non committal ***“murmuring how she loved me”.*** Similarly, in “The farmer’s bride”, Mew shows the farmer’s bride disregard for her husband through her self imposed isolation in ***“She sleeps up in the attic there”.***
Differences	• The farmer’s bride speaker seems more aware of the suffering he is inflicting than the Porphyria’s lover speaker. • Mew shows her speaker to be somewhat aware of the suffering he is inflicting on his lover through his confessions ***“Too young maybe”*** and ***“I’ve hardly heard her speak at all.”.*** The speaker of “Porphyria’s lover” is however, less self aware. He seems to believe that Porphyria enjoys or has benefitted from his actions. Browning uses lexis from the semantic field of romantic love and alliteration in ***“Blushed bright beneath my burning kiss:”.***