

“Porphyria's Lover” Introduction

"Porphyria's Lover" is a poem by the British poet Robert Browning, first published in 1836. Along with "[My Last Duchess](#)," it has become one of Browning's most famous dramatic monologues—due in no small part to its shockingly dark ending. In the poem, the speaker describes being visited by his passionate lover, Porphyria. After realizing how much she cares for him, however, the speaker strangles Porphyria and then props her lifeless body up beside him. He then concludes the poem by announcing that God has yet to punish him for this murder. While the speaker is often taken to be a madman, his (very twisted) motivations seem clear: in killing Porphyria, he takes control over her, transforming her into an obedient object that will remain "pure" forever.

“Porphyria's Lover” Summary

It started raining early tonight. The wind began to howl, breaking the tops of the elm-trees just for fun and disturbing the waters of the lake. I was listening to the storm, thinking my heart was about to break, when Porphyria came in. Right away, she shut the windows to keep out the cold and the wind. She knelt down and lit a blazing fire in the fireplace, making my cottage warm. When she was done with that, she took off her wet cloak and shawl, put down her dirty gloves, untied her hat to let her damp hair fall loose, and, finally, came and sat down next to me and spoke to me. I didn't say anything back, so she put my arm around her waist. Then she brushed her blonde hair off her smooth, white shoulder and laid my cheek on it. Then she spread her hair over my face and her shoulder, whispering that she loved me. Despite how much she wanted to be with me, pride (and other, even sillier, feelings) stood in the way, stopping her from indulging in her desires and letting me possess her forever. But her desire would

sometimes get the best of her. And even though she had been at a happy, raucous party earlier in the evening, she couldn't help thinking about me—picturing me wanting to be with her so badly that it made me weak and pale, and all for nothing. So she came in the storm to see me. Don't doubt it: I looked up at her happy, proud eyes, and in that moment I was finally sure of it: Porphyria loved me completely.

Suddenly realizing how much she loved me filled my heart with happiness and pride, and it just kept getting fuller as I tried to figure out what to do next. In that moment she belonged to me, and only me, and she was beautiful, virtuous, and noble. I finally figured out what to do: I gathered her hair into one blonde rope and twisted it around her thin neck three times in order to strangle her. She didn't feel any pain. I'm totally sure she didn't feel any pain. Her eyes were like a flower with its petals closed up around a bee. I cautiously opened up her lids and saw her blue eyes again, looking happy and perfect. I loosened the hair from around her neck. Her cheek was rosy beneath my passionate kiss again. I propped up her head—this time it rested on my shoulder. Her little smiling pink face is still there, resting on my shoulder. She's so happy she

finally got what she wanted, that all the things she struggled with are gone and that she has won my love instead. She never guessed how I would interpret her single, sweet desire. So we're sitting together and we haven't moved all night. And God hasn't said anything about it!

“Porphyria's Lover” Themes



Love, Violence, and Control

The violent climax of “Porphyria’s Lover” comes as a shock: right in the middle of a tender moment, the speaker suddenly decides to strangle Porphyria, the woman he loves. Many scholars have argued that the speaker is mad—in fact, in 1842 the poem was published alongside another of Browning’s poems and collectively titled “Madhouse Cells”—but his violence might not be all that random. Instead, it seems he kills Porphyria for a certain set of perverse reasons: he wants to fulfill (what he thinks is) Porphyria’s “one wish” to fully surrender herself to him, and to make this loving moment last forever. Told entirely from the

vantage point of its twisted speaker, the poem positions love as a form of total submission, and violence as a means of control.

When Porphyria first appears, she is presented as a strong-willed woman—especially for the stodgy Victorian time period in which the poem was written. As soon as she enters the cottage, she shuts out the storm and starts a fire, reshaping the environment in which the speaker exists. And while the speaker is “so pale,” she casts off her rain-soaked clothes as though the bad weather doesn’t trouble her at all. She even supports the speaker on her shoulder, physically propping him up.

Moreover, her decision to come to the cottage in the first place reflects an independent streak. Though she’s been at a “gay feast,” she decides to go out in a storm to be with the person she loves. For the speaker this marks a kind of internal triumph: though she’s been struggling to balance what her “heart” desires” with her “pride,” she has chosen to give into passion, to throw caution to the wind. In other words, she has chosen her own desires over the social punishment that might arise from indulging in them. Especially for a

woman in 19th century England—a period in which women's sexuality and ability to engage in public life was tightly controlled—Porphyria is presented as a willful woman with genuine agency.

Once Porphyria gives into her passion, however, her status changes. She stops being an independent person. The speaker describes her as “mine, mine, fair, / Perfectly pure and good.” The repetition of the word “mine” emphasizes that Porphyria has become a possession, an object—something the speaker owns. And by strangling her, the speaker can keep her in that “pure and good” state.

After Porphyria is dead, she ceases to have the control and agency she displayed earlier in the poem. Instead of opening her eyes, the speaker opens them for her. Instead of supporting the speaker's head on her shoulder, he supports her on *his* shoulder. As a result, she cannot remove herself from his embrace: she is permanently under his control, permanently “mine, mine.” By killing Porphyria, the speaker establishes control over her, takes away her agency, and turns her from an active subject into a passive object. And in his twisted mind, he's done the right thing—granted his lover's “one wish” ~~to be with him forever.~~



Sexuality, Morality, and Hypocrisy

As “Porphyria’s Lover” ends, Porphyria (now dead) and the speaker sit all night in their strange embrace. The speaker’s power over Porphyria has become absolute and unbending. Yet despite the speaker’s violent and disturbing crime, he appears to go unpunished: as he announces triumphantly in the poem’s final line, “And yet God has not said a word!”

For the speaker, it seems this silence means that God approves of his decision to murder Porphyria, since doing so forever keeps her “perfectly pure and good.” And given the strong sexual undertones of the poem, with its mention of bare shoulders and burning kisses, the speaker is probably thinking specifically of sexual purity here. Essentially, the speaker thinks that by murdering Porphyria he prevents her from sinning; by killing Porphyria, the speaker prevents her from straying into sexual acts that might endanger her soul’s status with God.

This is clearly a twisted interpretation of morality, but it could be the poem's way of critiquing those who would prioritize restrictive ideas about virtue above actual human life. The speaker assumes that God values purity above all else—so much so that he's willing to allow murder. God's silence suggests to the speaker that he has not only gotten away with murder, but that he was *justified* in killing in the first place.

Taken in context, the poem might be suggesting the hypocrisy of the early-Victorian society in which Browning lived—a very religious world that seemed to outwardly condemn any inkling of moral deviance, and in which female sexuality was particularly restricted and controlled. Perhaps the poem is saying that an obsession with being "good" has come at the expense of *actually being good*—that is, of appreciating and valuing other people.

On the one hand, the early readers of the poem would likely have condemned Porphyria for embracing her own sexuality. On the other hand, they would have

own sexuality. On the other hand, they would have been titillated by the poem's violence and sensationalism. Browning manages to give them what they want: a very sexual, very titillating poem—that also punishes sexual freedom. The speaker's violence thus not only preserves Porphyria's sexual purity, it also preserves the reader's: since the poem punishes her for her sexuality, it gives the reader a kind of plausible deniability. In this way, the Victorian reader is just as hypocritical as the speaker, defending violence because it preserves a narrow notion of sexual purity.