

The Transgression of Victorian Beauty, Romance and Hypermasculinity within Browning's

Porphyria's Lover

In Robert Browning's poem, *Porphyria's Lover*, the narrative of the text follows a man murdering the presumed love of his life by strangling her with her own hair. Throughout the poem, Browning's use of dramatic lyricism and monologue, paired with his descriptive imagery of Porphyria's physique, expresses an attitude of hypermasculinity that is at odds with an image of hyperfemininity in its perceived state. Within the text, aspects of womanhood, such as beauty and affection are seen as methods of religious worship, but are also framed as desires of sin that deserve punishment. Within this close reading, I want to look at how the narrator of the poem frames himself as a Godlike figure weeding out a toxin within his life (Porphyria) and using his misinterpretation of her humanity (love) as a justification for her demise, as well as consider how Victorian perceptions of womanhood explain domestic dynamics within a modern context.

To commence, I want to take a look into the meaning of the word porphyria and how it plays into the poem's narrative of both beautiful but damning. In a historical and scientific context, porphyria is understood as two primary things; in medicine, it is a buildup of natural chemicals within the body that, if over expelled, can lead to severe heart problems and issues within our nervous system (Mayo Clinic 2020). This build up comes from a lack of heme production, which is a protein that aids red blood cells in the circulation of oxygen to the lungs and other parts of the human body. In ancient Greek, the word porphyria comes from the Greek word, porphura, which means purple. The meaning derives from a Phoenician shell used to dye the fabrics of royal families' garments purple and was used most commonly in language that determined the status of newborns within families of high status [being born purple] (Lane 2002). With this information contextualised, we see the literal word porphyria means both

something that is toxic but also elegant and beautiful. There is a subjectivity of the word's meaning (beauty) and an objectivity of its meaning (deadly) and is what makes Browning titling the poem's primary character after such a word all the more significant.

Throughout the poem, there is a heavy weight of masculine passion within the language Browning uses when the narrator describes Porphyria. When he refers to her as "pale", "little" and "perfectly pure" (Browning 28, 37, 40), it's clear he views her within a typical Victorian perception of womanhood, which is fragile and inconsequential to his own wants and desires. Her femininity is insignificant in regards to his masculinity and he asserts this fact from the start to justify murdering her as the poem progresses. This is most known in lines 31-36 where he misinterprets Porphyria's look of pure love and admiration as signs of worship, almost like he is God looking down on a creation He has made before punishing that creation for their wrongdoings; and he *does* see her as an object of possession when he says, "Porphyria worshipped me; surprise / Made my heart swell, and still it grew / While I debated what to do. / That moment she was mine, mine, [...]" (Browning lines 33-36). It is at this moment that the narrator decides Porphyria's beauty, and her very being, is an object of desire but also despair and that she needs to be punished for her actions; her actions of being beautiful, a woman, and a person in love. What's most interesting about how he frames her death is not his justification for it when he behaves as though killing her was his only option. Rather it is his assurance that she not only wanted to die but that she did not even feel it:

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.

(Browning lines 37-42)

Here, the narrator is separating Porphyria from her humanity and is misunderstanding her love as devotion. To the narrator, because he believes Porphyria worships him in life, this means she must worship him in death and is willing to prove this however she can. It is interesting how when the narrator says he wrapped her hair around her “little throat [...] / And strangled her” (lines 40-41), there is no description of her fighting back against this assault. He also notes that her eyes “laughed [...] without a stain” (45) which could be read as either Porphyria accepting her fate, submitting to her lover’s desires or the narrator being unable to acknowledge moments of her defiance to affirm his misinterpretation of her love as forms of worship.

This poem within a modern context allows for us to reconsider frameworks of abuse with domestic relationships and how a primary motivator for abuse is to overpower and to control. Abusers in many instances perceive their own existences in comparison to God and believe their lovers exist to devout, serve, and accept them unconditionally, even if their actions directly harm their partners. This poem also frames how in moments of helplessness, women are pushed into dynamics of subordination in which they have no will or strength to fight against the forces that are at odds with them (their partners) and are left with no choice but to do as their abusers expect; to devout, serve, and accept unconditionally.

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