

Porphyria's Lover

By Robert Browning

1836

A bit of info about 'Porphyria's Lover':

"Porphyria's Lover," which first appeared in the *Monthly Repository* in January 1836, is the earliest and most shocking of Robert Browning's dramatic monologues.

The poem's themes of **sex**, **violence**, and **madness** were of particular interest to Victorian readers, who reveled in sensational tales of horror and depravity despite societal condemnation of all things immoral, but Browning overturns normal expectations.



Listen/watch the recording of Robert Browning reading
the poem:

- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dSIIm1KYZ0_I

Read the poem 'Porphyria's Lover':

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 endeavor,
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!

Porphyria's Lover: understanding the language

| Word in the poem |
|------------------|
| sullen |
| vex |
| grate |
| endeavour |
| vainer |
| dissever |
| prevail |
| warily |
| tress |
| scorned |
| oped |
| utmost will |

TASK-
Match the word from the poem
to the 'meaning in context'

| Meaning in context |
|--------------------|
| fireplace |
| cut off |
| miserable, gloomy |
| annoy, upset |
| win |
| strand of hair |
| worldly |
| effort, attempt |
| cautiously |
| opened |
| greatest wish |
| despised |

The plot

Order the following events:

- A. Speaker and woman sit together
- B. Weather described
- C. Questions God's existence
- D. Woman arrives
- E. Speaker admires dead body/repositions her
- F. Cottage- setting described
- G. Speaker strangles woman by wrapping hair x3 around her neck

Answer these questions to assess understanding:

1. What is the significance of the opening description of the weather? What atmosphere is being created, and why do you think that is?
2. Porphyria is the speaker's lover. What type of woman is she? What evidence do you have to suggest this?
3. What effect does she have on the atmosphere of the cottage when she enters it?
4. Why do you think the narrator does not reply to his lover when she calls him? What does this suggest about him?
5. Sexual relationships out of wedlock were highly controversial during Victorian times. There was a marked prudery in the stories about affairs, prostitutes and unmarried mothers being published in the newspapers of the time. What evidence is there that this is sexual relationship?

Continue to answer these questions:

6. What reason does the narrator give for killing Porphyria? How does he do it? Has your impression of the narrator altered? How/why?
7. What does the narrator do with Porphyria's body after the murder, and why do you think that is? Explore the imagery and language used.
8. What has God got to do with "Porphyria's Lover"? What is the meaning of the last line, "And yet God has not said a word!"
9. Considering all of your work on this poem, what message / warning is Robert Browning trying to give the reader?
10. Critics are divided about why the speaker decides to murder Porphyria. Which of the following suggestions do you believe is MOST true? Find evidence to back up what you say.
 - A. The psychologically unstable speaker in the poem murders his lover in an attempt to preserve a perfect moment.
 - B. The speaker kills his lover in the poem because they are from different classes and he cannot bear to be apart from her.
 - C. The two characters in the poem are engaged in an act of erotic asphyxiation and Porphyria isn't murdered at all, but instead becomes temporarily unconscious after achieving an intense orgasm.
 - D. The male speaker in the poem might be impotent, disabled, sick, or otherwise inadequate, and, as such, unable to satisfy Porphyria, which is why he kills her instead.
 - E. She is suffering from an incurable disease and the speaker kills her out of kindness so that she doesn't have to suffer anymore.

Useful websites/revision guides to assist understanding:

SparkNotes:

- <https://www.sparknotes.com/poetry/browning/section1/>

Close analysis of the poem, line by line:

- <https://www.owleyes.org/text/porphyrias-lover-robert-browning/read/text-poem#>

LitCharts:

- <https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/robert-browning/porphyria-s-lover>

Further insight/reading:

Robert Browning's biography:

<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/rb/rbbio.html>

Porphyria disease:

<https://www.niddk.nih.gov/health-information/liver-disease/porphyria>