

Criminal or victim: an  
analysis of  
victimhood in  
'porphyria's lover' and  
'the lab...



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In the case of Robert Browning's two poems 'Porphyria's Lover' and 'The Laboratory', victimhood is complex - in 'Porphyria's Lover', the victim is very clearly Porphyria, but in the case of 'The Laboratory', whether there actually is a victim or not is much more debatable.

In 'Porphyria's Lover', the lover "strangled her", and in his way of killing her, she is undeniably the victim. However, in 'The Laboratory', no murder actually ever takes place. The entire poem is plotting, structured in quatrains with a regular rhyme scheme, and although this arguably emphasizes the narrator's intent on the murder as well as her calculation, there ends up being no actual victim of her crime - only intended ones. However, the narrator attempts to justify her actions and makes it appear as if she is a victim. "They believe my tears flow / while they laugh, laugh at me." The epizeuxis of "laugh" emphasizes not her malice, but that of her intended victims - and through this presentation it can be argued that the narrator of 'The Laboratory' is actually the true victim.

However, in the two texts, perhaps the suggested victims are not the only victims represented in the two poems. For example, in 'Porphyria's Lover', she "kneeled" to warm the cottage for her lover and Browning writes that "she loved me." The pronoun "she" is active, but "me" is passive as the love is not returned. When her lover murders her, she is left staring up at him in "worship", immortalized in her love. Since her lover is deviant (due to his criminal nature) but not in prison, but in isolation, he is likely from an upper-class family as in the Victorian era if an upper-class family had a deviant family member they could simply send them away to live in isolation. But the way Porphyria does everything for him implies she is like a servant, lower-

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class, and this is emphasized by how he kills her with her own “yellow” hair. Yellow typically connotes wealth as it is associated with gold, so in turn could suggest a connotation of the upper-class. Through this description Browning could be presenting how the bourgeoisie abuse the lower classes, and Porphyria becomes a victim of classist society, and Browning shows how lower classes are also victims to Victorian society.

Although the implied antagonist in ‘The Laboratory’ is plotting murder, she could hold some status of a victim. It is interesting that in ‘Porphyria’s Lover’, the lover, an upper-class male, is able to commit his crimes but the likely lower-class female narrator of ‘The Laboratory’ is unable to. This suggests that the narrator of ‘The Laboratory’ is unable to commit her crimes because she is a female in a patriarchal society, thus being completely powerless, and perhaps is a victim of class like Porphyria.

Although her criminality is undeniable, the fact that she is so easily betrayed by a man and replaced with other women emphasizes how she is a victim of her own patriarchal society; through this, Browning also suggests that it is women who are victims as they are at the hands of these patriarchal societies and so, contextually, would have been considered less than men.

Porphyria’s status as a victim is emphasized through her lover’s success in possessing her. It is ironic that the title of the poem is ‘Porphyria’s Lover’ as the possessive “-s” implies ownership whilst in the end it is Porphyria’s lover who ends up possessing her. Through killing her in her moment of “

worship”, she is objectified forever and is owned, in this sense, by her lover completely. However, in ‘The Laboratory’, there is no actual possession. The

narrator is unable to possess the men or the two women as she never kills  
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them. Although, her plotting is driven by the fact she is jealous; she no longer holds any ownership over the man and wants to do so again – and realizes the only way she can own him as well as get justice would be to kill him and the two other women, but she is restricted by her gender and class, shown through how she describes herself as a “ minion”. Her powerlessness is emphasized by how she goes to “ pray God in” – she has no power and can only rely on God – so she cannot possess him or the two women so they ultimately cannot be victims.

The psyche of the two narrators of their respective dramatic monologues complicates the idea of who the victim is. In late Victorian times, criminals were actually thought to be mentally ill as it was ridiculous to think that crimes could be committed by regular, sane people. So Browning presents both characters as mentally unstable – the narrator of ‘ Porphyria’s Lover’ is narcissistic and appears unstable, shown through the fact that in order to keep Porphyria’s lover forever, he murders her; he also sees her love as worship, which suggests he could likely be psychotic. In ‘ The Laboratory’, the narrator is obsessive – she is so dedicated to her plot through her obsessive mental state that she sees it as the only solution for justice. So in this way, both criminals are victims of their own psyches rather than a crime against them.

To conclude, in crime writing both criminals and victims are commonly present, but the line between criminal and victim can blur, shown through the presentation of supposed criminals and victims in Browning’s ‘ Porphyria’s Lover’ and ‘ The Laboratory’.