

Critical appreciation: porphyria's lover



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

“ Porphyria’s Lover” is a Victorian poem written by Robert Browning and narrates the occasion in which a man strangles his lover to death as consequence of his rather special outlook on love, action catalysed by the climaxed situation they were both engaged in.

The poem transmits an overall tone of honesty, as if it were a confession, factor clearly appreciated from the macabre detail in which the lyric voice describes the corpse: :” And I untightened next the tress/ About her neck: her cheek once more/ Blushed bright beneath my burning kiss” to the fact that we are being told the story the morning after, while the body is still lying on our narrator. This will help us understand the peculiar and unusual perspective Browning had on love and death.

The poem can be thematically separated into three sections, even though structurally the whole text corresponds to a single stanza, due to their content. The first section, the shortest one, describes the weather Porphyria is out before entering where her lover is. The second one narrates the encounter of the couple and the third one the actual killing and its aftermath. The first part commences “ The rain set early in tonight”, sentence which to a great extent sets the tone of the poem and reflects its future development.

This opening line suggests that that night is unusual for some reason, strengthened by the uncommon syntax of words making the inauspicious beginning proper for the rest of the poem, as the reader begins to bear in mind the negative tone of the text. Following, a description of the wind is read which supports the tone created in the first line and uses the

alliteration: “ sullen wind was soon awake”. The “ s” and “ w” sounds reflect the sonic quality of the blowing wind.

Even though it is clear that this initial section uses a pathetic fallacy mirroring the horrid events to come, it can be regarded as a reflection of the duality of love the lyric speaker feels, and love itself when we combine the nature of the weather to that of Porphyria. This interpretation will be further developed later on in the commentary. The section describes Porphyria's actions before being killed, which the first one being the entrance to the cottage: “ When in glided Porphyria”. This is important because we can extrapolate two connections with the description of the weather from this sentence.

Firstly, the word “ glided” evidently suggests the wind, additionally the unusual syntax of the first line is present here too. An interesting fact is that the wind or storm outside are no longer mentioned, it is as if Porphyria when shutting “ the cold out and storm” had also made the wind cease completely as if she were the element herself, this is, before she was in the cottage travelling in the fields the turmoil and violence was outside, once she is in, these same features are transported in with her. In any case she would be the source of alteration: “ rain early tonight” when out, and the perversion of love when in.

We can see that the poetic voice is extremely offended and tries to portray indifference to Porphyria, while secretly being very proud of her worship of him, this is, the setting of her “ struggling passion free/ From pride” ironically enough. Therefore we are faced with two different stances of pride, one for

each member of the couple, this once again demonstrating a certain dual quality of love in Browning's point of view. The actual chapter of her death conveys again entirely an image of dual state or nature. The lover is so desperate to retain Porphyria's love " forever" that the only way he could resolve to keep her was death.

Even though Love and death are two completely counterposed themes, Browning here juxtaposes them very effectively in what conveys the image of a necrophilic ritual. A certain " pleasure of death" is suggested in the line " As a shut bud that holds a bee" as if Porphyria's maximum ecstasy was to be killed in the arms of the man she worshipped. We also see that the lyric voice takes death quite light heartedly (" The smiling rosy head") as if were no further than a means for the couple to stay together, in the form of some sombre marriage. The overall structure and wording of the poem suggests duality in a myriad of different levels.

Firstly, as we said before, that the wind is a reflection of Porphyria, and given the constant references to her hair (which has a flowing quality; wind-like) we can say that her hair carries the same aggressiveness of the wind which " tore the elm-tops" thus portraying the duality of the love of the lyric voice (marriage in death) in two levels. On one hand her own beautiful hair is used to strangle herself and on the other, the wind which hurts the trees and " vexed the tress" came to become a victim of itself, therefore stressing the quality that love can and will hurt anyone who feels it and it may lead to hurt others " down for spite".

The opposing stances of pride in the two lovers also add to this dual disparity effect as the feelings of one are not congruent with what the other is expected to feel. Then again this makes emphasis on the one-sided nature of the love the lyric voice as it is a love which only receives (from the corpse oddly enough) but does not give in return because of the counterpart's condition. The structure of the poem also plays an important role in the duality interpretation.

The fact that the whole poem is a single stanza reflects in a solid form, being the frame upon which the poem is constructed, the unification and consolidation of two contradictive ideas such as death and love. Both qualities are contained upon a single frame and acts as the wider representation of this unification in terms of imagery, for example, the unification of hair as both a tool for inspiring love as well as for causing death.

Finally, this ultimate and awkward juxtaposition is truly what the poem tries to portray and communicate, expressing Browning's ideas of death as a final proof for love relying on the idea that the feeling was so " perfectly good and pure" that any further development would result in the decay of such love due to inherent human imperfection, thus opting to stop any further corruption by means of a blissful and ecstatic disappearance.