

Compare and
contrast the attitudes
of john donne and
robert browning
towards love...



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Love is shown in different ways, when contrasting John Donne's *The Apparition* and Robert Browning's *Porphyria's Lover*. *The Apparition* is shown clearly as a jealous and vengeful love, whereas *Porphyria's Lover* is based on jealousy and lust.

John Donne was one of the Metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century. He wrote primarily about love, emotion and spirituality in conjunction with religion (he was a Catholic Priest). Donne, in *The Apparition* is writing in both the present and the future tenses, as the apparition himself, the narrator, is a posthumous self.

The love shown in *The Apparition* is torn between jealous affection (hence the actual existence of the poem) and bitterness. Clearly, the poet and "O Murdresse" were lovers, but he claims his 'love is spent' (line 15).

The poem's structure is based on a sonnet, though it is subtly twisted. The classic sonnet form has 14 lines, uses iambic pentameter and uses either an ABBA CDDC EFFE GG or an ABAB CDCD EFEF GG rhyme scheme. In *The Apparition*, John Donne produces a poem that uses a hybrid of the two rhyme schemes. He also uses a majority of iambic pentameter lines; however he uses different metrical lines at times to emphasize the irregularity of his 'love'. For example, the extra unstressed syllable in line 15 emphasizes how uncomfortable the meaning of the words "Lest that preserve thee" is. This is helped by the following caesura that breaks up the rhythm even more.

Although the poem has 17 lines, 2 half lines just follow on from the line above and it ends with a triplet, GGG instead of a couplet. The twisting of the sonnet structure mirrors the quality of the love shown in the poem: just as
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Donne's "love is spent" and the tone is of hatred so the classic love poem structure is warped.

However the poem opens as a typical sonnet, a Renaissance love poem, where the poet says 'I am dying for my love of you' - "O murtheresse, I am dead". His jealousy becomes increasingly clear: "in worse armes shall see" (line 5) and "whose thou art then" (line 7). But his love is bitter and rejected ("murtheresse", "scorne"). There is also a sense of threat in the poem; the accumulation of the definite future in "When..." and "Then..." and "Will..." as if he were to do something horrid to the recipient, is a promised threat.

Donne also describes intimate, repulsive images; he describes her love for another man as 'Solicitation' (line 3) though it is clearly not the case. He also mentions that she is "fain'd vestal" - a sly insult. These bitter words just reinforce the fact that he is jealous. He describes intimate details about them in bed together and the post-coital tiredness: "being tyr'd before" (line 7). There is an awful suspense at the end of the poem, where the tone becomes even more bitter and his intentions, worse.

In all, Donne's *The Apparition* is a poem about jealousy, love, hatred and revenge. The love is a jealous and rejected one, and the rejected lover is out for revenge on the woman. The extreme evocative language makes this love an even morose and bitter, rejected love, and the vivid depiction of imagined haunting is very disturbing.

In contrast, *Porphyria's Lover* by Robert Browning is one of his dramatic monologues and is told as if it were a story, with Browning developing the

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narrator as 'the lover'. The poem has the frame of a simple alternate line rhyme scheme which has an extra fifth line added to jar: ABABB. By the effect of this we can see that possibly the love is disjointed along with this odd structure. Just as Donne twists the sonnet, Browning twists alternate rhyming lines.

At the beginning of the poem, the tone is set by the pathetic fallacy: the storm, yet we concentrate on what is happening in the house (the house makes it seem like a sanctuary from the weather). Browning personifies the wind and lake - "The rain set early in to-night, the sullen wind was soon awake". But when the stage turns to the cottage, with the log fire, the tone is somewhat warmer. When Porphyria enters he states that "she shut out the cold and the storm" and so the room was even warmer/brighter when she came in. "And, last, she sat down by my side And called me. When..." (line 14/15) - this is strong use of a caesura (full stop) and suddenly halts the rhythm of the poem. We wait for the narrator's answer along with Porphyria - it never comes. The affect of caesuras on the fluidity of the rhythm scheme is another addition to the warped structure of the poem.

In the first half of the poem the narrator is passive, and lets Porphyria be the 'dominant' character, but in the second half, the narrator suddenly becomes active, with Porphyria passive. We can see examples of his passivity when Porphyria enters the cottage and droops her long, wet, blonde hair onto him; it seems as though she is in control and he was letting her do this ("and let the damp hair fall, And last, she sat down by my side").

The narrator states that Porphyria 'murmured' to him how she loved him, that he turned to become the possessive one ("at last I knew Porphyria worshipped me"). At this point his love is triumphant and he thinks that he is a God to her. "Made my heart swell, and still it grew" makes a strong use of metaphors which say as each moment passes his love for her grows stronger in his heart; this is emphasised by the following alliteration: "Perfectly Pure" (line 37). The narrator suddenly strangles Porphyria because he wanted her to die "worshipping" him, because that made him happy. When he killed her there is another effective use of a caesura (line 41) - "...and strangled her,". This has totally broken up the rhythm of the poem and is used to shock, which Browning does very well.

Directly after that caesura, the narrator has doubts over whether Porphyria died feeling any pain - 'No pain felt she; I am quite sure she felt no pain'. He tries to reassure himself that she did not die feeling pain because he wanted her to die worshipping him, not feeling hatred because she was being strangled. Is this dying for love? Rather disgustingly, the narrator then performs an act of necrophilia upon newly dead corpse, as if it were okay to do so. He says in line 48 that "she blushed bright beneath my burning kiss" as if she were still alive.

The narrator then jumps to using the neuter tense to describe Porphyria - "so glad it has its utmost will". This love has now turned her into an object; it is dispassionate and impersonal and makes the 'love' even more disturbing. At line 52, the narrator uses an patronising tone "Her smiling little rosy head" as if he was saying she wanted to die in this moment of pure, perfect

love. Porphyria's Lover relates how, by strangling Porphyria with her own hair, the lover seized and preserved the moment of perfect intimacy when, pure and good, Porphyria left the world she could not forego for his sake, and came to him, for once conquered by her love. An inherent misgiving as to his action is intimated in the closing line of the poem. "God has not said a word"- he thinks that he is God and as he, the narrator, has said nothing in this poem, it is a rather comically smug end to a sick, twisted love poem.

Compared to Donne's The Apparition, Porphyria's Lover is not about revenge, yet there is still possessiveness for the lover: in Porphyria's Lover, as she is married and she is not willing to get a divorce. These are both very physically intimate poems, however, The Apparition develops more of a bitter love. They are both amoral poems, with Donne's intentions and Browning's necrophiliac undertones. The love in The Apparition is a different love to Porphyria's Lover, as it is a sad and bitter ("spent") love, with a disappointed lover, whereas Porphyria's Lover moves from a melancholic to a fulfilled love, with a dominant, if twisted and amoral lover.