

Robert Browning
"Porphyria's Lover"



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In Robert Browning's poem, "Porphyria's Lover," both the speaker and Porphyria desire to be the most dominant partner in their relationship. Porphyria, however, brings tension into their relationship when she constantly attempts to be the most dominant partner. As the tensions keep increasing, the speaker finds it hard to fulfill his role as a man. However, when Porphyria's weakness is brought to the speaker's attention, he attempts to take full advantage. In the beginning of the poem, Porphyria appears to be the most dominant partner. For example, when Porphyria enters the cottage, she becomes very active, while the speaker remains still: "She is active, he is passive; she is talkative, and he is silent; she comes in after being with many other people, while he sits alone and isolated in his cottage" (Hacht 152).

Obviously, Porphyria is the one in dominion. Annie Hacht also agrees that Porphyria "is clearly more in charge" (155). In addition, Porphyria feels she is able to control the speaker because she comes from a wealthy class: "The fact that she was at a 'gay feast' indicates that she is from the wealthy classes, and so she has a much higher social position than he (speaker)" (Hacht 155). The fact that Porphyria is wealthier in the relationship makes it difficult for the speaker to have complete control. Though Porphyria is in command, she also becomes very forceful: "She (Porphyria) put my arm around her waist / And made her smooth white shoulder bare / And all her yellow hair displaced / And, stooping, made my cheek lie there" (Browning 16-19).

Before Porphyria tries to seduce the speaker, she reveals her forcefulness and dominance in the relationship (Hacht 152). When Porphyria enters into

the cottage, in the beginning of the poem, her presence becomes forceful: "She shut the cold out and the storm" (Browning 7). Hacht also agrees that Porphyria's presence is also forceful as she enters the cottage. Even though Porphyria is the most active person in her relationship, she defeats her lover's need to feel like a man, which leads him to grief.

The speaker is in love with Porphyria; however, because she is so powerful in the relationship, the speaker becomes unable to fulfill his role as a man. Unable to demonstrate himself as a man, the speaker finds himself resentful: "The fact that the woman is more powerful in the relationship is contrary to the stereotype, and this may be the reason for the speaker's resentment" (Hacht 155). Even though Porphyria remains to have complete control over their relationship, he shows her weakness by expressing her love for the speaker: "Murmuring how she loved me—she / Too weak, for her heart to endeavor" (Browning 21-22). Hacht indicates, in the beginning, when Porphyria comes from "what she needed to do, she is weak and struggling, torn between the party's allure and coming through wind and rain to be with him" (155). However, when Porphyria compromises her dominance by showing her devotion, the speaker takes the opportunity to have total control.

By regaining control, and as a result his manhood, the speaker decides to kill Porphyria to preserve her love towards him forever: "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 had she felt" (Browning 37-41). Annie Hacht realizes that "[w]hen he (speaker) kills her, he finally reverses their roles so that he is in control"

(155). After the speaker kills Porphyria, he "feels his action is justified because he has captured . . . the beauty of their relationship" (Hacht 156).

As a result, the speaker willingly kills his lover, so he is able to control her and their relationship. In conclusion, in Robert Browning's poem "Porphyria's Lover" both lovers are captured in the power of having complete control. By providing Porphyria with dominance and the speaker with insanity, Browning helps the reader understand the consequences of an unstable relationship. Together the characters both fail to realize the destruction they put towards one another and their relationship.