

'porphyria's lover' and 'first love'



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The poet Robert Browning of 'Porphyria's Lover' and the writer of 'First Love', John Clare, both delve into the complexity of love in many ways, some similar and others contrasting.

The most apparent similarity is that both poems are written in the style of a monologue. Throughout these poems the reader is enlightened only to the man's perspective; therefore as a reader, we never encounter the woman's emotions and can only guess by analyzing the text of what these could be. Throughout the monologues both lovers' characteristics are revealed. In 'First Love' the reader encounters a man who is unthreatening and we experience the innocence of him falling in love for the first time. This contrasts with 'Porphyria's Lover' where the reader is subject to the mind of a lover who has a jealous and obsessive nature. The reader is immediately aware of this lover's obsessive character in the opening line.

The poet Robert Browning uses the imagery of a storm to imitate the lover's emotions. The violence of the storm 'tore the elm tops down for spite', warns the reader that his emotions are indeed negative and volatile. The use of personification is present when describing the storm. This is shown when the poet uses 'sullen wind' to convey his mood. The reader finds out that he is desperately yearning for Porphyria to be with him and he is frustrated that he has to be kept waiting for their assignation. The quotation 'I listened with a heart fit to break' confirms the sense of yearning and in effect gives the reader the impression that his love towards the woman is dark and obsessive, this creates a sense of foreboding.

Throughout the beginning, Robert Browning includes harsh sounding words for example 'spite' and 'vex'. This emphasises the man's mounting emotions for Porphyria. John Clare, on the other hand, uses soft sounding words in 'First Love.' The alliteration of the letter 'S' 'so sudden' and 'so sweet' establishes a sweet and innocent tone to the poem.

The sinister nature of the lover in 'Porphyria's Lover' is further developed. Robert Browning portrays this by allowing the character not to communicate with Porphyria, only to observe her whilst remaining motionless. His observation of her is meticulous and a bit unsettling for the reader. This is shown when he recalls what she does, 'kneeling and made the cheerless grate'. His focus on her is further emphasised by the structure of the words using a longer sentence to intensify the scene.

The result is that it gives the poem an eerie and disturbing tone which is carried on throughout. 'First Love' is similar in this aspect as the man is also watching the woman motionlessly 'my life and all seemed turned to clay', however unlike 'Porphyria's Lover' the man is physically unable to move as he is love struck. During this, nature in the form of trees and bushes act as a blurred backdrop, verse two, to accentuate the character's sole focus on the woman, 'trees and bushes round the place'. Similarly in 'Porphyria's Lover' the man is focused on Porphyria; however it is controlled and sinister.

After studying these two poems it is apparent that both women exert at some stage, power over the men. In 'Porphyria's Lover', Porphyria is in power at the beginning. This is known due to the impression given, that the man is forever waiting anxiously for his love to visit and then she is always

leaving him shortly thereafter, to return to her own peer group of higher social status. Robert Browning represents this when the lover bears her shoulder, 'made her smooth white shoulder bare', this shows that she possesses the power at the start of the poem; later on a shift in power occurs. By her death he acquires his longed for power, this is emphasised through the reversal of the earlier posture 'I propped her head up.

.. only this time my shoulder bore her head'. It also suggests that he recognises the power change and how he had been shackled by her power.

Similarly the woman in 'First Love', who like Porphyria does not speak, exerts a sense of power through her beauty which is particularly shown at the beginning of the poem. 'I n'er was struck before that hour', this shows that her beauty entranced him. However unlike the woman in 'Porphyria's Lover', the power remains with her to the end. One explanation for this is that both women were of higher social status. In 'Porphyria's Lover' the reader is aware of this superiority by the description of her garments.

Her 'soiled gloves' indicated that she belonged to a wealthy other man as gloves were an expensive item of clothing in the era portrayed. Porphyria could therefore never be with the lover as it would have been unacceptable to society in those days. In 'First Love' the man's love was also unrequited again possibly because of social status. The poet's use of imagery of the heart to convey the same idea of love does differ. In 'First Love' the heart is used symbolically.

It is first mentioned by stating 'stole my heart away complete', which is significant as it means that he has fallen in love. The writer continues to

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delve into the subject of love by further using the heart to symbolise the effects of which love beholds. This is particularly shown in line sixteen, 'blood burnt round my heart'; representing the passion of his love.

Contrasting to this, the poet Robert Browning uses the heart in a continuous battle with the mind of Porphyria, 'too weak, for all her heart's endeavour', this suggests that her heart wants to be with him but is overpowered by her mind, which he believes prevents her staying with him. The lover in this poem resolves the situation in a macabre way by killing her.

He justifies the killing as a solution to resolve her battle of the heart and mind, so that she can stay with him forever. 'So glad it has its utmost will... all it scorned at once is fled' this refers to the battle of the head and heart and by his actions the head which was ruling the heart, is defeated.

Further to this, his belief that the woman truly wanted them to be together 'she guessed not how her darling wish would be heard' vindicates the macabre way in which he settles the state of affairs, between him and Porphyria, once and for all. It confirms his madness to the reader. There is also evidence in the text that the killing was premeditated. This is revealed through the way Robert Browning wrote the poem.

In the first section of the poem the lover's intentions are inconsistent and confusing to the reader, portrayed by the text jumping abruptly from one subject to another in a broken rhythm of continuity, as shown throughout the first half 'did its worse to vex the lake: I listened with heart fit to break'. An inconsistency of describing weather then jumping abruptly to his emotions is displayed. However from the second part of the poem, the text is clearer and

more fluent. His emotions are more precise as he has decided to kill her. ' I found a thing to do', this shows he is in control of the situation. The way in which he kills her is also very precise.

' In one yellow string I wound...and strangled her'. It is obvious to the reader that he is at this point in complete control of his emotions as his thought process is cold and methodical and as a reader we find this chilling and disturbing. The tragic resolution featured in ' Porphyria's Lover' provides a marked contrast to that of ' First Love' where the man does not intervene but leaves to fate the outcome, when meeting with his love.

The situation is left to resolve itself and the consequence being, that his love is unrequited to his dismay, ' my heart has left its dwelling place' and he accepts the outcome even though he is deeply affected. Before these resolutions happened, the men in ' First love' and ' Porphyria's Lover' both experienced a moment of perfection. In ' First Love' this takes place from the start until line sixteen, ' my legs refused to walk away...what could I ail?' and ' my life and all seemed turned to clay'.

This describes the symptoms of experiencing love for the first time. He is so love struck he is unable to move and ' what could I ail?' suggests to the reader that the moment is so perfect that he wants for nothing else.

However the moment is soon lost. In ' Porphyria's Lover', the lover also captures a moment of perfection, ' happy and proud; at last I knew Porphyria worshipped me'. This gives the reader the impression that he is deluding himself as ' worshipped' is a very strong word to use.

The lover then kills Porphyria in an act to preserve this captured moment. Throughout both poems flowers are used as imagery however in very different scenarios. The image of the flower is used in 'Porphyria's Lover' in an unnatural way to describe him opening the eyes of a dead Porphyria. This simile 'as a shut bud which holds a bee' uses the flower which normally represents beauty to depict a horrific image therefore this turns the natural and pleasant image of flowers are associated upside down.

Similarly the flowers in 'First Love' are used in an unnatural way, 'are flowers the winters choice?' This use of a rhetorical question conveys in the poem a cold and sad image of love to the reader. Contrasting to this, in the same poem, the image of the flower is used in a pleasant way to describe the beauty of the woman. 'Her face it bloomed like a sweet flower,' emphasises her purity. Many differences occurred throughout both poems as Robert Browning and John Clare explored the different types of love. 'Porphyria's Lover' was based on an obsessive love and the poet explored the tragic consequences of this. Whereas in, 'First Love', John Clare explored the innocence of first love and how the outcome was left to fate and not manipulated.