

Porphyria's lover

Sociology



It would be easy to assume that women in Victorian England were treated badly. However, “ Porphyria's lover” suggests that his idea springs from society's control of women. At the start of the poem, Porphyria has freedom and control but as the piece progresses, it is clear that this freedom and control is curtailed by her lover who contains and incarcerates her through death. As a result it can be argued that Browning's purpose was to warn women that deviant behaviour would result in their incarceration.

The title “ Porphyria's lover” implies that the female holds a slightly dominant role; the poem is primarily about Porphyria when in fact it is staged from the perspective of the male narrator. This suggests that she is treated as an equal; that she has a freedom which was not permitted by a Victorian society. Also, Browning's purpose to treat Porphyria as an equal was by naming the male narrator as the “ lover. ” By doing this, the audience is presented with the idea that the male is secondary in the poem. However, as the piece progresses, it becomes clear that the lover becomes the protagonist character.

Therefore, the reader is able to predict Porphyria is treated with power and independence. Initially, the reader's hypothesis is correct. There is a sense of freeness as she has the licence to do what she wants; Porphyria “ made the cheerless grate blaze up” and “ shut the cold out and the storm. ” The closing out of the bad weather suggests that the door is closed against a raging society and it also insinuates that they share an intimate relationship. This would have had an effect on a Victorian reader as a relationship between a man and woman was based upon wealth and status.

Furthermore, Porphyria then “ sat down by [his] side,” which symbolically suggests that she is an equal which contrasts to men’s beliefs in the Victorian era as they believed it was a woman’s role to be lower than the males. Therefore, Porphyria experiences equality but is soon brought back within the constraints of society. Moreover, Porphyria is treated with disdain by her lover as she bores her “ smooth white shoulder,” even though she is overtly seducing him, as “ no voice replied” which insinuates his discomfort with her as she is taking his role.

Porphyria then symbolises her power by letting her “ damp hair fall,” which indicates that Porphyria is in danger of becoming a fallen women as she is having sex out of wedlock. What is more shocking is that Porphyria angles her lover’s posture by putting his “ arm about her waist. ” This flirtatious language is the foundation of Porphyria’s methods of captivation as she wants him to embrace her. There is a chance that Browning purposely added this information into his poem to show that women are irresponsible with power.

Therefore, even though Porphyria is beginning to be treated like a fallen women, her lover still treats her with compassion as he sits passively while she manoeuvres his body. In addition, Porphyria’s role as the dominant character ends as her lover realises that she “ worshipped [him],” which suggests that he feels a sense of relief as he realises she is totally in his possession. The narrator then claims that Porphyria was “ mine, mine” which deduces that he wants to preserve and keep his love in this perfect instant because he realises that she will give into society’s pressures.

The narrator uses possessive language which restores his masculinity and therefore his control over the situation. Therefore, even though Porphyria has stopped being treated with love she is treated horribly as he selfishly kills her. Afterwards, Porphyria begins to be physically manipulated by the speaker as he animates her actions. The balance of power shifts as he associates himself with action while she lies passively. He uses vegetative imagery to describe Porphyria which accentuates his total dominance over Porphyria.

He holds her “ smiling rosy little head” as one would hold a rosebud, totally encasing its beauty. As a result, Porphyria is physically treated horribly as her lover toys with her body. As the above shows, the treatment towards Porphyria evolves from her freedom of thought and movement to being subjugated by her lover. It could be argued that Browning's message to the reader was to warn women that deviant behaviour would result in their incarceration.