

Porphyrias lover essay sample



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Like 'My Last Duchess', this poem is an example of a dramatic monologue – a poem in which the impression the speaker unwittingly gives is rather different from the picture they intend to present. Initially, the poem appears to be built around a contrast between the storm outside and the cosy domestic scene within the cottage that Porphyria and her lover share. But there are unsettling notes from the very start – the storm is strangely personified in terms of sullenness, 'spite' and anger, and the speaker is for some reason so moved by it that his heart is 'fit to break' (5), while – on the other hand – when Porphyria arrives, he is entirely passive and all but emotionless. A psychological reading of the poem would suggest that the lover is suppressing his own unbearable feelings of violent jealousy here, and unconsciously projecting them instead – in a pathetic fallacy – on to the weather outside. The poem repeatedly focuses on purity of various kinds. First, Porphyria lays aside clothing that is 'dripping' (11) or 'soiled' (12) and instead reveals a 'smooth white shoulder' (17). Second, in the speaker's eyes she has laid aside for now weakness (22), pride (24) and vanity (24) – all words with a specifically moral dimension – to become instead 'perfectly pure and good' (37).

It is to preserve this physical and moral purity, as he sees it (and indeed the two dimensions are combined in his reference to her as 'fair' (36) – of complexion and of character), that he strangles her. Although the word comes as a surprise, at the very end of a six-line sentence as long and winding as the hair with which he does the deed, there have been hints at something amiss: not only in the speaker's strange passivity (a striking contrast with the animation with which he describes the night to the reader)

but also in his vocabulary, which is the language of Victorian moralising – ‘soiled’, ‘weak’, ‘endeavour’, ‘struggling passion’, ‘set... free from pride’, ‘vainer ties dissever’, ‘all in vain’ – rather than passionate love. The use of the word ‘debated’ (35) is a particularly chilly and calculated one with to describe his decision to strangle her. Her hair, moreover – which so fascinates him (he refers to it on five separate occasions) – is always ‘yellow’: symbolically this is the traditional colour of death, but – more to the point – the unattractiveness of its connotations relative to ‘blonde’, a word he could easily have substituted, perhaps unconsciously reveals something of his true suppressed feelings.

The paradoxes that Porphyria’s lover destroys her precisely because she was at that moment ‘fair,/ Perfectly pure and good’ (36 37) rather than in spite of this, and that he destroys her in order to preserve her in this state serve to reinforce our growing sense that the speaker is in fact deranged rather than – as Browning’s Duke might be seen – chillingly in control. The bizarrely moralising language, the emphasis on purity, and – above all – the fetishizing of her hair, which at one point he has her spread across his face (20), all further contribute to this impression. The repetitions of ‘mine, mine’ (36) and ‘no pain felt she;/ I am quite sure she felt no pain’ (41-42) suggest what is most important to him – to possess her for himself (rather than sharing her with her husband) while reassuring himself that he has done no wrong. But the simile comparing each closed eye to ‘a shut bud that holds a bee’ (43) is a psychologically disturbing one, and the wary opening (44) seems designed to avoid a sting rather than to express a tender intimacy.

Despite the implicit relief in his apparent ability to bring her back, in his mind's eye, to life, the defiant exclamation of the final line perhaps suggests that he does not expect to get away with it for ever. Paradoxically, Porphyria is presented by the speaker as more alive than she ever was when living – a paradox which maintains our sense of his derangement. Where once she merely 'murmur[ed]' (21), now her blue eyes 'laugh... without a stain' (45); instead of the somewhat marmoreal 'smooth white shoulder bare' (17), we now have a cheek 'blushed bright beneath [a] burning kiss' (48); and in the space of nine lines the 'shut bud' (43) has developed into a 'smiling rosy little head' (52), as if Porphyria is a flower at last in bloom. It is at the end of line 51 that we get a second sudden revelation – the first being her death – that forces us to re-evaluate our picture of the lover: that she is propped up beside him as he speaks to us.

If anything, this increases our horror, particularly as so important a piece of information has been so casually delayed by the speaker and for so long. A comparison with our earlier picture of the couple is interesting: once she brought him, entirely passive, to rest on her 'smooth white shoulder bare' (17) – frequently used by Victorians as a euphemism for the breasts, and clearly an erotic detail for him – before covering the submissive lover with her hair; now instead it is his shoulder that bears her head. There is a second, similar shift in power: once he was entirely silent; now his voice is the only one heard. But disingenuously the speaker suggests that it is Porphyria who has gained her 'utmost will' (53) rather than him, and that it is Porphyria who has gained him (55) rather than he her; this can be read either as a determined and intellectually dishonest evasion of his

responsibility for her death by making her seem the active participant or as a reflection of the curious passivity which has characterised him throughout, and which continues to be evident in the final three lines, in which he simply sits with her.

Indeed, one common psychological reading sees ‘Porphyria’s Lover’ as a study in impotence, in which the speaker resorts to physical violence to achieve a union that he cannot achieve sexually, his intimate moments with her being characterised by her domination of him. Certainly, it is only after he has killed her that he is able to refer to the two of them as a couple – the pronoun ‘we’ is used for the first time only in line 58 – but the anti-climax of the final three lines, and the sexlessness of the picture of them merely sitting together and not stirring (58-59), suggests the lack of consummation in such intimacy. Indeed, his final thought is not with his lover at all but with God. The poem need not be read in this way, however, and is usually seen as a study in jealous possessiveness, and of the destructiveness of such an emotion, which Browning symbolises in the literal destruction of Porphyria by her lover and his literal possession of her corpse.

But it is the progressive revelation of the derangement underlying apparent mere jealous possessiveness that is most engaging, and in the last few lines this reaches its grotesque zenith: first, in the ambiguity of how ‘she guessed not how/ Her darling one wish would be heard’ (56-57) which apparently suggests the speaker’s deluded pride at surprising Porphyria and making her ‘wish’ come true, but which also has an undercurrent of grotesque gloating at how she never could have guessed the perverse way in which it did come true; and second, in the final line which takes the monstrous egotism of the

speaker to its final conclusion as he imagines his action is worthy of notice from God himself.