

**Choose a poem on the subject of love.**

**Show how the poet treats the subject and explain to what extent you find the treatment convincing.**

“Porphyria’s Lover” by Robert Browning is a poem which deals with the subject of love. However, unlike most of his Victorian contemporaries, Browning wished to challenge the perceptions of his readers, in this case having the speaker of poem driven increasingly mad by his obsessive love for Porphyria. The reader witnesses the speaker’s obsession growing throughout the poem, from sitting in the cold and dark awaiting Porphyria’s arrival, his manipulative behaviour towards her, his desire for more than love from her and his eventual need to possess her. Browning’s skilful use of word choice and imagery throughout the monologue encourages the reader to consider some of the darker consequences of an obsessive love.

The scene is set in the first four lines of the poem. The speaker sits alone in his cottage by a lake while a storm rages outside. Browning uses pathetic fallacy in these lines, using the weather to reflect the inner torment the speaker is experiencing. The description of the “sullen wind” trying to “vex” the lake establishes the mood of the speaker. He is clearly upset at the fact Porphyria has not yet come to meet him. While the speaker’s feelings may be understandable at this point, the reader is warned about the violent consequences of the speaker’s love. Words like “tore” and “spite” suggest the anger and aggression also brewing within the speaker and foreshadow the tragic events of later in the poem. The speaker’s negative emotions, reflected by the storm raging outside, are not what the reader would expect given his love for Porphyria.

When Porphyria does arrive the mood of the poem changes dramatically. Her very presence brings about a dramatic change in mood in the speaker, no longer upset and angry but cheerful and warm. However, it is not long before the reader can see a manipulative side to the speaker’s behaviour.

And, last, she sat down by my side  
And called me. When no voice replied,  
She put my arm about her waist,

The parenthesis of the word “last” effectively suggests the speaker’s feeling of neglect at this part of the poem. He feels that Porphyria has deliberately ignored him while she lit a fire, brightened the cottage and took her sodden outdoor clothes off. The repetitive structure of the list of things Porphyria does when she enters the cabin culminates in her going to the speaker. However, the separation of the word “last” suggests that the speaker feels she has deliberately been ignoring him and he is her last priority. He does not respond to her call and it appears that she begins to take control by physically manoeuvring him and suggestively baring her shoulder. However, he is exerting power over her, making her come to him by being silent and moody. This reveals to the reader how the speaker’s obsessive love is evolving into a desire to control Porphyria’s every move.

His obsessive love and wish to control Porphyria continues to permeate the poem. As the poem continues, the speaker debates Porphyria’s commitment to him, concluding that her perception of how she appears in society is keeping them from being together. His obsession for her is becoming a need to possess her.

And give herself to me forever

Browning’s word choice clearly indicates the subtle change in the attitude of the speaker, from his obsession and desire to be with her to the much more sinister need to possess her. The use of the phrase “give herself” subtly highlights the speaker’s feelings of inadequacy and emasculation. He lacks control in the relationship as Porphyria is from a higher social class than he is. By surrendering herself to him, he feels he would be able to secure the power in the relationship and control her. The finality of the word “forever” is a startling suggestion to the violent ends the speaker will go to in order to possess Porphyria. This need to possess Porphyria demonstrates to the reader the dangerous effects of obsessive love.

The speaker’s obsession for Porphyria begins to skew his perception of events and reality so that he only sees things as he wishes them to be. The speaker, believing that Porphyria now worships him, begins to see her as a possession. Browning uses word choice and repetition to express the speaker’s delusion about their situation.

That moment she was mine, mine, fair,  
Perfectly pure and good

The repetition of “mine, mine” emphasises how important it is to the speaker for him to feel like Porphyria belongs to him. He has felt throughout that he lacks control in the relationship due to his inferior social status but has now convinced himself that he possesses Porphyria. The choice of words like, “fair,” “Perfectly pure,” and “good” all have connotations of innocence and perfection strengthening the idea that the speaker is deluded, as these are not the words Victorian society would use to describe an adulteress such as Porphyria. These delusions on the part of the speaker confirms the dangerous consequences of an obsessive love. The speaker now feels that Porphyria is a possession and he will go to any lengths to preserve this feeling.

As the poem reaches its climactic moment, the reader can see the dire consequences of obsessive love. The speaker finally has what he has wanted all along - to be loved unreservedly by Porphyria. He feels he must preserve this feeling and the only way he is able to do it is to kill her. Browning uses a number of devices to ensure that murder is a shocking development for the reader.

In one long yellow string I wound  
Three times her little throat around  
And strangled her.

The repetitive rhyme and meter of the poem lulls the reader into a false sense of security. The playful rhyme here is in stark contrast to the sinister and brutal action taking place. Browning uses inversion powerfully to delay the realisation for the reader of what is going on. The fact that Porphyria’s throat - the object the speaker is wrapping her hair around - is put at the end of the sentence powerfully shocks the reader with something unexpected. The use of enjambment, putting “And strangled her” onto the next line delivers the final shocking blow to the unsuspecting reader. The way this heinous act is so simply stated by the speaker confirms for the reader that he has been driven to insanity by his obsessive love for Porphyria.

As the poem reaches its conclusion, Browning further emphasises the insanity of the speaker as a result of his obsessive love for Porphyria through his attempts to justify his actions. The poem ends with an emphatic statement by the speaker challenging God to

judge him for his actions. In the twisted eyes of the speaker, the fact that God has not judged him is further evidence that he has done nothing wrong.

And yet God has not said a word!

The use of the exclamation mark here to finish the poem demonstrates the total and unwavering belief of the speaker that he has done the right thing. He views the fact that he has not yet been judged by God as the final justification for his actions. There is a defiant tone to this final statement, the speaker clearly challenging the reader about their beliefs of right and wrong. Browning wanted to challenge his Victorian reader to judge who was more in the wrong – the upper-class adulteress or her insane lover who murders her. The ambiguity of the poem's closing line is clearly designed to challenge the reader to make that decision. It also confirms for the reader the dangers and the consequences of a love which is obsessive.

“Porphyria’s Lover” by Robert Browning is a poem which deals with the subject of love, as the reader sees the speaker of poem driven increasingly mad by his obsessive love for Porphyria. Browning’s detailed characterisation of the speaker allows the reader to see the subtle changes in his personality and his growing obsession for Porphyria. Browning clearly demonstrates how the speaker’s feelings of obsessive love lead him to want to control Porphyria, which in turn becomes the desire to possess her. His feelings of obsession become more destructive when in order to possess her he decides to murder her. Finally the reader sees the tragedy of his obsession as the speaker justifies his actions demonstrating to the reader the dark consequences of an obsessive love.