

## EXPLORING HOMOSEXUALITY IN BROWNING'S 'PORPHYRIA'S LOVER'

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### Abstract

*'Porphyria's Lover' was published, along with a not her poem, under the title Madhouse Cells. It is about two lovers and their meeting. It is about Porphyria and her lover. Going through the poem suggests that Porphyria's lover is a female. As the poem was published in Victorian Era, it was not a great matter to be rich as Victorian Age records a period of economic expansion and rapid changes. So financial status wasn't the matter to worry about for a person. But Victorian values were hard to change. Homosexuality was a taboo and it was considered a crime. Christianity also considers it a sin. Homosexuals were considered mad and sent to asylum for cure. It is important to note that the poem was published under the title Madhouse Cells. This poem speaks not only about class difference, but also mental illness, inferiority complex, suppression and narcissistic behaviour. Porphyria's lover kills Porphyria in the end and justifies her act narcissistically. Porphyria's coming to her place shows some kind of awkwardness, if there is a gap between them. Either because Porphyria Is Not Loyal To Her Or the lover feels inferior to Porphyria from the perspective of Class. This is just an apparent meaning of the poem. This paper critically reads the poem with homosexual perspective and deeply examines the psyche of both Porphyria and the lover. Browning's works mostly stand out for his different characters and the psychological phenomenon related to them.*

**Keywords :** *Homosexuality, Victorian Age, Stereotype, Society, Beloved, Human Psyche*

This short dramatic monologue begins with the description of a stormy night. It is raining and the wind is gloomy. The lover gets a sort of fit while listening to the wind. And in such unfriendly weather, Porphyria manages to come. It shows that their romantic rendezvous is not random. They have something very serious and predetermined. Porphyria has a deep purpose to reach to her lover anyhow.

When Porphyria arrives, her presence makes the atmosphere warm and bright for her lover. Without talking to each other or even greeting each other, Porphyria goes and lights the fire. This can happen only when there is awkwardness between lovers and one makes himself busy to avoid interaction, out of nervousness. But finally, this awkwardness breaks. Porphyria sits beside her love, with her hair all wet.

If Porphyria's lover was a man, then her taking off the cloak must have created a sort of sexual tension or shyness, but it doesn't happen. Awkwardness and shyness could be with a woman also, but the fact is, a female is most comfortable in the presence of a female only. There is always a sort of discomfort and awkwardness between different sexes. This kind of awkwardness is lacking definitely because, the lover was a female. The notion that only women can understand other women, even homosexual women, is refuted by Jones, de Saussure, Socarides etc.

The way Porphyria's lover talks about the lover's white skin and yellow hair, shows that she is different from her. Porphyria's lover could be a black man or a black woman, that's why he/she feels inferior. Though being black skinned should not be the matter to feel inferior at all, but the time, this poem was published, a person belonging to the 'black race' was considered ugly. Porphyria's lover is most probably a black woman, because in the most censorious way, Browning rebelliously drew a lesbian love affair between different races. It reminds me of Othello and Desdemona, Desdemona's pale white skin and golden hair, and Othello's aggression, doubts, and inferiority that made him kill the innocent Desdemona.

Later on, in the poem, Porphyria tells her lover that she loves her, hearing such sweet statement from a lover, it is a matter to be on the cloud nine. But instead, her lover gets a nightmarish feeling and thinks to free Porphyria from such struggle. The struggle against the Victorian heterosexual society that thought loving a same sex was a crime.

“From pride, and vainer ties dissever  
And give her self to me forever.”

These lines indicate Porphyria's dishonesty but when we read the poem further, the lines:

“For love of her, and all in vain  
Happy, and proud; at last I knew

Porphyria worshipped me” indicate the pride she talks about is not the pride Porphyria has for belonging to a superior class but she is proud of her lover and she kind of worships her too. She says ‘all in vain’ to Porphyria's love and her pride on her love, because it was impossible for them to stay together.

It shows as if Porphyria is optimistic and lives in a Utopian world, believing in their love life and a perfect future with her lover, they might stay together forever, get married, have children or just be in love as if it is no crime but her lover knows the harsh reality and upcoming tortures that they may have to face because of their ‘immoral and unnatural’ relationship.

Her lover knows that Victorian society would never allow them to be together and Porphyria won't be with her in future; and out of uncertainty, insecurity, immense love, she thinks of making Porphyria's life less miserable; as a horrifying future is waiting for them already, she makes her love immortal by killing her at the moment she lover's her most.

This thought of killing her might not be sudden also, because this is what Porphyria wanted and she had already made up her mind to die in her lover's arms to feel it forever, and that's why she came through the negative stormy weather, and did not even resist for once while being strangled. She was happy dying in her lovers arms.

“So glad it has its utmost will”

This line shows that Porphyria wanted to die this way and her beloved made her wish come true. In the end, her lover is sitting with Porphyria's corpse. It is such a melancholic and tragic end if we see it as a homosexual poem. She clings to Porphyria's body as if it was immortal and had life, this is where ‘insanity’ comes in the poem.

Love was not the crime she made, but to save themselves from the so-called crime, a criminal and insane was made in the 'Madhouse Cells'. The last line is a sharp satire to Christianity, that called their love a sin, a crime, and when the crime was done, when Porphyria was killed, "God did not utter a word". No God came up to save the soul, to stop the crime from being done.

This was the positive perspective of Porphyria's lover but as a negative character, the way her lover murders her, shows violence that comes out of frustration. And the frustration is a result of not coming out as a person you are, or not having the guts to come out of the closet because obviously society will not allow. Porphyria was proud of her love but her lover's opinion on their relationship is not clear. So perhaps, her lover was violent, frustrated, had narcissistic behaviour, and this was leading her to insanity.

Elaine V. Siegel in her Psychoanalytic Study "Female Homosexuality: Choice Without Volition" talks about how homosexuality in a woman leads to her narcissist behaviour and its deviations, ego development, suicidal thoughts, inner guilt and psychosis. In her study, she speaks about 'Ferdinand de Saussure's theory on lesbianism that homosexual fixation in women corresponds with the patient's projections. A woman can project her femininity onto another woman, who is a mother substitute. She may become excessively narcissistic because she is thwarted in her own femininity and wishes to be mirrored by another woman, or she may choose as an ideal, an aggressive woman, just like the case of Porphyria in the poem.

By killing Porphyria in the end, by her own lover, Browning indicated on how Victorian society and values were vanishing love and peace among people. Sodomy became a civil offence, punishable by death in 1533 and remained a capital offence in England until 1828. Act against Sodomy, The Social Purity Movement 1880, Gross Indecencies, and Section 11 of the criminal law Amendment act that Oscar Wilde was accused to have violated, remained in England till 1967. In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association decided that homosexuality should no longer be classified as a mental disorder. If such laws didn't exist no Porphyria would have died, no elephant could be found hidden in the Lihaf or no Jack Twist would have killed in the Brokeback Mountain.

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