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### Porphyria Was Playing Dead

Published in 1842, Robert Browning's "Porphyria's Lover" is a classic allegory written with a maintained rhyme and meter of ABABB pattern in "a narrative that exists on at least two levels simultaneously, a concrete literal level and a second level of abstract meaning" (Gwynn 433). In the poem, Porphyria's lover, who wanted to seize and immortalize the moment when Porphyria admits her perfect love for him, supposedly strangles her. After performing the dirty deed by wrapping her hair about her neck, he believes Porphyria is peaceful and beautiful in death. He has achieved his goal to preserve that true moment of absolute love. On the other hand, it is easy to see that she was mocking both the lover and, death, by pretending to be dead, and waiting for the right moment to preserve and immortalize *him* because . . . Porphyria was a vampire.

To begin with, the name "Porphyria" is equated with a rare blood disease associated with vampirism. Could Browning have know of this meaning and associated it in Porphria's character? "People with this condition cannot produce *heme*, an essential component of red blood. The disorder causes photosensitivity which is over sensitivity to sunlight" (Bradley). Legend tells us that vampires are never seen in daylight and only come out at night. The condition "porphyria" is now remedied with blood injections whereas, vampires of old had to get their remedy the good old-fashioned way, in the darkest of night by sucking the blood of another human rendering them immortal stalkers of the night. In J.T. Best's analysis of the poem he writes, "I respectfully submit that, early on, a link in the chain of reasoning was somehow missed and the path leading to a proper conclusion regarding that the strangulation went undiscovered. Consequently, a commonly acceptable analysis regarding the motive behind Porphyria's death has labored under a false image for well over a century" (Best). The vampirism theory appears to shed new light on this dark tale.

Right from the start of the poem Browning sets a mystically ominous tone with hints of evil events to come. He sets the mood making nature come alive in frenzy with anticipation of Porphyria's arrival.

“The rain set early in tonight /  
     The sullen wind was soon awake, /  
 It tore the elm- tops down for spite,  
     And did it's worst to vex the lake:  
 I listened with heart fit to break.” (1-5)

It was not commonplace for a young lady to be out and about on such a stormy evening, and her coming on such a night indicates a sense of urgency. Note that Porphyria arrives on this dark and tempest night and “glided in”(6) implying there was something mysterious and magical about her:

“She shut the cold out and the storm/  
 And kneeled and made the cheerless grate/  
     Blaze up, and all the cottage warm”. (7-8)

Charismatically, she changes the atmosphere and attitude in the cozy cottage to one of mystery and foreboding. He is so under her spell, he can't even respond when called to. Note also that the lover's rendezvous in the secluded cottage suggests something is hidden and they can't meet publicly or in the daytime. Pensively, Porphyria begins her seduction:

“She put my arm about her waist, /  
     And made her smooth white shoulder bare, /  
 And all her yellow hair displaced, /  
     And, stooping, made my check lie there, /  
     And spread, o'er all, her yellow hair.” (16-20)

Professing her true, undying love for him made her more irresistible yet somehow threatening to him. The lover, so enthralled by and proud of his conquest over her, debates what he should do with this rapturous moment and thinks:

“A sudden thought of one so pale /

For love of her, and all in vain” (28-29)  
 “Made my heart swell, and still it grew /  
 While I debated what to do.” (35-36)

Entranced with Porphyria’s power of presence and intimidated by her bold seduction he resorts to murder, because he thinks that there will never be another perfect moment of love in his life such as this. Believing that he has given her peace and comfort in death, he begins to admire what he thinks is her corpse. Ironically, he fondles what he once loved and has killed; he doesn’t realize that he is juxtaposing that she is alive in death. Unfortunately, he neglects to pay attention to a few important details like the fact that Porphyria still has the “laughing blue eyes without a stain” (45), and “blushed bright cheeks beneath his burning kiss”(48) and “the smiling rosy little head so glad it has it’s utmost will”(52) also suggesting that she has not met her demise at his hands. Vampires are notorious for being very patient killers that can suspend their bodies into an animated state and wait for the right moment or opportunity to strike. Why should Porphyria take this one human moment of victory away from him so quickly knowing that they will have all of eternity? Let him think he has the power momentarily, even let him think that he might get away with murder.

“And all night long we have not stirred. /  
 And yet God has not said a word!” (59-60)

If he believes he has, he’s got another thing coming. Porphyria can wait for her moment; she has all the time in the world. In addition, God would have nothing to say about it because what is really happening here is pure evil. Murder, suicide and immortality are not part of God’s plan for humanity. The lover’s comeuppance is right around the corner or on the next page of Porphyria’s diary and she will choose when to claim his future. Porphyria might not have known what the lover’s ulterior motives were that night, but then nor did he, of her motives.

Companionship in death, immortality and eternal love were what prompted Porphyria’s motivations of false death. She was patiently waiting for the moment to suck the life out of the lover, and inject the venom of her love for him for all eternity at her convenience. The lover, obviously weak or possibly mad, never had a chance and maybe

Porphyria felt love and pity for him at the same time allowing him his moment of mastery in his own mind's eye. What a calculating, clever and cunning vampire Porphyria was! In the end her "utmost will" (53) – will be done.

#### Works Cited

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