“Porphyria’s Lover” is a Victorian poem written by Robert Browning. The poem was originally published in 1836 in the Monthly Repository under the title “Porphyria,” and then republished in 1842 in a book called Dramatic Lyrics alongside another of Browning’s poems, “Johannes Agricola in Meditation.” The 1842 publication titled the two poems together as “Madhouse Cells.” It wasn’t until 1863 that the poem was given the title that we now use, “Porphyria’s Lover” (Porphyria’s Lover). “Porphyria’s Lover” is widely accepted as being read through the eyes of a psychotic killer. Although this is definitely an accurate reading, the lover of Porphyria is not an unknown second human in the room. The text itself, with a little medical knowledge, will prove that the poem is actually about a woman suffering from a rare blood disease called porphyria and it is she, not a psychotic killer, who is the disease’s lover. An explanation of how this poem could possibly be read through the eyes of the disease itself will entail four main ideas: the original title changes are extremely significant; symptoms of porphyria are hidden within the lines of the poem; what the sufferer believes she is seeing are actually a hallucination caused by this rare and toxic disorder; and the reference to her still being alive can be proven within the text.

A part of any literature that should not be ignored is the title. At times, it is even necessary to look back at previous titles that were used in various publications for a given text. The fact that Browning’s poem was originally titled “Porphyria” leads to the thought that the poem does, in fact, center on the disease itself. To further that thought, the poem was then published under the title “Madhouse Cells,” which can have a dual meaning. Many read into this as an allusion to the “mad” killer who takes Porphyria’s life, when it should be read differently. The word “madhouse” alludes to the fact that porphyria causes paresis, or “mental changes [including] gradual deterioration of personality, impaired concentration and judgment, delusions, loss of memory, disorientation, and apathy or violent rages” (Encyclopedia Britanica). In Browning’s time, people suffering from these mental problems would be found in insane asylums, also known as madhouses. The word “cells” alludes to the fact that porphyria is a blood disorder, targeting red blood cells and, in some instances, skin cells. With this in mind, it seems that settling on the title “Porphyria’s Lover” leaves it just ambiguous enough to allow the reader certain indeterminacies.

Equally as important is the use of certain words within the poem. These choice words not only emphasize the blood disorder, but to also state that the main character is, in fact, still alive in the end. To illustrate this point one must read the poem stanza by stanza in order to grasp what is being conveyed.

“The rain set early in tonight,
The sullen wind was soon awake,
It tore the elm-tops down for spite,
And did its worst to vex the lake:
I listened with heart fit to break” (Browning 1252).
Using words like “rain,” “sullen,” “tore,” “worst,” and “break” set a somber mood as well as exemplify words one would use for depression. Mental breakdowns often lead to depression for the sufferer. Using terms like “set early in tonight,” “was soon awake,” and “did its worst to vex,” are used to explain that the hallucinations are occurring earlier than normal, which is vexing, and the woman is suffering from insomnia, since “insomnia is often an early symptom [of porphyria]” (Acute Intermittent Porphyria). It isn’t until line five that Browning introduces the heart, which is typically associated with blood. Along the same lines, “with a heart fit to break” should be read as the sufferer’s mind “breaking” from reality.

To keep with the same theme, lines 21-24 continue to keep the heart and blood within the context of the poem.

“Murmuring how she loved me – she
Too weak, for all her heart’s endeavor,
To set its struggling passion free
From pride, and vainer ties dissever” (Browning 1252).

Using the words “murmur,” “weak,” “heart,” “struggling,” and “vainer” accentuates porphyria. Palpitations are a result of increased heart rate in porphyria sufferers, which would cause a murmur. Weakness is common, causing mental and physical struggles (Acute Intermittent Porphyria). The word “vainer” means futile, as in it is useless trying to cope with such a horrible problem. “Dissever” is also an important word because the woman is divided between reality and hallucinations.

As mentioned earlier, a side effect of porphyria is paresis. This is a significant fact to correctly interpret this poem. “When glided in Porphyria” (Browning 1252), the word glided is a huge clue as to what is really going on. From this point on in the poem, the woman is suffering from hallucinations. “She doesn't walk in, actually – she ‘glides’ in, like a ghost” (Porphyria's Lover). It is more than likely that this woman is seeing her actions from outside of her mind as they happen. Almost as if she was watching a movie of herself. To further this idea, the woman is all alone when

“And, last, she sat down by my side
And called me. When no voice replied,
She put my arm about her waist,
And made her smooth white shoulder bare,
And all her yellow hair displaced,
And, stooping, made my cheek lie there,
And spread, o'er all, her yellow hair” (Browning 1252).

No voice replied because she is all alone. Seeing as how she is suffering from hallucinations and watching her own actions as if she isn’t in control, she is speaking in first and third person. She is wrapping her own arms around herself; after all she did just come in from a rain storm and started a fire to warm up. She is laying her own cheek on her shoulder, maybe from being depressed, or trying to warm her face up. She could also simply enjoy the way her hair feels on her face.

As the poem progresses, her hallucinations intensify as

“...I found
A thing to do, and all her hair
In one long yellow string I wound
Three times her little throat around,
And strangled her. No pain felt she;
I am quite sure she felt no pain” (Browning 1252-53).

When hair is wet it gets stringy and clings easily to the skin. In her delusional state, the woman believes her hair is trying to choke her and it freaks her out. The reality is she
felt no pain, not because she was being strangled by a psychotic lover, but because her hair is simply so long that it is able to cling around her throat, thanks to her having just come inside from a rain storm.

It should also be mentioned that another side effect of porphyria is muscle weakness and even coma (Acute Intermittent Porphyria). “Weakness is a failure of the muscle to develop an expected force [and] may affect all muscles or only a few” (muscle disease). Continuing with the fact that she wasn’t actually murdered, but is still alive, can be proven with a close reading of the text that follows.

“As a shut bud that holds a bee,
I warily oped her lids: again
Laughed the blue eyes without a stain.
And I untightened next the tress
About her neck; her cheek once more
Blushed bright beneath my burning kiss”
(Browning 1253).

The first line is especially important in that the bud does not kill the bee, but simply holds it. The woman is simply held down by the muscle weakness and hallucinations she is experiencing. There is the first and third person presence still because she is still in this hallucinatory state. Being able to open her eyes is a sign that her muscle weakness is not controlling her entire body, but she still has use of her head. The tress of her hair is loosening because it has been drying in the now warm room. The last line of this stanza is the most important. If her blood was no longer pumping through her veins from death, her cheeks would not be blushing. To further this thought, “Her head, which droops upon it still: The smiling rosy little head, So glad it has its utmost will” (Browning 1253) is stating that she is happy to at least have control of her head, which is resting on her own shoulder in order to rest. Again the use of the word “rosy” alludes to the fact that she is very much alive, she simply cannot move due to the muscle weakness caused by porphyria.

Finally we reach the end of the poem, which is widely read as the psychotic killer admiring his lovely corpse and God not caring about the events which just unfolded. Except when looking at the ending like this paper has looked at the rest of the poem, it is obvious how that simply isn’t so.

“She guessed not how
Her darling one wish would be heard.
And thus we sit together now,
And all night long we have not stirred,
And yet God has not said a word!”
(Browning 1253).

The one wish she wanted heard was for her hallucination and pain to stop. It is very plausible that one who is suffering like this woman is would plead to God to make it all stop. The hallucination of her being murdered by her hair has stopped as she now rests since she cannot move her body. She still remains stuck with this horrid disorder in her mind and body and has not stirred because her muscles are still too weak to move. God does not say a word because he made it all stop, just not in the way she had hoped, hence the phrase “she guessed not how.”

Given all these points, "Porphyria's Lover" reads as almost an entirely different poem. The more popular interpretation leaves the reader with a sense of closure, albeit disturbing. Conversely, interpreting the poem as a woman suffering alone and stuck inside her own head leaves the reader with no closure. She will continue hallucinating and is stuck with this disorder until she dies a painful death. To some, this is an even more terrifying scenario than being murdered by a psychotic lover.
Works Cited


