**Porphyria’s Lover by Robert Browning**

1. **Narration:**

**How is the text narrated to position the audience? (Consider how point of view (e.g. first person vs. third person), focalization and voice position the reader in relation to perspectives, ideas and reliability of the characters or narrator in the text. Is this a fallible narrator? Does the ideology underpinning the gender discourse operating in the poem align with the narrator’s world view?)**

The poem is in the form of a **dramatic monologue** in which Browning uses **the first person point of view** to give his words a sense of **immediacy**; that is, this makes the audience feel that they are being directly spoken to by the **narrating persona** adopted by the poet. The reader is very aware of the **perspective** from which the story is being told which leads to questions about the narrator’s **reliability.**  The narrator is undoubtedly deranged. This being the case, the ideology underpinning the gender discourse in the poem, which is sympathetic to the plight of the woman, does not align with the worldview of the narrator.

The first half of the poem **focalizes** on Porphyria; the second half **focalizes** on the lover. Initially, we are introduced to Porphyria as an active and beautiful character, as she strides into the cottage (*“When glided in Porphyria”)* and builds up a fire. The man then describes her passion for him (“*Murmuring how she loved me”)*, and yet also her inability to set aside her pride to be with him forever. Then comes the most shocking moment of the work, when the speaker reveals his solution to this problem: “*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,”*. It is at this moment that we realize the speaker is mad and has committed murder and yet he goes on to describe the conclusion of the scene, as he rests her head against his shoulder, seemly content that they can now be together in peace. The poem provides a glimpse into the mind of one who is mentally unstable; we as readers are required to take his words as the only version of the story we have access to, and have to interpret what he says.

<https://blogs.commons.georgetown.edu/engl-161-spring2013/2013/02/25/porphyrias-lover/>

<https://urenglish338.wordpress.com/2013/02/18/narrative-voice-in-porphyrias-lover/>

**Fallible or unreliable narrator:** An **unreliable narrator** is a [narrator](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Narrator) whose credibility is compromised. Unreliable narrators are almost by definition [**first-person narrators**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First-person_narrative)**.**

Sometimes the narrator's unreliability is made immediately evident. For instance, a story may open with the narrator making a plainly false or delusional claim or admitting to being severely mentally ill, or the story itself may have a [frame](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frame_story) in which the narrator appears as a character, with clues to the character's unreliability. A more dramatic use of the device delays the revelation until near the story's end. In some cases, the reader discovers that in the foregoing narrative, the narrator had concealed or greatly misrepresented vital pieces of information. Such a [twisted ending](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twist_ending) forces readers to reconsider their [point of view](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Point_of_view_%28literature%29) and experience of the story. In some cases the narrator's unreliability is never fully revealed but only hinted at, leaving readers to wonder how much the narrator should be trusted and how the story should be interpreted.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unreliable_narrator>

1. **Analyzing Binary Oppositions:**
* What pairs of opposing forces can you identify in the poem?
* What key conflicts are suggested by the binary oppositions?
* Does one half of a pair seem more powerful than the other?
* How is the reader intended to respond to the opposing forces?
* Do the binary oppositions suggest any ideological messages?

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| good | evil |
| sane | deranged |
| male | female |
| reality | delusion |
| love | hate |
| life | death |
| femininity | masculinity |
| calm | storm |

The most powerful conflict is between the **reality** of what the narrator is doing and his **deluded** interpretation and justification of his acts. The binaries good/evil, sane/deranged and male/female also obviously underpin and structure the text but the **overarching theme seems to be that the nature of truth and reality fluctuate depending on a person’s perspective**. The reader is initially positioned to identify and sympathize with the lover’s feelings for Porphyria but rethinks the reliability of the lover’s account at the point of Porphyria’s death by strangulation.

A case can also be made for identifying **male/female** as the key binary underpinning the meaning of the text. This interpretation posits that the monologue may be read as a protest against the oppression of women by patriarchal society.

**Possible theme statements:**

This poem may be read as a protest against the oppression of women by patriarchal society.

The poem conveys the idea that the nature of truth or reality fluctuates depending on a person’s perspective.

The poem promotes the idea that sexual/romantic love taken to an extreme can be dangerous.

The poem is an analogous representation of the idea that men will go to extreme lengths to maintain power over women.

The reader is positioned to abhor the ideological position of the narrator in relation to gender relations; women should not be objectified and mistreated in this way.

**Possible opening paragraph**

“Porphyria’s Lover” by Robert Browning may be read as a protest against the oppression of women by **patriarchal** society as the poem is an **analogous representation** of the idea that men will go to extreme lengths to maintain power over women. The **dramatic monologue** depicts the unexpected death by strangulation of a strong but **silenced** woman by a weak and insecure man, who seeks to justify his deranged actions. The reader is **positioned** to abhor the **ideological position** of the psychologically abnormal **narrator** in relation to gender relations; women should not be **objectified** and mistreated in this way.

**The highlighted words relate to either t-c or w-c-c reading strategies.**