

STUDY MATERIAL FOR PG SEMESTER II, ENGLISH, PAPER- CC-6, UNIT-IV(a)

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POEM: PORPHYRIA'S LOVER

POET: ROBERT BROWNING

Porphyria's Lover is a unique love poem written by Robert Browning. The poem was first published as **Porphyria** in 1836 in *Monthly Repository*, a magazine. Later on, in 1842 it appeared in *Dramatic Lyrics* together with *Johannes Agricola in Meditation* under the title *Madhouse Cell*. In 1863 the poem appeared independently with the title, **Porphyria's Lover**.

The speaker of the poem is a passionate lover who reveals his intense emotions of love while he speaks. Robert Browning uses the form of dramatic monologue that reveals the entire personality of the lover. It is known that Browning uses this form frequently because this helps Browning discuss the different personality traits. The speaker reveals his intention, mood, attitude and intense emotion while placed in a critical situation. The love poems are unique for their dramatic essence.

The poem begins with the description of weather. The weather is extremely rough and violent due to the storm. The strong wind seems to be angry and destructive as it violently shakes the leaves of the elm tree to tear it apart. It also disturbed the surface of lake causing ripples. The disturbed state of weather outside reflects the sad and gloomy state of mind of the lover. It seems that the same turmoil is present in the speaker's mind. The line, '*I listened with heart fit to break,*' expresses his mental state.

The lover is sitting all alone in his cottage near a burnt out grate. This gives a dull and gloomy look to the environment inside. In the meantime, amidst storm and rain Porphyria enters the cottage of the lover. Her arrival is significant because with her arrival the environment inside the cottage changes completely. She brings comfort and cosiness with her. Once again the environment becomes warm and cheerful as she makes the cheerless grate glow with fire. Thus, Porphyria creates a warm and comfortable environment. After this she takes off her wet cloak and shawl and also removes her gloves. She unties her wet hair that spreads all over. The speaker's description of Porphyria is fascinating. In his speech, the lover also describes the way Porphyria expresses her passionate love for him. She sits beside him and calls him but there is no reply. She gradually takes his hand around her waist and offers her bare shoulder making him lean over it. Spreading her hair all over him she murmurs about her love. The moment is quite rapturous. The lover is quite aware of his beloved's weakness who under suppression of social convention was unable to express her love for him. It seems that she has finally broken those restrictions of social ties to free her 'struggling passion'. In the following lines the speaker reveals about Porphyria's attempt of resolving all problems and finally submitting herself:

*From pride, and vainer ties dis sever,
And give herself to me for ever*

The passion of love in Porphyria became so dominant that she could not resist any longer and was encouraged to leave the grand feast to meet her lover. All fears and pride were set aside. The lover expresses this strong impulse of love in Porphyria as follows:

*But passion sometimes would prevail,
Nor could to-night's gay feast restrain
A sudden thought of one so pale
For love of her, and all in vain:*

The wind and rain through which Porphyria has dared to come is suggestive of her struggle against the established social norms. She also proves herself as an honest and true lover. The speaker is overwhelmed and surprised as he realises that Porphyria worshipped him. This moment of love had filled the lover with an ecstatic pleasure. The speaker experiences the intensity of love that was quite gripping and becomes aware that Porphyria belonged to him with all perfect purity and goodness. At the spur of the moment the lover does something surprising and shocking. He strangles Porphyria, his beloved, by her own strands of hair. This sudden act of murder is definitely not out of revenge or any

malice but it seems that the lover intended to eternalise the moment of love as he admits: *'That moment she was mine'*. To preserve this moment of pure and perfect love the speaker murders Porphyria. It also appears that the sense of insecurity that this moment will pass away and fear of separation from Porphyria could have culminated into this act of murder. Another possibility could be of the social disparity between the lovers and the social conventions. However, the reason behind this act is hard to discern. Perhaps, there is some abnormality of mind that instigates a person towards such abnormal act. The way the lover justifies his act itself approves of some abnormal behaviour in him. He shows no sign of remorse as he claims that the beloved showed no sign of pain when he says *'laughed the blue eyes without a stain'*. Porphyria was lying still. The lines below depict her lifelessness as well as the indifference of the lover:

I am quite sure she felt no pain.

As a shut bud that holds a bee

I warily opened her lids: again

The speaker unties her neck and rests the dead body of Porphyria against his shoulder. As he props her head on his shoulder her head droops. The word 'droop' indicates lifelessness. As he kisses her dead face he feels the cheer and blush that makes her face bright. He almost handles the body as he desires. Everything was in his control. The lover in his speech confirms that there was happiness on dead Porphyria's face because she was relieved of all social obligations and was finally united to her lover. The speaker has also gained as the moment of love was eternalised forever. Both the lovers, dead and alive, sat together the whole night. The lover shows no regret and even justifies his act because he thinks that even God has not said anything. Perhaps he was waiting for God's approval of his act. As he says:

And yet God has not said a word!

In the poem, *Porphyria's Lover* Browning has presented a unique love story. He has portrayed the mental and emotional status of a lover who strangles his beloved for eternalising love. This is an excellent attempt of Browning in personality study of an abnormal lover. Robert Browning's dramatic monologues probe into the deep recesses of mind of a variety of personalities, like scholars, lovers, poets, murderers and many others and express their moods and motives according to their situation.

POINTS TO REMEMBER

- The lover is the speaker of the poem.
- The poem opens with the description of tumultuous weather.
- The lover is sad and sitting alone near an unburnt grate.
- Porphyria enters the cottage of the lover turning the environment warm and comfortable.
- She lights the grate and makes the room warm.
- She takes off her wet cloak and unties her wet hair.
- She sits beside her lover and talks to him but there was no reply.
- She gradually takes his hand round her waist and leans his head against her shoulder.
- The passionate moments of love is spent.
- Porphyria seems to leave all social conventions to meet her lover.
- The moment is a rapturous one.
- The lover is surprised to find that she worshiped him.
- At the spur of the moment the lover kills his beloved by her own strand of hair.
- This is a shocking moment.
- Perhaps the moment of ecstasy excited him and he commits this crime.
- The insecurity and fear of separation from Porphyria was there in the mind of the lover.
- The lover shows no remorse or regret.
- He eternalises the moment by murdering his beloved and justifies his act.
- The poem is an excellent study of an abnormal personality.