

Psychoanalytic Criticism
“Porphyria’s Lover” by Robert Browning

In Lois Tyson’s “Critical Theory Today” Tyson discusses Sigmund Freud’s theory on the psychoanalytic nature of human beings. Tyson expounds on Freud’s belief on the repression of negative events in one’s childhood. In order to cope with these events as humans we repress certain memories and in turn our unconscious mind, which stores these memories, influences our day to day actions which ultimately point back to the repressed memory. Every human experiences some form of anxiety, which stems from the repressed memory. Tyson states how “anxiety can be an important experience because it can reveal our core issues, those deeply rooted, psychological problems that are the source of our self-destruction.” (16) One core issue that Tyson mentions is fear of abandonment. This is “ the unshakable belief that our friends and loved ones are going to desert us (physical) or don’t really care about us (emotional). (16) Often times when an individual has one core issue it opens the door to another. For example, “ if fear of abandonment is my core issue, I am liable to develop fear of intimacy as a core issue as well. My conviction that I will eventually be abandoned by anyone for whom I care might lead me to chronically avoid emotional intimacy...” (17)

In Robert Browning’s “Porphyria’s Lover” Browning shows the use of Freud’s theory of fear of abandonment through his main character and his lover. The main character is essentially trying to control time with death ;his fear of death comes from fear of abandonment. Half way through the text the main character decides to kill his lover for the sake of preserving/ freezing her love for him. Although the text does not mention the fact that someone had abandoned him previously, his actions have justified Freud’s theory that one’s actions represent the repressed memory stored in the unconscious. The text states “She shut the cold out and the storm, And kneeled and made the cheerless grate Blaze up, and all the cottage warm”. In this quote it shows that when porphyria came to the the house she was trying to change the environment in which the character was in. One can assume that the cottage he was in was cold and dark ;it seemed as if he was engulfed by his own sadness and misery. Further along in the text the woman tries to talk and cheer up her lover but he does not respond. Instead the text states

“ Happy and proud; at last I knew
Porphyria worshipped me; surprise
 Made my heart swell, and still it grew
 While I debated what to do.
That moment she was mine, mine, fair,
 Perfectly pure and good: 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;

There are many ways to analyze this quote. For one he is in his misery and he she is trying to turn his negative environment upside down in which he is not satisfied with this reaction from her. The second thing to look at is her reasoning for coming over. The text states

“Murmuring how she loved me — she
Too weak, for all her heart's endeavour,
To set its struggling passion free
From pride, and vainer ties dissever,
And give herself to me forever.”

But passion sometimes would prevail,”. It is here where one can see that their “passions” are not in alignment. I believe his lover is ready to finally give herself to him but due to his fear of abandonment which in turn leads to fear of intimacy, the main character is afraid to give himself to her. He would rather her stay “fair, Perfectly pure and good”. In order to prevent her from leaving him, changing his negative environment into a positive one, and give up her purity, his final decision is to kill her. By killing her he ultimately is able to perpetuate his own misery by continuing the cycle. In addition to, seeing that she is dead he is now able to control her body and keep their love “everlasting” which is something he may have failed to do with a significant individual in his past, maybe his mother perhaps.

Lastly, he does show some form on the conscious mind at the end when he states “And all night long we have not stirred, And yet God has not said a word!” This shows that he felt some form of guilt. If he did not believe that God would do anything to punish his actions he would not have mentioned God, thus, this is his conscious mind acknowledging the tragic deed.