

# The Death and Female Beauty in Robert Browning's "Porphyria's Lover" (1836) and Pu Songling's "Lotus Fragrance" (1740)

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**Abstract:** Robert Browning and Pu Songling both explore the death of women in literary works from the perspective of the Gothic. The purpose of this essay is to extract the passive and erotic elements contained in the death of women in the two works. It focuses on the textual comparison and systematic textual analysis to demonstrate women in different social contexts who are objectified and viewed as emotional dependents thus triggering passivity. In addition, although the element of eroticism appears several times in the theme of female death in Gothic literature, in Robert's works, it does not have a direct connection with death, but instead justifies the violence; whereas in Pu's works, it tends to be more independent, and becomes a reason for the development of the story.

**Keywords:** comparative literature, gothic, feminism

## 1. Introduction

"Death is the most melancholy topic", according to Edgar Allan Poe [1], "and when it most closely allies itself to Beauty", it becomes "the most poetical". Robert Browning is an English poet and playwright, who is known in Victorian England for his dark humor, irony, and so on. "Porphyria's Lover" [2] is one of his famous poems and describes that possessiveness leads the narrator to kill Porphyria. And in China nearly a hundred years ago, although in a different social context, the novelist Pu Songling's "Lotus Fragrance" [3] shows a fox and a ghost falling in love with the same human, which also contains the death of a beautiful woman. Nevertheless, the presentation and subjective feelings of the dead beautiful women in the two works are different. Therefore, this essay will compare them to demonstrate that the death of a beautiful woman can be analyzed through an exploration of both passive and erotic elements and can be understood as a reflection of personal and social conflicts.

## 2. Passive Elements

### 2.1 Passive Elements in "Porphyria's Lover"

Firstly, the death of a beautiful woman usually contains passivity. "Most striking about Gothic novels is the combination of intrigue, crime, and danger with the Heroine's complete passivity" [4]. Russ explains that these women are usually not over 30 years old and extremely beautiful, and they will cause emotional or struggling problems just because they exist. I interpret passivity here as a lack of rational awareness of the threatening force, and the woman is incapable to resist or actively accepts all her lover's behaviors (even that of letting herself die) because she is trapped in a particular love relationship. Then the act of being killed or voluntary death is framed through this lens of passivity. In Robert Browning's "Porphyria's Lover", the title itself and the masculine perspective of the poem have already shown Porphyria's dominated position. Her own emotions have taken the place of any knowledge of the presence of a potentially dangerous force. She left a "gay feast" [2] and went out into the storm and wind to meet her beloved. At last, she sat down by her lover's side and "put his arm about her waist" [2]. Although she was proud, "passion sometimes would prevail" [2]. These actions and psychological descriptions prove that Porphyria chose the latter between self-esteem and love. Furthermore, when the man strangled her with her hair, she was smiling. In "no pain felt she; I am quite sure she felt no pain" [2], the former sentence can be regarded as Porphyria's feelings from the perspective of the man (or Porphyria's shown feelings), and the latter is the man's feelings. This can be inferred that she had no obvious resistance. "There is also much within Gothic fiction that is troubling to feminists, in particular a sado-masochistic dynamic that appears to enjoy the spectacle of violence against women and the reaffirmation of cultural stereotypes projecting women as either victims, monsters or femmes fatales" [5]. This sado-masochistic tendency is also an explanation for passivity. Porphyria's attachment to a man and her acceptance of his behavior are also the recognition of self-identity. Her series of actions until her death reflects that this corpse inhabits an ambivalent hinterland between an altruistic love surviving death, and a powerless suppressed female sexuality.

## 2.2 Passive Elements in “Lotus Fragrance”

Similarly, Lotus Fragrance is a beautiful fox woman who died for love and came back to life for love. In the descriptions of her by the other two protagonists, Sang Xiao thought she was the “ravishing beauty” [3] when he first met her. After meeting her, Li (the female ghost) said that she was “more beautiful than any woman on earth could ever be” [3], so she suspected that she was a fox-spirit and followed her. Lotus Fragrance is also passive in this article. She had no idea why she began to love Sang, but she was infatuated with it. In the first half of the article, Pu focused on her repeated struggles with Li, not only to protect her love rights, but also to care about her beloved Sang. Her love is altruistic, and she always dealt with problems from the perspective of being good for Sang. This is different from the behavior of many other foxes and ghosts in *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* [3], who are greedy for selfish desires and ignore each other, and it is also in sharp contrast with Li. When Lotus Fragrance was away, Li “spent every night with Sang” [3], while as long as Lotus Fragrance realized that Sang was not looking well, she would “leave” [3], “refuse to stay and share his bed” [3]. This is a restrained love. At the same time, she subjectively accepted everything Sang wanted and could even sacrifice herself to achieve his goal. After understanding the love between Sang and Li, she spent three months collecting herbs to avoid Sang’s death. Later, she heard that Li was reborn and even asked Sang Sheng to propose marriage to Li. After that, she decided to leave for fear of delaying their marriage. After childbirth, she got sick and said, “You find your joy in life, I find mine in death” [3]. Her attitude towards death is the ultimate embodiment of her character.

The fox represents the conflicting views of China’s male literati towards women and their needs for both sexual and emotional affection. The literary form of these folk stories is not to create “literature”, but to edify readers’ morality. Pu commented on the ills of corrupt officials and oppressed family members at that time. [6] In *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* [3], foxes are often regarded as seductive women. They are vindictive and destructive. This is the same as Spooner’s view in “*Porphyria’s Lover*” discussed above, which is, in some cultural traditions, women are regarded as *femmes fatales* in Gothic novels. The difference is that Lotus Fragrance breaks through this stereotype: “If you go indulging yourself day after day, then a human lover can do you more harm than a fox” [3], highlighting the main idea of the article. However, it is because of this breakthrough that the author uses Lotus Fragrance’s tone to satirize that some people live worse than foxes, but the fox is passive enough that her life cannot be decided by herself, which is a tragedy.

## 3. Erotic Elements

### 3.1 Erotic Elements in “Porphyria’s Lover”

There are erotic elements in the death of beautiful women in the two works. In “*Porphyria’s Lover*” [2], I suggest, although eroticism exists (“made her smooth white shoulder bare” and “blushed bright beneath my burning kiss”), Porphyria’s temptation cannot justify her lover’s killing. According to Punter [7], in Gothic texts, the theme and narrative framework are usually transgressive. Violence, especially sexual violence, is open and reflected in continuous details, and this behavior has also become the main threat to the female protagonist. It can be seen from “three times her little throat around and strangled her” [2] that the sexual violence is described carefully. This violence is persistent. After strangling Porphyria, her lover also opened her eyelids to observe and stayed still all night. Catherine Ross argues this poem is a “tale of erotic asphyxiation, one in which Porphyria survives” [8]. This seems to make sexual hanging reasonable. However, I suppose this point is worth discussing because the final narrative of the poem is ambiguous and out of Porphyria’s lover’s subjectivity. From the perspective of the narrator, he believed that by killing Porphyria, she could be prevented from unintentionally engaging in sexual behavior and committing offences. He hoped she would maintain her sexual purity. God’s silence also appeared to support the validity of his actions and the idea that protecting “morality” was superior to protecting human life. However, this concept and the so-called “morality” of sex in the Victorian era are distorted. It defends violence and retains the narrow concept of purity but ignores freedom and appreciation of others. In Haggerty’s “erotics of loss” [9], he explains loss functions in the Gothic as “a conspicuous mark of unrealized personhood”. It registers a failure of subjectivity brought on by a “cultural system that commodifies desire” at the same moment that it “renders it lurid and pathological”. Porphyria’s lover’s performance in poetry is murderous but unfazed, which implies his sociopathic tendency. Therefore, Catherine Ross’s point of view is a little offensive in my opinion.

### 3.2 Erotic Elements in “Lotus Fragrance”

Eroticism has always been an indispensable topic in *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*. The stereotype of the foxes is that they feed on people to prolong their life, make men to ejaculate to excess and rob them of their energy and spirit [3]. The eroticism has two main characteristics in this story: its abrupt appearance and rough description. The focus is not on sexual stimulation itself, but it is often used as the basis for future communication between the hero and heroine. There is no

deliberate avoidance of it, but there is no detailed description of sexual scenes. In “Lotus Fragrance”, when Sang and Lotus Fragrance met at the first time, “two of them clicked into bed, where they enjoyed to the full the sweet pleasures of love” [3]. Although this sentence is short, it is the premise and condition of the following story. “Sex for Pu Songling is simply one arena in which human behavior can be observed in its extraordinary intensity, richness, and variety. [9]” Han Tianlu believes that this is due to the sexual repression in the Qing Dynasty and the spiritual core of the traditional marriage in China. [10] In feudal China, generally men and women had little chance to know each other before they got married, and the understanding between them might start from the newly married bed. They always knew each other’s bodies first. However, from other literary works at that time, such as “Bei Guan Zhou Ye” [11] (Xue Ming Dynasty) and “Da Gu Ren” [12] (Lin Qing Dynasty), we can see that there are many ways to relieve sexual repression due to polygamy and brothels. Therefore, I argue Han’s opinion cannot constitute the main reason for the emergence of erotic elements. At the same time, I do not agree that it is entirely appropriate to compare the marriage process in feudal China, because the story itself can be seen as a beautification and fantasy of dreams that cannot be achieved in real society. The sexual description in “Lotus Fragrance” is set according to the characters’ personalities, and it also constitutes the premise of the following plots, such as the man getting sick and Lotus Fragrance picking herbs.

#### 4. Conclusion

To conclude, by comparing Robert Browning’s “Porphyria’s Lover” and Pu Songling’s “Lotus Fragrance”, the essay aims to explore the passive and erotic elements contained in the death of beautiful women in Gothic literature, which, along with the representation of the bereaved, can express the social context of the time. I argue that in terms of passivity, the manifestation of Porphyria may reflect the condition of female objectification in the Victorian period, and Lotus Fragrance’s altruistic attitude also reflects the fact that the male literati of the Qing Dynasty regarded women as emotional support. In addition, the erotic elements are presented differently in the two works, being constant and detailed in the former but abrupt and rough in the latter.

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