What is the poem about?

A man sits in his cold cottage on a stormy night. Porphyria, his lover, arrives and makes the cottage warm and comfortable, before sitting down next to him.

He ignores her while she’s flirting with him- he seems upset with her. However he decides that she loves him and that she belongs to him- he wants to preserve the moment, so he strangles her with her own hair. It’s clear that the speaker is mentally disturbed.

He opens her eyes and spends the rest of the night sitting with her dead body.
Thoughts vs Actions

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3MSO1sOtQhA

Take two colours and underline the voice of the poems:
• Thoughts
• Actions

Porphyria
a rare hereditary disease in which there is abnormal metabolism of the blood pigment haemoglobin. Porphyrins are excreted in the urine, which becomes dark; other symptoms include mental disturbances and extreme sensitivity of the skin to light.

PAIR
Using your highlighting, discuss the possible motivations for the killing of his lover?
Pathetic Fallacy creates a threatening atmosphere

This shows how the narrator is emotionally at breaking point and hints at his mental instability.

The rain set early in to-night, The **suilen** 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**. When **glided** in Porphyria; straight

This description makes Porphyria seem almost magical.
Porphyria seems to be powerful, positive force in the speaker’s life. Her actions contrast with the miserable weather.

**She shut the cold out and the storm,**
**And kneeled and made the cheerless grate**
**Blaze up, and all the cottage warm;**
Which done, she rose, and from her form
Withdrew the dripping cloak and shawl,
And laid her soiled gloves by, **untied**
Her hat and **let the damp hair fall,**

Female sexuality was repressed in Victorian times, Porphyria is openly flaunting hers. Women who behaved like this were often labelled ‘fallen women’ - the use of the word “fall” draws attention to how Porphyria’s behaviour would have been seen as sinful.

Enjambment creates unusual line breaks that reflect the speaker’s unstable mental state.
Repetition of “And” emphasises the calm way he’s chronologically recounting the events leading up to her murder.

His passivity is strange—he doesn’t speak and lets Porphyria arrange his body.

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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,
Murmuring how she loved me — she

“Murmuring” could suggest her tone is flirtatious, or that she doesn’t really mean what she says.

Repetition of “yellow hair” shows his obsession with it. It foreshadows his using it to strangle her. Later in the poem.
The narrator is critical of Porphyria’s lack of commitment to him. She may be from a higher social class than him – this situation could be difficult for her as her family might not approve of the relationship.

She’s left some kind of party to see him – this could show how much she wants to see him, but also hints that he isn’t part of her social activities.

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 for ever.
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:
So, she was come through wind and rain.
Be sure, I looked up at her eyes.

First time in the poem that the speaker takes action – signals a shift in the balance of passivity and activity between Porphyria and the speaker.
He wants to be loved by her and to have power over her.

The repetition of “mine” is disturbing and suspicious – it emphasises how he wants to possess her.

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;

This description of the murder is shocking because it’s unexpected and matter – of fact - there’s no change in rhythm.

She’s come to be with him tonight
and he’s convinced she loves him, so he wants her to preserve the moment.
This is clearly not true – the reader now has reason to question everything he’s been saying.

Ambiguity – this could mean there’s no evidence of his sin, that he thinks she doesn’t blame him for murdering her, or that there’s no stain on her honour because she didn’t have sex with him.

I am quite sure she felt no pain. 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:

Seems unlikely that her eyes are laughing, so maybe her eyes weren’t “Happy and proud” in line 32 either.

He believes her red face (as a result of being strangled) is actually a blush from his passionate kiss – this shows that he’s deranged.

Juxtaposition shows the narrator’s love for Porphyria is passionate but also destructive.
Flower imagery reflects her beauty, but also depicts the speakers foolishness — flowers droop, just as this perfect moment will not last.

I propped her head up as before,
**Only, this time my shoulder bore**
**Her head, which droops** upon it still:
The smiling **rosy** little head,
So glad it has **its** utmost will,
That all it scorned at once is fled,
And I, **its** love, am gained instead!

Reversal of earlier in the poem — he’s now active and Porphyria is passive.

He describes her as “it” — she’s just an object to him now.
This is disturbing – the reader realises that she’s been dead for the whole poem.

Porphyria’s love: 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!

Ambiguity – could be surprised that he hasn’t been punished, or perhaps he doesn’t believe that he’s committed a sin at all.
Feelings and Attitudes in the poem

It becomes clear that the speaker is delusional- he believes that Porphyria wants to be murdered so she can be with him forever, so his reliability throughout the poem has to be questioned.

The first half of the poem describes Porphyria’s actions whilst her lover is passive. However, by killing her, the narrator makes Porphyria completely passive. She also seems passive during her murder – perhaps the narrator chose not to report any struggle, because to him it was a perfect moment.

The speaker comments that God hasn’t punished him for the murder – he either believes that he’s had a lucky escape, or, more worryingly, that he hasn’t committed a sin. Porphyria’s actions could also be seen as sinful – Victorians would have viewed a woman sneaking off to see her lover as immoral.
Your personal response to the poem.

1. Why do you think the speaker murders his lover?

2. Find an example of repetition in the poem. What effect does it have?

3. Do you think Porphyria loves the speaker? Does he love her? Explain your answers.

**Key Themes**
Longing is also presented as potentially destructive in the ‘Farmer’s Bride’. You could look at ‘Sonnet 29’ if you’re writing about longing, or ‘Eden Rock’ to explore the idea of love enduring beyond death.