

"Porphyria's Lover": A Critical Appreciation / As a Dramatic Monologue

"Porphyria's Lover," which first appeared in 1836, is one of the earliest and most shocking of Robert Browning's dramatic monologues. The speaker of the poem lives in a cottage in the countryside. His lover, a blooming young woman named Porphyria, comes in out of a storm and proceeds to make a fire and bring cheer to the cottage. She embraces the speaker, offering him her bare shoulder. He tells us that he does not speak to her. Instead, he says, she begins to tell him how she has momentarily overcome societal strictures to be with him. He realizes that she "worship[s]" him at this instant. Realizing that she will eventually give in to society's pressures, and wanting to preserve the moment, he wraps her hair around her neck and strangles her. He then toys with her corpse, opening the eyes and propping the body up against his side. He sits with her body this way the entire night, the speaker remarking that God has not yet moved to punish him.

Browning's "Porphyria's Lover," while natural in its language, does not display the colloquialisms or dialectical markers of some of Browning's later poems. Moreover, while the cadence of the poem mimics natural speech, it actually takes the form of highly patterned verse, rhyming "ababb." The intensity and asymmetry of the pattern suggests the madness concealed within the speaker's reasoned self-presentation. This poem is a dramatic monologue--a fictional speech presented as the musings of a speaker who is separate from the poet. Like most of Browning's other dramatic monologues, this one captures a moment after a main event or action. Porphyria already lies dead when the speaker begins. Just as the nameless speaker seeks to stop time by killing her, so too does this kind of poem seek to freeze the consciousness of an instant.

Browning's "Porphyria's Lover" opens with a scene taken straight from the Romantic poetry of the earlier nineteenth century. While a storm rages outdoors, giving a demonstration of nature at its most sublime, the speaker sits in a cozy cottage. This is the picture of rural simplicity – a cottage by a lake, a rosy-cheeked girl, a roaring fire. However, once Porphyria begins to take off her wet clothing, the poem leaps into the modern world. She bares her shoulder to her lover and begins to caress him; this is a level of overt sexuality that has not been seen in poetry since the Renaissance. We then learn that Porphyria is defying her family and friends to be with the speaker; the scene is now not just sexual, but transgressively so. Illicit sex out of wedlock presented a major concern for Victorian society; the famous Victorian "prudery" constituted only a backlash to what was in fact a popular obsession with the theme: the newspapers of the day reveled in stories about prostitutes and

unwed mothers. Here, however, in "Porphyria's Lover," sex appears as something natural, acceptable, and almost wholesome: Porphyria's girlishness and affection take prominence over any hints of immorality.

For the Victorians, modernity meant numbness: urban life, with its constant overstimulation and newspapers full of scandalous and horrifying stories, immunized people to shock. Many believed that the onslaught of amorality and the constant assault on the senses could be counteracted only with an even greater shock. This is the principle Browning adheres to in "Porphyria's Lover." In light of contemporary scandals, the sexual transgression might seem insignificant; so Browning breaks through his reader's probable complacency by having Porphyria's lover murder her; and thus he provokes some moral or emotional reaction in his presumably numb audience. This is not to say that Browning is trying to shock us into condemning either Porphyria or the speaker for their sexuality; rather, he seeks to remind us of the disturbed condition of the modern psyche. In fact, "Porphyria's Lover" was first published, along with another poem, under the title Madhouse Cells, suggesting that the conditions of the new "modern" world served to blur the line between "ordinary life" – for example, the domestic setting of this poem – and insanity – illustrated here by the speaker's action.

This poem, like much of Browning's work, conflates sex, violence, and aesthetics. Like many Victorian writers, Browning was trying to explore the boundaries of sensuality in his work. How is it that society considers the beauty of the female body to be immoral while never questioning the morality of language's sensuality – a sensuality often most manifest in poetry? Why does society see both sex and violence as transgressive? What is the relationship between the two? Which is "worse"? These are some of the questions that Browning's poetry posits. And he typically does not offer any answers to them. Browning is no moralist, although he is no libertine either. As a fairly liberal man, he is confused by his society's simultaneous embrace of both moral righteousness and a desire for sensation; "Porphyria's Lover" explores this contradiction.