Porphyria's Lover Study Guide

Porphyria's Lover by Robert Browning

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Introduction

"Porphyria's Lover," which first appeared as "Porphyria" in the *Monthly Repository* in January 1836, is the earliest and most shocking of Robert Browning's dramatic monologues. The speaker—or, perhaps more accurately, thinker—of the poem recounts how he killed his illicit lover, Porphyria, by strangling her with her own hair. He does so to keep her his forever, reliving his story to justify his actions and preserve the moment of her death. The simple language and precisely structured form of the sixty-line poem combined with its asymmetrical rhyming pattern suggest a complex madness concealed beneath the speaker's outwardly calm manner and reasonable tone.

The poem's themes of sex, violence, and madness were of particular interest to Victorian readers, who reveled in sensational tales of horror and depravity despite societal condemnation of all things immoral, but Browning overturns normal expectations of such stories by presenting the sex between Porphyria and her lover as natural, making the reader consider the relationship between sex and violence, and exploring the complex nature of the speaker's madness. The result is a study of human nature and morality that poses more questions than it provides answers. The reader is left wondering, for example, whether to believe the mad narrator's account, how to understand society's condemnation of sexual transgressions, and why sexuality is so often linked with dominance and power. The widely anthologized poem is also considered one of the finest poetic explorations of criminal pathology, an early example of Browning's treatment of the theme of experiencing an infinite moment, an ironic reaction against the Romantic idealization of love, and a work that shows a skilled use of lyricism to present the complex workings of a character's mind.

Author Biography

Browning was born in 1812 in Camberwell, a suburb of London. His father, a bank clerk, had a 6000- volume book collection, from which Browning read widely. Most of Browning's education came at home from his artistically inclined, nonconformist parents. It is believed he was proficient at reading and writing by age five and by age fourteen had learned Latin, Greek, and French. At ten, Browning attended Peckam School, where he remained for four years. In 1825, he received a volume of Percy Shelley's poetry and was utterly taken with it, declaring himself a devotee of the poet. In 1828, Browning enrolled at the University of London but soon left, preferring to read and learn at his own pace.

In 1833, Browning's first work, the long poem "Pauline," was published anonymously. The dramatic poem "Paracelsus" appeared in 1835 to lukewarm reviews. "Porphyria's Lover" was published a year later in a small monthly magazine and received scant attention. During the next few years, Browning wrote several unsuccessful plays and a difficult, obscure long poem, "Sordello." From 1841 to 1846, he published a series of poems under the title *Bells and Pomegranates*, which were poorly received at the time but that include some of his best-known poems. *Bells and Pomegranates* includes the poems "Pippa Passes" and "My Last Duchess." *Dramatic Lyrics*, in which "Porphyria's Lover" appeared untitled with "Johannes Agricola" under the general title "Madhouse Cells," was published in 1842, and *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* appeared in 1845. Again, while Browning received no critical recognition for these works, later commentators note that the techniques developed through the dramatic monologues during this period□ including his use of conversational verse, rhythm, and symbol□are Browning's most important contribution to poetry, influencing such major twentieth-century poets as Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and Robert Frost.

While Browning failed to garner popular and critical recognition for his poetry, it won the admiration of the renowned poet Elizabeth Barrett. The couple met in 1845 and in 1846 eloped to Italy, where they lived together until her death. Barrett demonstrated her love for her husband in *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, and he dedicated his collection of poems *Men and Women* (1855) to her. The volume, which includes the famous monologues "Fra Lippo Lippi" and "Andrea del Sarto," is now regarded as one of Browning's best works, but it received little attention when it appeared; at the time, Browning was known chiefly as Barrett's husband.

After Barrett's death in 1861, Browning returned to England. The appearance in 1864 of the collection *Dramatis Personae* finally brought Browning critical and popular acclaim. In 1868-1869, he published *The Ring and the Book*. The enormously popular work established Browning's reputation, and thereafter he was considered one of England's greatest living poets. His 1880 prose narrative *Dramatic Idylls* brought him international fame. In the last years of his life, Browning received various honors, including a degree from Oxford and an audience with Queen Victoria. He died in 1889 in Venice on the day that his final volume of verse, *Asolando*, was published. Browning is buried in Westminster Abbey.

Poem Text

The rain set early in to-night:
The sullen 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
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,
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
Too weak, for all her heart's endeavor,
To set its struggling passion free
From pride, and vainer ties dissever,
And give herself to me forever:
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;
And she was come through wind and rain.
Be sure I looked up at her eyes
Proud□very proud□at last I knew
Porphyria worshiped 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□
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:
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!
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!

Plot Summary

Overview

The action of "Porphyria's Lover" unfolds through the recounting of the events of one night culminating in the murder of Porphyria by the speaker of the poem. Because the story is not retold to an audience but seems rather to be replayed in the mind of Porphyria's lover, it is somewhat inaccurate to refer to him as the poem's "speaker," but most commentators refer to him as such. Browning masterfully builds up tension in the poem by gradually revealing to the reader, through details provided by the speaker, what has taken place. As it also becomes clear that the narrator is mad, it is up to the reader to decide to what extent to believe the speaker's statements. The poem is a dramatic monologue told by Porphyria's lover (who is never named in the poem), and like other Browning monologues, what is learned about this person is to be gained not merely from what he says about himself but from what he does not say and from a sense that his depiction of himself may not be completely trustworthy. The speaker describes how his lover comes to him one night and he kills her, and in doing so he preserves their love forever. And while his portrayal of the situation is designed to show that his actions are justified, it becomes apparent that he is not so certain of this. In this poem Browning offers a complex psychological study of an insane man who uses reason and argument to explain and make sense of his actions.

Lines 1-5

The poem opens by setting the scene it is raining, and a storm is raging outside and with it establishes the tone of the action that follows. The storm is described in simple, direct language: it sets in early, it tears down tree limbs, and its force disturbs the calmness of the lake. The storm is also personified in a way that anticipates the mood of the speaker. Browning here uses a device called "pathetic fallacy," in which something nonhuman is endowed with human intentions and feelings. The wind, the speaker explains, is "sullen"; it destroys the trees out of "spite," and it deliberately tries to "vex," or anger, the lake. Later in the poem the speaker is sullen and he uses his sullenness to elicit some type of reaction from Porphyria. Also in these first few lines, it is learned that the events described are from the recent past; the speaker refers to "tonight." The mood of the speaker is made clear when he explains that he listens to the storm raging outside "with heart fit to break" he is suffering greatly over something, and the weather outside mirrors and intensifies his feelings.

Lines 6-15

Porphyria enters the speaker's cottage, and immediately the tone of the poem changes. In line 4, the speaker introduces himself as passively listening to what was going on outside, but in his description of Porphyria, he presents a woman who busily and

actively moves around. In these ten lines in which Porphyria is depicted, Browning uses an abundance of verbs, which show her as performing no less than twelve actions. However, even as she "shut," "kneeled," "made," "rose," "laid," "untied," etc., there is no sense that she is in a hurry or frenzy. Rather, she is in control of her brusque, purposeful movements, which are emphasized by the use of monosyllables. Porphyria enters the cottage and "straight," or right away, gets to work. Her presence shuts out the cold and storm, again an indication of her strength of personality. Despite the fact that there is a storm raging outside, there is no fire burning, and she sets about making one "blaze up." From this the reader gets a sense of her forcefulness but also of the speaker's passive and depressed state, as he has apparently been sitting alone in his cottage in the middle of a storm without attempting to warm the place up.

Indeed, throughout the poem, there are clear contrasts between Porphyria and her lover. She is described in terms of bright color (her yellow hair, the fire she makes blaze up, her blue eyes and rosy face), while he is pale. She is active, he is passive; she is talkative, and he is silent; she come in after being with many other people, while he sits alone and isolated in his cottage. After she makes the fire, Porphyria rises and takes off her clothes that are wet and soiled from the storm. The poet makes clear that it is only after she has put the scene in order that she approaches her lover. It is learned that Porphyria unties her hat, lets her hair down, "And, last, sat down by my side." The use of commas around "last" further emphasize that she goes to her lover only after she has set her surroundings right. She then calls to him.

At least one critic has argued that the portrayal of Porphyria in these early lines of the poem suggests that she is a vampire, or at least that the speaker presents her as one to justify his later murder of her. The setting of the poem, this critic suggests, is typical of the traditional Gothic horror story, as a mysterious lady enters at night during a storm. Porphyria "glides" into the cottage in the silent manner of the undead, and she shows her forcefulness and dominance in her actions before trying to seduce her victim. The rest of the poem, it is contended, provides further evidence of the speaker's belief in Porphyria as vampire, as he thinks her gaze weakens him and his only choice is to kill her, and as he believes that God has not punished him because in killing the vampire he has saved his soul. The name "Porphyria," too, it is claimed, has links with anti-Christian elements: "porphyre" designates a type of serpent, Porphyrius was an anti-Christian philosopher, and "porphyry" is a type of marble that is sensitive to light in the same way that vampires are said to be.

Lines 15-30

The speaker does not respond to Porphyria's call after she sits next to him. This failure to respond indicates his sullenness; perhaps he is even in a catatonic state. Interestingly, the speaker does not even present himself as "I," and the sense of his passivity is stressed once more when he says that "no voice replied" to her calls. Porphyria again is the active partner, as she puts her arm around the speaker's waist and bares her shoulder to him. She proceeds to seduce him, moving her blonde hair from her shoulder, pressing his cheek against it, and then enfolding him in her long

tresses. By modern standards, this description may not be considered sexually explicit, but in early Victorian poetry this would be considered a daring and erotically charged scene. The fact that the woman dominates and controls the situation is, of course, unusual, and this aspect is made all the more shocking when it is learned in the next few lines that she is a married woman of a different social class than the speaker. These facts are not immediately obvious, and the reader only gleans from several hints offered by the speaker that the two of them are engaged in an illicit love affair. He explains that Porphyria murmurs to him how much she loves him. But, he says, she is too weak, despite wanting to very much, to overcome her pride and follow her desire to be his forever. She cannot "dissever," or break, her "vainer" ties. However, sometimes her passion overcomes her and she cannot help but come to her lover. Tonight, for example, she has left a "gay feast" to be with him. Thoughts of her pale, lonely lover cannot keep her at the party, and she has come through wind and rain to be with him. The fact that she was at a "gay feast" indicates that she is from the wealthy classes, and so she has a much higher social position than he, who lives in a cottage. Their love affair would thus be frowned upon because of their different social backgrounds.

The picture of Porphyria in these lines of the poem comes as a contrast to the description of her given earlier in the poem. In lines 6 through 15, the speaker presented a figure of a strong, forceful, dominant woman. Now, he presents her as being weak and unable to do what she actually wants□which is to leave her "vainer ties" and be with him. It is not entirely clear whether in lines 22 to 25 the speaker is merely giving his own explanation of her actions or whether he is offering a mocking reproduction of Porphyria's own narration of her feelings and actions that evening. It is clear that while the earlier portrayal of Porphyria is offered in objective terms, the speaker now presents how he sees his lover in light of his selfimportance, frustration, and bitterness. Before, the description was of outward events (the storm, Porphyria's entrance and action), and now the speaker turns inward to present a subjective interpretation of her state of mind and motives. While before she was dominant and in control, coming to him only after she has done what she needed to do, in his mind, she is weak and struggling, torn between the party's allure and coming through wind and rain to be with him.

Lines 31-42

Suddenly the demeanor of the speaker changes, and it seems that all is well and he is happy. But it becomes clear again that what he describes is not presented objectively but from the recesses of his troubled mind. While in the first half of the poem the speaker is depressed and morose, it becomes clear in this part that he is in fact quite mad. It becomes especially difficult to determine what to believe about the account he offers. He says that he looks up at Porphyria's eyes and they are happy and proud. He "knows" at that instant that Porphyria worships him. He is surprised and made proud by this realization, and his feelings intensify as he decides what he should do. In lines 31 to 36, the speaker suddenly uses a series of first-person pronouns: "I looked," "I knew," "my heart," "I debated," "mine, mine," and "I found." He thinks that at "that moment" Porphyria is completely and utterly his, and not only that but she is "fair / Perfectly pure

and good." It suddenly occurs to him what he should do, and that thing he finds to do is to take her hair in one "long yellow string" and wind it three times around her throat, strangling her.

There is no description at all of Porphyria's struggle or horror, and according to the speaker, she feels no pain. He insists upon this twice. The reader knows the events cannot have occurred exactly as the speaker presents them, that he gives the interpretation of those events shaped by his demented mind. The speaker imagines that his lover who has trouble leaving her social circle to be with him in fact "worships" him, that she is completely his, and that at the moment she is with him she is perfectly pure. He is taken with the perfection of the moment, and he realizes that what he must do is preserve it. Killing her is the only way he can possess her completely. This act, he suggests, is not to be condemned, since, he insists, his victim feels no pain.

Lines 43-55

After strangling and killing her, the speaker opens Porphyria's eyelids, using a strange simile that is at once grotesque and oddly innocent: he lifts her dead lids as perhaps a child would who opens a flower that holds a bee. Again, her eyes indicate that she is happy: they are laughing and "without a stain"□an unusual occurrence indeed, since Porphyria is dead. The speaker then proceeds to loosen the hair from around Porphyria's neck and kiss her on the cheek, which blushes beneath his caress. Now he props her up and puts her head on his shoulder; he points out that this is the same position they were in before, but now the roles are reversed, and he bears her on his shoulder. The balance of power, it seems, has shifted, after Porphyria has "given" herself to him completely and he has made sure that this will be the case for all time. The speaker explains that as he utters these lines, Porphyria's head is still on his shoulder, smiling and happy and free of its worries and in the state in which it has always wanted to be. He imagines that Porphyria shares in his joy of having stopped the passage of time in the exact moment in which her love for him is complete. She is finally free of all she scorned□perhaps her life in a monied society□ and has gained her true love. This strange and disturbing depiction of what is happening is made all the more eerie by the fact that the speaker says that it is Porphyria's head, drooped on his shoulder like a flower, that has these thoughts and feelings.

Lines 56-60

The last five lines of the poem show the speaker sitting still with his dead lover's head upon his shoulder, as he reflects that Porphyria would never have guessed how her darling one wish□to be with her lover forever□would finally be granted. The moment of their perfect love has been captured and preserved for all time. They have sat together in the same position all night, not stirring at all, and this, it seems, is the beginning of an eternity together. Again the speaker tries to convince himself (or the reader) that what he has done is not to be condemned, for he says that even God has not spoken about his act. But he leaves it open that he is himself not absolutely sure of God's approval, as

he says that "yet God has not said a word"□ indicating that He might still do so. Once again, this seems to imply that the speaker, by presenting or reliving his account of the night's events, tries in his demented state to justify to himself, presenting the situation in such a way as to show how he is not to blame but seeming to feel undercurrents of distress and guilt at his crime.

Themes

Madness

Browning's study of madness in "Porphyria's Lover" is subtly presented. At the beginning of the poem there is little sense that the person who narrates these events is insane. The form of the poem is regular, with a tight *ababb* rhyme pattern. Most of the poem is written in an uncomplicated iambic pentameter, in which every other syllable is stressed, creating a rhythmically soothing beat. The diction of the poem is straightforward (most of the words used are monosyllables), as is much of the description of events presented by the speaker. The poem begins with a simple description of a storm and then moves into a similarly straightforward description of Porphyria's movements. The narrator explains everything methodically, presenting a catalog of his lover's movements, as she shuts out the cold, kneels down, makes a fire, takes off her coat, and sits by his side. However, as is soon made clear, the apparent objectivity of the account and the outward, metrical impression of reasonableness and calmness belie the psychological upheaval in the speaker's mind. As the events of the evening unfold through the speaker's monologue, the reader realizes the speaker is not completely in touch with reality. The sudden shift in the speaker's perception of Porphyria□she is at first a strong, commanding presence and in the next moment is shown as weak and indecisive□indicates that actual events and his interpretation of them are not in accord.

In the second half of the poem, Browning offers more and more clues to show that the speaker is not merely delusional or confused because of his near-broken heart but that he is quite mad. Yet all this is presented, again, in a manner of eerie calm, even as the speaker describes how he takes his lover's hair and twists it around her neck until she is dead. At the moment of her death, there is no shift in rhythm (although the language of the poem does become progressively more metaphorical throughout the poem), and the detachment with which her death is reported makes the scene all the more shocking. At the end of the poem, it is obvious that the speaker has completely lost touch with reality, but again neither the tone nor the diction points overtly to his madness. Rather, the reader gets a sense of his dementia from what the speaker does not say, from how his depiction of events cannot possibly accord with reality, and from the incongruity of his insistence of his lover's happiness with the fact that she lies dead in his arms. Although nowhere in the poem does the poet Browning offer his own commentary on the events that take place or the state of the speaker's mind, with his presentation of Porphyria's lover's account of what takes place, he forces the reader to ask questions about the nature of the speaker's mind and madness. By not writing using disjointed language or crazy rhyme (the rhyme scheme is rather irregular but follows a very orderly pattern), Browning suggests that madness is a complex phenomenon that has more in common with sanity than most people would perhaps like to think.

Sex and Violence

"Porphyria's Lover" is not an overtly sexual poem by today's standards, but its frank depiction of an illicit love affair between a woman of high social standing and her poor lover would have been shocking to Victorian readers. However, Browning's poem is not shocking merely because it presents a transgressive sexual union but because of the way it depicts it. Nineteenth-century readers in England, despite strict societal standards of morality, were fascinated by stories of prostitution, unwed mothers, and torrid affairs, and the newspapers were full of stories catering to the public taste for scandal. Browning does not just offer the shocking story of an illicit affair but complicates it by showing the intimacy and complexity of the relationship and by provoking additional emotional reactions in readers when it is learned that the speaker kills his lover. Browning uses sex and violence in the poem to pose questions to readers about the nature of immorality. In the poem, Porphyria tries to seduce her lover by laying bare her shoulder and putting his head on her shoulder, and he in turn kills her and places her head on his. Both sex and violence were deemed "immoral" by Victorian standards, and Browning seems to be asking why this is as he shows the two acts mirroring each other. What makes these two very different types of acts "wrong" in the eyes of so many people? Why are sex and violence so intimately connected and of such interest to people that they continue to be fascinated with sensational and scandalous stories despite at the same time being horrified by them?

Dominance and Power

The two characters in the poem are lovers, but there is obviously a great deal of tension between them, and there is a sense of the speaker's unease at Porphyria's power. She is clearly more in charge: she is superior to him socially; she comes to see him and puts his house in order. She is a forceful presence as soon as she walks in the cottage and is able to shut out the storm. The speaker seems to resent her power over him. For, while he portrays her as strong and commanding, he insists that she is weak and needs him more than anything else. When he kills her, he finally reverses their roles so that he is in control; at the end of the poem, she sits with her dead head drooped on his shoulder, when before she had lain his cheek on hers. The fact that the woman is the more powerful partner in the relationship is contrary to the stereotype, and this may be the reason for the speaker's resentment and anger. The fact that he cannot control her□she has a gay social life which she enjoys□is a likely source of his bitterness, and the only way to rid himself of his feelings of impotence and powerlessness are to kill her. Again, while Browning offers no commentary on the nature of power in relationships, the poem brings up questions about how power dynamics manifest themselves in sexual partners' attitudes and behavior toward each other.

Experiencing an Infinite Moment

Time plays an important role in "Porphyria's Lover," which is made up of sixty lines divided into twelve parts using the same rhyme scheme. The use of sixty lines

(reflecting the minutes in an hour) made up of twelve clock-like sets might be Browning's way of emphasizing the significance of temporality. From the beginning, when he tells us the rain set in early tonight, the speaker is aware of time. When he describes Porphyria's weakness at not being able to leave her other life behind to be with him, he insists that she wants to be with him "forever." The speaker, in his delusional state, believes that by killing Porphyria he can preserve forever "that moment" of their perfect love, and he feels his action is justified because he has captured for all time the beauty of their relationship. His replaying of the scene in his mind□and thus the poem itself□seems also to be an attempt to stop time and experience forever the moment of their perfect love. This theme of experiencing an infinite moment (in which the lover experiences a woman's perfect love) was common in much Romantic literature, and it has been suggested by a number of critics that in his poem, Browning parodies this notion by showing a madman capturing this infinite moment with his gruesome murder of his loved one.

Style

Dramatic Monologue

"Porphyria's Lover" is a dramatic monologue, a poem in which a speaker talks to a silent listener about a dramatic event or experience. Browning is considered to be one of the earliest and greatest practitioners of this form, and "Porphyria's Lover" is his first poem in this style. The dramatic monologue offers readers intimate insight into the speaker's changing thoughts and feelings because he presents in his own words how he sees and understands the situation he discusses. However, as becomes clear in "Porphyria's Lover," much of what the reader learns about the speaker of the monologue comes not from the speaker's own revelations but from what he does not say. The speaker in "Porphyria's Lover," for example, never declares that he is mad, but the reader infers from his words that he must be. The speaker also means to convince (perhaps himself) that his actions are justified, but there are clues that he may not actually feel this way, and certainly the reader can decide, after considering what has happened, how the speaker should be judged. One of the most interesting features of the dramatic monologue is that it presents a situation through the words and thoughts of a particular character, but then it is up to the reader to decide to what extent that character's actual depiction of the events should be believed. With "Porphyria's Lover," the reader must determine by reading between the lines of the speaker's account how reliable a narrator he is, how accurate his portrayal of Porphyria is, what his intention is in recounting the story, and exactly what is the extent and nature of his madness.

Form

"Porphyria's Lover" uses a highly patterned structure: it is composed of sixty lines of verse divided into twelve sets of five lines each which rhyme *ababb*. The regularity of the pattern is contrasted with the unusual asymmetry of the *ababb* rhyme, and together they every effectively emphasize the inward turmoil of the speaker's mind. The use of iambic pentameter throughout most of the poem lends it a steady, rhythmic quality, which again contrasts sharply with the unusually disturbing events depicted in the work. Browning uses the highly structured form of the poem to reinforce the speaker's sense of his own calmness and sanity, as he speaks reasonably and straightforwardly about his despicable acts, indicating perhaps that madness is a complex phenomenon that is not always immediately identified as such.

Language

Browning often uses complex classical reference and colloquialisms in his poems, but the content and language in "Porphyria's Lover" seem straightforward and easy to understand. Again, the directness and apparent transparency of what is said by the speaker seem unusual considering that he is a madman whose thoughts should be

difficult to analyze. Browning seems to take pains to make the musings of a criminal psychopath clearly under- standable to every reader. The poem uses simple, short words. However, there are subtle developments in the poem to suggest the speaker's unusual state of mind and his heightening sense of conflict. At first, the poem relies almost exclusively on straightforward description as the speaker recounts the events that have taken place, but as it becomes clear that the events described are seen through the lens of the speaker's madness, the language becomes more metaphorical. In the early description of Porphyria, the speaker offers a simple physical description of her. She has smooth shoulders and yellow hair. But after he kills her, he uses vegetative imagery to describe her□her eyelid is like a shut bud that holds a bee, her head droops like a fallen flower, and it is smiling and "rosy"□which seems to accentuate her total subjection by him. Browning also uses language in other effective ways in the poem. For example, the sense of Porphyria's dominance over her lover and the difference in their temperaments is indicated by the active verbs which initially describe her and contrast her with the speaker's passivity. When the balance of power shifts as he kills her, the speaker reveals himself as in control, and this shift is accomplished by his associating himself with action while she lies passively and silent against him.

Historical Context

Strictly speaking, the Age of Victoria should correspond with the beginning and end of Queen Victoria's reign (1837 to 1901), but literary historians generally agree that the Victorian period began around 1830, when many social, political, and economic changes were taking place in English society. The Catholic emancipation of 1829, which enabled Catholics to sit in Parliament; the construction of the first railway in 1830; Parliamentary reform in 1832, extending the enfranchise to the middle classes (now one in five adult males could vote); the suppression of slavery in the colonies in 1833; and the beginning of the world's first industrial revolution meant profound changes in the existing social order. However, despite many positive social reforms, Victorian England was known also for its repressive attitude toward sexuality. This might have been partly as a backlash to the notorious debauchery of the Regency period during the early part of the century. Sexuality in the Victorian period was seen as taboo, not an appropriate subject of discussion. But, paradoxically, while moral purity was the norm in public, sex during the Victorian era was a powerful force in journalism, art, and literature. Sexual scandals were the subject of numerous newspaper stories, and the reading public had a voracious appetite for tales of illicit affairs. "Porphyria's Lover," written by Browning around 1834, during the early days of the Victorian period, takes on a scandalous subject that would have been of interest to the reading public that enjoyed shocking and horrific tales of sexual transgression. However, in his poem, Browning does not merely feed his readers' need for scandal by describing a sordid crime enhanced by madness and violence, but shocks his audience even further and thus forces them to question their desire for sensational stories that both titillate and horrify them.

The repression of sexuality in Victorian England, then, had the effect of unleashing a great deal of discourse about sex. The number of newspapers in Britain also multiplied during this time, and they became cheaper and more widely available. This burgeoning medium generated stories for popular consumption on a scale that had not been possible before. The papers' greater availability, coupled with increasing literacy, made scandals publicly accessible in new ways. It can be argued that the proliferation of sensational sex scandals in contemporary media has its roots in the Victorian era. The point here is that the social and material conditions were met during this period in Western history to make mass consumption of sensational material the phenomenon it continues to be today. Unfortunately for women, the double standards used to judge their sexual behavior in everyday life also found their way into the scandal sheets, and women suffered far more greatly than men if they were even rumored to be misbehaving sexually. A woman would lose her good name, be barred from society, and decried as "fallen," and because she was usually so completely under the power of her husband, any transgression on her part could mean being outcast for the rest of her life. Another reason that "Porphyria's Lover" is interesting in the context of Victorian social life is that the poem presents a situation in which a woman dominates an illicit relationship and the immorality of that relationship is then undercut by the horror of the murder that ensues. In the poem, Browning once again overturns his audience's

expectations by presenting a twist on a scandalous subject that requires them to reconsider their attitudes towards sexuality, propriety, and morality.

Critical Overview

"Porphyria's Lover" was published early in Browning's career in the first issue of the journal *The Monthly Repository* under the title "Porphyria." It received little notice upon its initial publication in 1836, and critics were similarly unresponsive when it was reprinted in 1842 in *Dramatic Lyrics* together with a companion piece "Johannes Agricola" under the general title, "Madhouse Cells." When it appeared again in 1863 in *Poetical Works* under its present title, Browning's reputation had grown, and all his earlier poems were more favorably reviewed than when they were first published, but the work was not singled out for praise. In *Browning: The Critical Heritage*, which includes all major critical assessments of Browning's works in his lifetime, "Porphyria's Lover" is mentioned but twice, and at that only briefly and in passing. The English writer Charles Kingsley writing in 1851 is said to have disliked it, but an anonymous 1876 critic refers to it as an example of a good short poem by Browning. In general, in the nineteenth century the poem seems to have been seen as one of a handful of immature verses written by a young Browning during a period when he was writing poetry in the confessional style and developing his techniques of the dramatic monologue.

In the twentieth century, Browning's reputation in English literature having been firmly established, "Porphyria's Lover" was heavily anthologized but presented to be "of interest" by most critics almost solely by virtue of its being a "murder" poem, an example of Browning's interest in criminal psychology and violence, and Browning's first dramatic monologue. However, as the critic Norton B. Crowell points out in his study of Browning's works, the poem "rarely received the attention it deserves." Most of the analyses of the poem were brief and covered single aspects of the poem.

An interesting but largely discredited interpretation of the poem was offered in 1900 by James Fotheringham, who claimed that the lover in the poem is dreaming and the entire action takes place in "wild motions" of his brain. C. R. Tracy's 1937 *Modern Language Notes* article, one of the first devoted entirely to a discussion of the poem, argued that the speaker of the poem is not mad, or at least no more so that others of Browning's characters. Several critics have dismissed the poem as minor and unimportant. Thomas Blackburn writing in *Robert Browning: A Study of his Poetry* in 1967, for example, complained that the work is "unleavened by insight," and Park Honan in *Browning's Characters* regarded it as an "extremely good anecdote" but essentially echoes the sentiments of the earlier critic J. M. Cohen that the work is a "juvenile and unrepresentative horror poem."

Recent commentators have tended to see the poem as more interesting and complex. While they agree that "Porphyria's Lover" certainly does not rank as one of Browning's most sophisticated works, they have pointed out the psychological complexity of the anonymous narrator, seen its indebtedness of earlier works such as John Keats's "Eve of St. Agnes" and William Shakespeare's *Othello*, recognized the use of techniques developed by Browning in his more mature monologues, suggested that the speaker views his lover as a vampire, and noted that the poem is an interesting study in abnormal psychology that anticipates Browning's most influential work.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4

Critical Essay #1

Kukathas is a freelance writer and editor. In this essay, Kukathas considers to what extent the reader should believe the mad speaker's account of events in Browning's poem.

Many readers agree that "Porphyria's Lover," is a poem in which a madman recounts to himself the events of the night before that end with his murdering the woman he loves. The speaker's actions and words□his strangling of his victim with her own hair and his insistence afterwards that she is glad at what has happened□surely point to his tenuous grip on reality. However, if the narrator in "Porphyria's Lover" is in fact insane, certain difficulties arise. Since his is the only account offered of what happens that stormy night, it seems that the reader gets only his version of events and then must try to figure out from his view how to assess the situation. But what is the truth in the speaker's description of the circumstances and what are merely delusions of a demented psyche? How is the reader to determine which part of the deranged speaker's story should be believed and which rejected as untrue?

One reason the dramatic monologue as a poetic form is so compelling is that it offers a situation told from the perspective of a single character who, the reader gradually realizes, cannot be completely trusted to present with total accuracy the events he describes. The reader, then, must be the judge, both of the speaker's character and the veracity of what he says. How is the reader to do this? In "Porphyria's Lover," Browning presents subtle clues to reveal to the reader the speaker's psychotic state, and it is up to the reader to pick up on these to make inferences and recognize what kind of man the speaker is. That is, Browning offers hints that tell the reader what can be believed about what the speaker is saying and that also show the workings of his unbalanced mind.

The clues Browning provides are of two kinds, which are used together to show the speaker's increasingly precarious grasp of what is real. First, with the structure of the poem, Browning shows the descent of the speaker into madness that takes place in three distinct stages. At the beginning of the poem, the speaker is in a depressed state, but he is not completely mad. His language and description of outward events indicate as much. But in the second part of the poem, as he turns increasingly inward, he is seen to be losing touch with reality: he does not describe outward events but presents only an interpretation of his lover's inner feelings and motives. By the end of the poem, the speaker can be seen to be clearly mad, as he offers again a description of outward events but in a manner that could not possibly accord with reality because they are so colored by his inner perspective. So then, Browning's second technique is to use changes in language to show how the speaker loses his grip on reality. In the first part of the poem, the language used is straightforward and descriptive. In the second part, it becomes more evaluative and concerned with emotion. In the final section of the poem, the speaker again offers descriptions of outward events, but this time his language is much more metaphorical, and the description of external events is offered together with the speaker's unlikely interpretation of them. The further the reader is taken into the

speaker's mind, the clearer it becomes that while his description of outward events can be taken seriously, his interpretation of them cannot be.

The first twenty lines of the poem consist of almost exclusively straightforward, descriptive words. Browning uses an extraordinary number of verbs□over twenty□in this section, and the adjectives he chooses for the most part describe external features. The speaker opens by setting the scene, explaining that it is raining, presenting the backdrop of trees and lake. He is alone in his cottage when in walks Porphyria. The description that is offered of Porphyria in the first part of the poem is completely external; it focuses on her actions, clothes, and body. She kneels down, rises up, unties her hat; her shoulder is "smooth white," her hair "yellow." The speaker in this first section of the poem does provide some information about himself, but it is minimal and concerns not his outward but his inner state. He is feeling dejected (with "heart fit to break") and silent when she calls out to him. There is a clear sense that he is depressed, but he is still in touch with reality, as his detailed observations of his surroundings and his lover indicate.

In line 21, after Porphyria murmurs that she loves him, the speaker abruptly moves from providing a description of external things to offering an interpretation of Porphyria's motives, feelings, and state of mind. The declaration of love on her part seems to set him off and now he does not *describe* her actions but *judges* them. The second section of the poem, from lines 21 to 40, then, turns to using language that is descriptive not of external objects and situations but of internal feelings and thoughts. The adjectives used become distinctly evaluative as the speaker's thoughts go inward. He explains that Porphyria is "too weak" to set her "struggling" passion free from pride. Sometimes her love for him overcomes her, as tonight, when she leaves a "gay feast" to be with him. As he looks into her eyes, the speaker sees that Porphyria is "happy and proud," and he realizes then that Porphyria worships him. The speaker's interpretation of Porphyria and her actions does not seem at all to accord with the more objective, straightforward description of her that he offers earlier. Her actions in the first twenty lines show her to be strong and decisive, but now the speaker says she is weak. The speaker also begins to use a great many first-person indicators, underscoring again that he is turning inward in his interpretation of what is happening. He says that Porphyria is "mine, mine" and then that she is "perfectly pure and good," and with that he strangles her with her own hair. So then, throughout most of this second section, Browning shows his speaker losing grip with reality as he ceases to offer objective reports of events but presents subjective evaluations instead. However, right at the end of the section, when the speaker describes the act of murder, he again uses objective, descriptive language, explaining that he kills his lover by winding her hair around her throat three times.

But then the tone shifts abruptly yet again in line 41. Immediately after he confesses his deed, the speaker offers his own bizarre interpretation:

In one long yellow string I wound
Three times her little throat around
And strangled her. No pain felt she□
I am quite sure she felt no pain.

In the entire third section of the poem, from line 41 through 60, the speaker offers this type of interpretation repeatedly. He presents a supposedly straightforward, objective description of an event but then immediately gives his own, incongruous understanding of it. He strangles Porphyria, but she feels no pain. (The speaker even repeats this thought to convince himself of its truth.) He then opens her (now dead) blue eyes, and they laugh. When he kisses her (lifeless) cheek, it blushes, and her rosy head smiles. The speaker's madness in this section has descended into yet another stage, and the changes in language signal this. In the first twenty lines of the poem, he is in a depressed state, but he seems to interpret the outward world correctly with his observations. In the second section of the poem, the inner workings of his mind show him to misinterpret his lover's feelings for him. Now, in the third section, he misunderstands and misinterprets even the most obvious external signs and events. He thinks his lover's blue eyes are laughing when they are more than likely wide open in shock. He thinks that she is blushing when what may have happened is that his touch has brought color (in the form of his body heat) to the surface of her dead face. Also, it is noteworthy that throughout this third section Browning has his speaker use far more metaphorical language than in the previous two sections. In the first description of Porphyria in lines 1 through 20, the speaker puts forth a catalog of her actions. In this third section, he compares her to a flower: her eye is a shut bud, and her head is smiling and rosy.

The speaker in the final section no doubt descends into complete insanity, which is made clear by signs indicating he no longer makes sense of the external world as he used to. He no longer merely objectively observes outward events but filters them always through the subjective, interpretive lens of his complex feelings for Porphyria, which are shown in the second section to make him clearly delusional. However, this is not to say that at the end of the poem the reader can no longer take seriously anything that the speaker says. What Browning does in the poem is to present the speaker's descent into madness by showing his increasing movement away from an objective understanding of events. What this seems to indicate is that the reader can still take seriously the facts of the speaker's account (that his lover enters the room, that he strangles her, that they sit together all night long) but not his interpretation of them. It is, then, the speaker's *reading* of what has happened on that night that reveals him to be less than sane. It is up to the reader of the poem, then, to separate the objective, factual description presented by the speaker and provide his or her own (necessarily subjective but most likely not tainted by madness) reading of it to better understand the whole truth of what has transpired.

Source: Uma Kukathas, Critical Essay on "Porphyria's Lover," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Popowich examines the various meanings attached to the word "Porphyria," especially that of delusional madness and its meaning for Browning's poem.

If one examines such a standby as DeVane's *A Browning Handbook*, or the recent Oxford edition of *The Poetical Works*, one discovers no conjecture upon the name in the title of "Porphyria's Lover." While Robert Browning's poetry is undeniably well annotated, one of his most famous terms, "Porphyria," has not been glossed, apparently because its meaning has been taken as clearly the proper name of a female character. But, while Porphyria is certainly used as a character name, it is far from only that. The term resonates of alternate states of mind, for it is the name of a disease that brings delusional madness to its sufferers. (The disease also causes purple urine, hence the name which is based upon the Greek *porphryos* or purple, a derivative of which, porphyry, Browning uses a dozen times elsewhere.) I contend that Browning gained knowledge of this disease shortly before he wrote the poem, and, because he had seen the delusions experienced by porphyria sufferers, he wrote the poem to be read in a most unstable way as the raving memory of an inmate in an asylum. My contention also serves to reinforce the importance of Browning's interest in the pathological.

Michael Burduck's 1986 article in *Studies in Browning and His Circle* is in partial response to the ready acceptance of "Porphyria" as merely a fanciful female name, as Burduck implicitly notes the lack of attention given to it. He considers the possible definitions of the term as he makes a case for the poem's use of a submerged theme of vampirism. Burduck's research, while helpful, does not state the obvious, that "Porphyria" seems not to have appeared previously as a woman's name. He, however, usefully comments upon the Gothic atmosphere of the poem, and in a footnote, comes within a hair's breadth of what I believe to be Browning's inspiration for "Porphyria." Burduck's reference is to a "rare blood disease" called porphyria in which sun-sensitive skin is the main symptom, and which was a condition treated from medieval times by the drinking of blood. But what he seems not aware of is that porphyria as a disease is much more than this, indeed being that "madness" which George III suffered.

If Browning understood porphyria as a form of delusional madness, and the speaker in the poem is then understood as largely or even completely deluded in his perceptions, indeed likely locked up in an asylum, the reading of the poem will shift away from the angle of interpretation proposed by this quotation from DeVane, which also contains a reference to an older name for the poem:

It is the opinion of Professor Tracy that the lover in
the poem is no more mad than many others of Browning's
heroes; he remarks that in calling this poem and
"Johannes Agricola" "madhouse Cells" the poet lacking
the full courage of his convictions, adopted a convenient

method of fobbing off these two poems as objective studies of mental aberration.

Besides some readers' wishes to diminish the possibility of delusion in the poem, what also is being referred to here is that the title "Porphyria's Lover" is actually a late, third title to the work. Its first 1836 appearance was simply as "Porphyria," and then its second appearance in 1842 was as "madhouse Cells, No. II" (linked with "Johannes Agricola"). "Porphyria's Lover" was only added in 1849 as a subtitle, and by 1863 the madhouse main title was dropped. This retitling of the poem has had the effect of moving the opening denotation away from the issue of madness to that of character and relationship, i.e. the "Lover," and readers have been led along with this lessened attention to madness in the title to a more literal approach to the speaker's situation. Unaware that porphyria likely refers to a disease affecting the mind, the reader has been resituated from looking through a cell-door at someone suffering a delusion to an ethereal perspective in a country cottage quite a large shift, itself indicative of the power of a title.

The question of just how to take the speaker in the poem has remained open. Herbert F. Tucker, Jr. in 1984 wrote on a number of possible motivations for why Browning would present "speakers in extremis" in dramatic monologue form. One reason involves the anxiety of influence from the lyric, first-person form of the past generation of poets, and Browning's wish to distance himself clearly from the extremity of the poem's speaker. Another reason Tucker proposes is almost the opposite, that Browning was making an ironic stance upon the reading public's overvaluation of the lyrical "I," as his mad speakers shattered expectations of what the private speaking voice in poetry would be like.

The issue of voice in this poem is a complex one of the self and language, of the poet speaking for another, if fictional, self, and of literary history and context. My contention that porphyria first and foremost meant madness to Browning serves to give his intention some clarity, but does not seek to answer for his fundamental interest in the chosen voice, other than to point out yet more definitely his interest in voices not often heard. Likewise, my seeing the speaker undoubtedly as in delusion in a madhouse helps to answer the question of what Tucker calls "the complicating factor of dramatic audience," for by placing the speaker in an asylum, the situation is altered to that of "doctor" and "patient," "keeper" and "kept," or "observed" and "observer." Furthermore, if one accepts Browning's use of a form of madness as the name for a woman, there is to be considered how he links madness and gender, particularly in the face of the violent end. (The editors of *The Poetical Works* provide the grisly sources that Browning drew upon for the murder of a woman by her "mate.")

Of course, my argument for extreme instability in the poem's speaker depends upon the hy- pothesis that Browning was aware of the disease porphyria as a form of madness in the early 1830s. The history of medical terminology is a most vague area, but there is enough evidence to afford this hypothesis a high probability. As to the disease itself, its modern history is recounted in this quotation from Ida Macalpine and Richard Hunter's

fascinating book, *George III and the Mad Business*, which traces in retrospect the hereditary disease's prevalence through the royal houses of Europe:

> Only in the present century did advances in medicine and biochemistry allow Sir Archibald Garrod to put forward the concept of 'inborn errors of metabolism' to account for a group of disorders in which inherited defects of body chemistry lead to an abnormal accumulation of toxic chemical substances which damage the nervous system. Among these is a rare variety, which was clinically defined only in the 1930s, called the porphyrias, because in attacks the urine is of a purple or dark colour, either when it is passed or left to stand. The biochemical lesion is a disturbance of porphyrin metabolism. These are purple-red pigments which are contained in every cell of the body and give blood its red colour. In the porphyrias their formation and excretion is greatly increased and they or their precursors appear in large amounts in urine and faeces. Their excess in the blood causes widespread intoxication of all parts of the nervous system, peripheral and central. In this group called variegate porphyria there is, in addition, sunsensitivity and increased fragility of the skin to trauma.

(Here is the same photo-sensitivity that Burduck noted as vampirish in the line "A sudden thought of one so pale," and in the overall gloom of the setting.)

While this disorder gained clinical definition only in the twentieth century, its very name was derived from the much older observation of the symptom of the purple urine. For instance, in *Dunglison's Medical Dictionary* of 1857, the definition is given:

> PORPYRURIA, from "purple" and "urine." A state of the urine in which it deposits the remarkable colouring matter.
> PORPHYURIA, Porphyruria.

The observation of this single symptom gave the name to a complex disease that was to be understood later as a metabolic disorder (which has alarming frequency in certain populations). Porphyria, then, is not a feminine form of a proper name, but originally a compound noun, purpleurine.

Even if it took into the twentieth century to define its cause, porphyria as a diseased condition was observed long before. In the work *Porphyria in Australia*, Roderick McEwin notes of the disease's research history:

> Scherer showed in 1841 that a substance of bloodred colour, but not due to iron, was present in blood□ The name porphyria first appeared in the literature in 1871 when Hoppe-Seyler prepared haematoporphyria from blood.

Throughout the nineteenth century, researchers were studying this symptom, and while these efforts were uncoordinated, there would have been opportunities for one to come across the term orally outside of the medical research literature, particularly for someone as interested in such matters as Browning. The term would have been in use long before inclusion in a medical dictionary.

It is hard to imagine, even if complete scientific understanding was lacking, that such a "remarkable" symptom would go unnoticed among relatively numerous "madhouse cell" occupants at the time. The patients with purple urine would be ones that would attract attention, for the disease's effect upon the nervous system is severe and they would be far from passive. Physicians studying the troubling case of George III, now realized to have had porphyria and to offer a representative example of its symptoms, described his mental state in the following way:

> Dr. Robert Darling Willis summed up the problem for the parliamentary committee in December 1810: "I consider the King's derangement more nearly allied to delirium□ In delirium, the mind is actively employed upon past impressions □ which rapidly pass in succession□ There is also a considerable disturbance in the general constitution; great restlessness, great want of sleep, and total unconsciousness of surrounding objects."□
>
> □ The first asylum doctor who studied George III's illness was Isaac Ray□ [H]e gave an account of all attacks from printed sources then available□ This attack (1810) closely resembled the others. It was manifested by hurry, restlessness, caprices, indiscretions, violence, and delusions.

Macalpine's thesis is that George III had a disease with physical origins, and not an "insanity." Such a distinction in definition and cause, however useful to hindsight's repairing of a royal reputation, would not keep any less distinguished patient out of one of the growing number of asylums of the time. Unquestionably Porphyria's lover has a number of the characteristics noted above, and one can soon place him in a madhouse cell, where he is actually in delirium, fixated upon God and his past deed, rather than still being at its location. In fact one might pursue a reading in which the desired woman is a delusional construct, a product of the madness after which she is named; although, when considering Browning's sources, I believe the speaker is intended to be a murderer.

The gap in the absolute proof of my argument is that in the 1830s there seem to be no recorded studies connecting the symptom of purple urine with delusion and violent madness. For instance, over the earlier period of George III's attacks (1788-1820), his discolored urine was often noted, but not directly related to his delusions. Yet, there was an explosion in scientific interest in insanity by the time of his death. Inevitably there would have been numerous asylum inmates who would have been exhibiting as an additional symptom the "remarkable" coloring effects of porphyria in their often extraordinarily confined cells. And this very unsubtle symptom had been given the name *porphyuria* at some point well before the mid-century (perhaps as Burduck notes even back to medieval times). In British medical history there is a long if inconsistent interest both in classification of symptoms, and also in studying urine. As Macalpine related in her book, the "piss prophets" were divining from urine in the seventeenth century. One only has to believe as probable that Browning would have visited an asylum (or spoke to someone who had) and encountered an example of porphyria. Then one can accept that his use of the term got its inspiration directly from a form of madness brought to his attention by asylum staff. Is this sort of excursion or contact, then, an action that can be assigned to Browning with reasonable likelihood?

As to the availability and attraction of an asylum, Macalpine's book is especially noteworthy for its analysis of the development of the "madhouse" in England after the time of George III. In her chapter "The Asylum Era: Acute Mania," she writes:

> When the insane were raised to the status of patients and hospitals were built for them and doctors took an interest in 'insanity,' a new specialty was launched, which was later named 'psychiatry' or 'psychological medicine.'
>
> By the middle of the nineteenth century the asylum era was in full swing.

While the social implications of these institutions are beyond the scope of this paper, I think it reasonable that Browning would have been especially attracted to such places, indeed fascinated by what he might learn there. In Donald Thomas' biography, we learn this of Browning in 1829, several years before he wrote the poem:

> In the following spring he withdrew from the university altogether Soon he was exploring new and more scientific paths of knowledge, perhaps a corrective to the prodigies and monstrosities of Wanley's *Wonders of the Little World*. He attended the lectures of Dr. James Blundell at Guy's Hospital, the celebrated physician sharing at least with Wanley a special interest in midwifery.

As Thomas points out earlier, Browning had a deep interest in new medical developments and in the medically unusual, likely fueled by his favorite childhood reading, manifesting in his adult life as his seeking of the obscure and often unpleasant:

> For such ghastliness he had been well prepared by other items of childhood reading. Chief of these was Nathaniel Wanley's *Wonders of the Little World: or, A General History of Man in Six Books* (1678). Among its anecdotes of piety the work contained much that was grotesque or terrifying. With great relish Wanley devotes chapters to monstrous births or abortions To the child's imagination Wanley also offered a chapter 'Of such persons as have changed their Sex', including a spirited chapter of a girl who leapt a ditch, ran screaming home to report that 'her Bowels fell out, but exhibited instead 'the hidden evidences of a man.' To complete the child's knowledge of the world there was a formidable section on torture and execution. He read, for example, a description of how a man might be severed at the waist, his upper half kept alive on 'an hot Iron, or Plate of Copper, that sears up the Veins.'

As W. Hall Griffin has noted, Browning turned to Wanley for a large number of later inspirations. Lest one think that this collection of the highly unusual was an isolated influence on Browning's uniquely developing curiosity, one can also note that at one time his father was found dissecting a rat at his desk in the Bank of England, or that his sister Sarianna's favorite reading was the graveyard humor of Thomas Hood. (Indeed it was a friend of his father that was the famous Dr. Blundell's cousin and led Browning to those surgery lectures.)

Following along in the path of Browning's interests in these earlier years, he later became particularly concerned with forms of insanity. He was especially interested in the production of "the Song of David" by Christopher Smart, supposedly scratched upon the walls of his cell in Bedlam. This act of "madness" is referred to in *Paracelsus*, itself a work that required much medically-related reading. Thomas outlines most completely Browning's incessant interest in such matters as insanity, phrenology, and criminal mentality. And, in regards to the creative process, Thomas notes how Browning kept his public self quite distinct from his private sources of inspiration. Given all this, it seems more difficult to believe that Browning would not have visited or inquired into asylums and madhouses than to accept that he would have.

Browning was eager to "see, know, taste, feel, all," and in this process he came across much that was esoteric and even macabre. While there doubtless can never be direct proof that with the first title, "Porphyria," he referred to a distinct condition of madness encountered in his wide-ranging explorations, which included "madhouse cells," it seems more than sufficiently probable that the first two titles of the work are more useful

as a guide to his original focus than the one by which the poem is now known. While this awareness may serve to guide readers concerned with the authorial intention into a yet further destabilized reading of what to make of that well-known act of love, it also illustrates much of the socio-historical milieu and its ability to generate such diverse and often disturbing work as Browning exemplifies.

Source: Barry L. Popowich, "Porphyria Is Madness," in *Studies in Browning and His Circle*, Vol. 22, May 1999, pp. 59-65.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Burduck studies "Porphyria's Lover" within the context of "traditional vampire lore."

For some curious reason scholars have virtually ignored the Gothic features of Robert Browning's "Porphyria's Lover." In the poem, Browning, familiar with the horror literature of his day (especially the lore lying behind such poems as Keats's "Lamia"), creates a dramatic soliloquy in which the speaker attempts to justify his murder of Porphyria by suggesting that she was a vampire. Throughout the work, he selects particulars that reinforce this view, for if he is convincing that he has killed a vampire, he believes he can absolve himself of guilt.

The first clue to Browning's strategy is the connotations of Porphyria's name. Three variations of "Porphyria" known during the nineteenth century shed some interesting light on the poem. According to Murray, the noun "porphyre" designates a type of serpent, while the adjective "porphyrian" pertains to the Neo-Platonic philosopher Porphyrius, a staunch antagonist of Christianity. In his famous dictionary, Dr. Johnson defines "porphyry" as a variety of marble that is extremely sensitive to light. Collectively these meanings conjure images of the undead. First, the snake suggests consummate evil and deadly, dagger-like fangs. In addition, the bloodsucker of legend despises all Christian symbols and reacts adversely to sunlight.

Along with the significance of Porphyria's name, Browning has his narrator carefully select details that suggest a vampiric view of Porphyria. The speaker opens his narration in the traditional Gothic manner as the mysterious lady enters at night during a storm. One can also speculate that the lover's weakened condition□"I listened with heart fit to break"□makes him the perfect prey for Porphyria's promises of eternal life and devotion. Next he analogizes her moving into the room to that of a serpent: "When glided in Porphyria." Typically, according to the narrator, she relies on a form of silent movement employed by the undead. She seems to command the storm to cease and the fire to blaze: "straight / She shut the cold out and the storm, / And kneeled and made the cheerless grate / Blaze up, and all the cottage warm;", thereby demonstrating some of her powers. In line 12 the narrator mentions her "soiled" gloves. Obviously they have been sullied by the rain, but the speaker's word choice suggests that they carry the blood stains of her previous victims. Sexual advances constitute part of the vampire's arsenal; and as the narrator recounts it, Porphyria seductively bares her shoulder as she tries to seduce the speaker, who refers to himself in lines 28-29 as "one so pale / For love□" Does he not suggest his discoloration results from her having previously drained some of his blood? Tradition maintains that a vampire's glance can lure a victim into a spell from which he has little chance of escape. Looking into her eyes, the lover becomes surprised as he feels his ability to resist weaken. Here he hints that she had supernatural power over him and thus he was not responsible for any ensuing actions. He suggests he is left with the two traditional alternatives: succumb to her seductions (which will make him one of the undead) or kill her.

The speaker resolves the dilemma mentioned in line 35 ("I debated what to do") in lines 37-38 with the words "I found / A thing to do□" At this point he tries to indicate that he rose to heights of heroics to slay her. His willpower triumphs, and he destroys the predacious creature. The method used to subdue Porphyria combines two procedures for eliminating vampires. When he strangles her with her hair, he performs a type of quasi-beheading. Also, according to legend, a vampire can be killed with a part of its own body. After the speaker slays Porphyria she appears curiously refreshed, just like the preternatural creature of lore once the vampire hunter relieves it of its unholy burden. Lines 56-57 ("she guessed not how / Her darling one wish would be heard.") show how the lover claims he demonstrates his love not by falling into Porphyria's trap as she had hoped but by destroying her. Browning's irony in the concluding line ("And yet God has not said a word!") becomes clear. The narrator actually believes that The Creator refuses to punish him because he has saved his own soul, as well as Porphyria's, by dispatching one of hell's voracious minions.

"Porphyria's Lover," then, is an early example of the self-deluded narrator and the dramatic irony that Browning would develop later in such poems as "Fra Lippo Lippi" and "Andrea del Sarto." Although "Porphyria's Lover" has been interpreted from numerous vantage points, studying the work in relation to traditional vampire lore might possibly offer an interesting, though exploratory, alternative reading.

Source: Michael L. Burduck, "Browning's Use of Vampirism in 'Porphyria's Lover,'" in *Studies in Browning and His Circle*, Vol. 14, 1986, pp. 63-65.

Critical Essay #4

In the following essay, Walker examines how Browning is able to fuse diverse elements into "poetic coherence" in "Porphyria's Lover."

The young Robert Browning manages remarkable mileage from nine sentences worth of the distracted reflections of "Porphyria's Lover." The poem is at once a murder shocker featuring a madman strangling a comely blond, a sociologist's case study of inability to communicate in a sexual relationship, a glimpse at the impact of artificial social values upon individual lives, a presodium pentathol excursion into the mind of an apparently motiveless killer, a convincing speculation as to why all men destroy the thing they love. Browning's fusion of such diverse forces into poetic coherence, let alone a compelling work of art, poses an intriguing problem in literary dynamics.

The only clear source in "Porphyria's Lover" of this surprising poetic resilience is the source of its flaws: Browning allows his intense interest in human dynamics to decrease the priority of the ordering formal aspects of his poem. Such subordination of form tends to artistic blunting□in this poem occasionally to chaos□but at the same time frees the poet to concentrate upon seeing rather than upon expressing prior judgment. Browning plays no favorites; the tenacious ambiguity of the poem demonstrates the balanced sympathy generated for the opposing characters. We are as shocked as we are empathetic with Porphyria's strangler. We share his tenderness for Porphyria at the same time we recognize her greed in grasping for the best of both worlds. The very madness advertised in the "Madhouse Cells" title becomes a moot question: Though the Lover's behavior is clearly antisocial, his motives for that behavior are not easily condemned. Browning's noncommittal stance and resulting psychological acuteness usher us into a credible, dynamic, uncomfortably unresolved poetic world.

Thus from forced suspension of judgment Browning generates tensions which energize the poem. "Porphyria's Lover" is a struggle from its introductory storm to the unresolved ambiguity of its final line. Structurally, the poem is a juxtaposition of antitheses. The most apparent of its many dilemmas is the simultaneous attraction and repulsion of Porthyria and her lover, "lovers" satisfied neither with union nor with separation: They can't live without each other; they can't live with each other.

Browning dramatizes the ambivalence of their relationship by personality contrasts□she is a collage of "yellow" and "blue" and "rosy" color, he is "so pale"; she initiates almost all the action of the poem, he is catatonically passive; she is talkative, he silent; she reflects the norms of society and its "gay feast," he is the isolated individual in his "cottage." The paradox of the lovers' total misunderstanding of each other underscores these constant contrasts. Much is made in the poem of inability to communicate, of inadequate listening, of failure to answer□he listens "with heart fit to break"; for her, "no voice replied."

Sexual conflict intensifies the friction of the communication gap. The female at first dominates, approaching the man, carrying the conversation, initiating the lovemaking.

The Lover's perception of her as indecisive, as "too weak," is pathetically typical of his projection of his own inadequacies. Her aggressiveness penetrates even the diction; there are more verbs in the Porphyria passages, and they are significantly more active.

The poem pivots upon male assertion of dominance. The ardor of the battle for power is evident in the man's satisfaction in the ascendant role: "this time my shoulder bore / Her head." The sudden lurch to trochees from previously steady iambs signals the shift of power, and the vegetative imagery the "shut bud," the "rosy" head which, flower-like, "droops" underlines her total subjection. Male-female confrontation sparks considerable sexual tension. As its title hints, the poem could be read as a sensually rhythmic accelerando to the climactic fulfillment of a literal dying; Porphyria's disrobing stimulates a vigorous movement of clauses passionately accelerating to the ejaculatory rhythm of "mine, mine, fair / Perfectly" and its metrically and syntactically satiated aftermath.

The frictions between Porphyria and her lover are multiplied by vacillation within his mind, vacillation made visible as he projects his moods upon the environment. His alternating visions of storminess and warmth approach manic depression in their drastic divergence. The poem begins in the "cheerless" atmosphere of a wet, windy storm, thereafter shifting precipitously between this "sullen" mood and the warmth surrounding Porphyria, her "yellow hair," the fire she causes to "blaze up," and the whole overflow of laughter she brings with her from the "gay feast." The very diction softens when Porphyria is viewed; liquids and sibilants, overwhelmed by harsher consonants in stormy parts of the poem, predominate three to one near Porphyria.

Beneath these rhythmic tensions, the poem pulses with the systole and diastole of reasoned madness. Browning rejects the temptation of writing crazily to portray insanity. The poem is formally regular especially for Browning. Over three-fourths of its uncomplicated iambic tetrameter lines are unvaried. Diction, 85% monosyllables, is sanely simple. Tight ABABB rhyme pattern starches the regularity. Even syntactically, "Porphyria's Lover" is far less elliptical than "Fra Lippo Lippi," far less convoluted than "Andrea del Sarto." The metrical impression is one of calm, methodical reasonableness, and it is significant that the reasonableness approaches total detachment during the strangling itself. Rigid regularity provides a solid background for the counterpoint of psychological chaos, at the same time reflecting the obsessive care with which the Lover strives to repress aberrant impulses.

The structural conflicts of "Porphyria's Lover" proliferate through the prism of Browning's narrative perspective. The Lover's insight, the focal center of the poem, varies widely in depth, from naively superficial naming of emotions, through revelation projected in his perception of the external world, to penetrating clues of characterizing thought patterns. The poem moves from a wideangle perspective of the storm to a close-up of Porphyria disrobing, from the almost tactile intimacy of the strangulation to the broad philosophical perspective of "And yet God has not said a word."

This complex central point of view is further refracted by reader reaction. The Lover's language, not so much the language of thought as the more associative language of

conversation, invites reader response. By partly talking to himself, partly addressing an individual listener, and partly appealing for sanction to a metaphysical system, the Lover forces the reader to view his position from those varying perspectives. Browning exposes us to the interior of a value system with which we partially identify and yet whose very sanity we question, thus altering our viewpoint from that of curious bystander to that of confidant, then double, perhaps psychiatrist, even God.

Illuminating and yet further complicating the whole spectrum of the poem's point of view is the evaluative control of Browning himself. That control, usually imperceptible, becomes pointed in the poet's acute application of dramatic irony: "As a shut bud that holds a bee," for example, portrays the projected hostility of the Lover as tellingly as it describes the grotesqueness of Porphyria's condition. Browning's multifaceted viewpoint subtly explicates through ironic refraction of perspective.

But the ultimate control of the poem, the power which prevents the centrifugal force of its complex and shifting points of view and tensions from im- pelling it off the page, is focus in time. The poem's conceptual heart is an attempt by Porphyria's Lover to prolong the ideal moment, "that moment" when "she was mine, mine, fair / Perfectly pure and good." The very line, dragging its spondaic feet, seems loath to pass. From the initial time reference□"early" in the first line□to the "now" and "yet" and "all night long" which in the final three lines become static equivalencies, the entire movement of the poem is a striving to stay the external moment.

The structure itself is almost graphically temporal; the poem contains exactly sixty lines comprising a clocklike twelve stanzas. Its iambic tetrameter beats as regularly as a metronome. Concern with transcending time is emphatically stressed. "For ever," in line 25, stands at the climax of one of the five-line stanzas, receiving the full force of its triplet of rhyme and standing out further as the only feminine rhyme in the entire poem, its additional syllable propelling its rhythmically out of time. Thus the formal weight of this central line, "and give herself to me for ever," underscores the fervor of the Lover's longing for an eternal present with Porphyria. The Lover, like the poem, strives to extend infinitely "that moment she was mine."

And he succeeds. His strangulation of Porphyria terminates time not only for her, but for himself. Upon attaining the finality of "that moment," the poem strives for stasis. Terminal punctuation of clauses doubles in frequency, braking the syntax. A crescendo of "again"s, "once more"s, "as before" s, and "still"s hallmarks the timelessness of the "all night long" in which Porphyria and her Lover "have not stirred" and God has indicated His eternal changelessness by not saying a word. The poem has become a paradigm of the artistic paradox of attempting to enrich life by arresting it in static form.

Thus Browning molds "Porphyria's Lover" into a lens of a moment, focusing the entire raw power of his poetry through that moment. It is the intensity of the temporal focus which unites the disparate moods and methods of the poem, concentrating otherwise dissipative forces into an explosive proximity. The moment is everything; the moment of the poem, like the Lover's endless moment, unites past and future in a perpetual present, and captures motive, action, and consequence within the framework of

immediate psychology. Browning, like the Lover, succeeds in maintaining his moment by transfixing it. In that success lies the vitality of the poem. "Porphyria's Lover" is an amalgamation of structural irresolution, viewpoint wavering between nebulousness and didacticism, and psychological inconsistency wandering from objectivity to sentimentality made poetically compelling by suspension within an artistic moment.

Source: Steven C. Walker, "'That Moment' in 'Porphyria's Lover,'" in *Studies in Browning and His Circle*, Vol. 7, No. 2, Fall 1979, pp. 70-74.

Adaptations

The Victorian Web maintains a Browning web page at http://landow.stg.brown.edu/victorian/rb/ rbov.html with links to other interesting sites.

The audio collection entitled *Robert Browning: Selected Poems* (1984), edited by William C. DeVane, contains a representative selection of dramatic monologues, dramatic romances and lyrics, and short poems that are annotated and are supplemented by an introduction, a list of principal dates in Browning's life, and a bibliography.

Robert and Elizabeth Browning (1998), a video in the Master Poets Collection, presents an overview of the lives, careers, and relationship of these two prominent Victorian poets.

Topics for Further Study

Compare and contrast "Porphyria's Lover" with another of Browning's dramatic monologues, such as "Johannes Agricola" or "My Last Duchess." What similar patterns do you see in the writing? What differs in their tone and style?

In "Porphyria's Lover," what clues suggest that the speaker's account is unreliable, that what he says cannot be true? What would make you not trust his recounting of what happened?

Do some research into the psychology behind crimes of passions. Based on your research, are crimes of passion only committed by those who are mentally unstable, or are "normal" people also capable of such acts?

Do some research into the way modern U.S. courts evaluate sexually-motivated crimes. Explain how a modern court would address the crime and criminal that this poem presents. What do you consider would be a just punishment for Porphyria's lover? Explain your answer.

Assume the identity of the speaker and write the defense you would use at your trial to explain the events that led up to the murder.

Do you think there is evidence in the poem to suggest that Porphyria is a vampire? If so, what is it? If not, why do you think this is not a reasonable interpretation of the poem?

Research the treatment of the criminally insane in England in the 1860s and their treatment in the United States in 2002. Write a compare and contrast essay that describes how the speaker in this poem would be treated in these different times and places.

Compare and Contrast

1830s: The invention of the steam press, cheaper paper, and increasing literacy in England results in the proliferation of newspapers, including a great number of scandal sheets.

Today: Circulation of tabloids in England such as the *Daily Mirror*, that concentrate on scandalous stories, far exceeds that of other daily publications.

1830s: In England, a man has the legal right to beat and lock up his wife; a woman who leaves her husband is not allowed even to keep what she earns; a man may divorce his wife but a woman must prove cruelty or desertion if she wants to leave her husband. She is not able to obtain a divorce.

Today: In the United States, statistics show that women experience more than ten times as many incidents of violence (including murder) against them by their spouses or partners than do males.

1830s: In England, middle- and upper-class men were expected to have affairs, but the slightest hint of scandal that a woman had a sexual relationship outside marriage meant social ostracism.

Today: In the United States, more men than women are reported to commit adultery, but more women than men file for divorce to get out of bad marriages.

What Do I Read Next?

"My Last Duchess," published in 1842, is perhaps the most celebrated of Browning's dramatic monologues. It presents in fifty-six lines the thoughts of the Duke of Ferrara about his late wife, but as much is revealed about the coldness and inhumanity of the duke as about his gracious and exquisite wife.

Browning's early lyric "Johannes Agricola in Meditation," which was published together with "Porphyria's Lover" in *Dramatic Lyrics* in 1842 under the general heading of "Madhouse Cells," is also a study of madness, in this case of religious mania.

Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996) reconstructs the sensational story of a 16-year-old Canadian housemaid named Grace Marks who was tried for the murder of her employer and his mistress.

Dark Dreams: Sexual Violence, Homicide, and the Criminal Mind (2001), by Roy Hazelwood and Stephen G. Michaud, reveals the twisted motives and thinking that go into sexual crimes.

Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness (1992), by William Styron, describes the author's own descent into depression and madness.

Further Study

Curry, S. S., *Browning and the Dramatic Monologue*, Haskell House, 1965.

Curry claims that Browning invented a new language with the dramatic monologue, which might account for why critics were slow to embrace his work.

Dupras, Joseph, "Dispatching 'Porphyria's Lover,'" in *Conversations: Contemporary Critical Theory and the Teaching of Literature*, edited by Charles Moran and Elizabeth F. Penfield, National Council of Teachers of English, 1990, pp. 179-86.

Dupras expresses the difficulties he encountered in teaching "Porphyria's Lover" to his students and explains that when a teacher forcefully determines a poem's "meaning" to other readers, the poem dies.

Pearsall, Robert Brainard, *Robert Browning*, Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1974.

Pearsall provides a straightforward account of Browning's career as a whole and attempts to say something useful or interesting about every book and every poem that Browning published.

Sutton, Max Keith, "Language as Defense in 'Porphyria's Lover,'" in *College English*, Vol. 31, No. 3, December, 1969, pp. 280-89.

Sutton shows how this poem spoken by a madman extends the reader's awareness of how the mind works and reveals what madness is like by following the speaker's train of thought.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Poetry for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Poetry for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from PfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from PfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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