

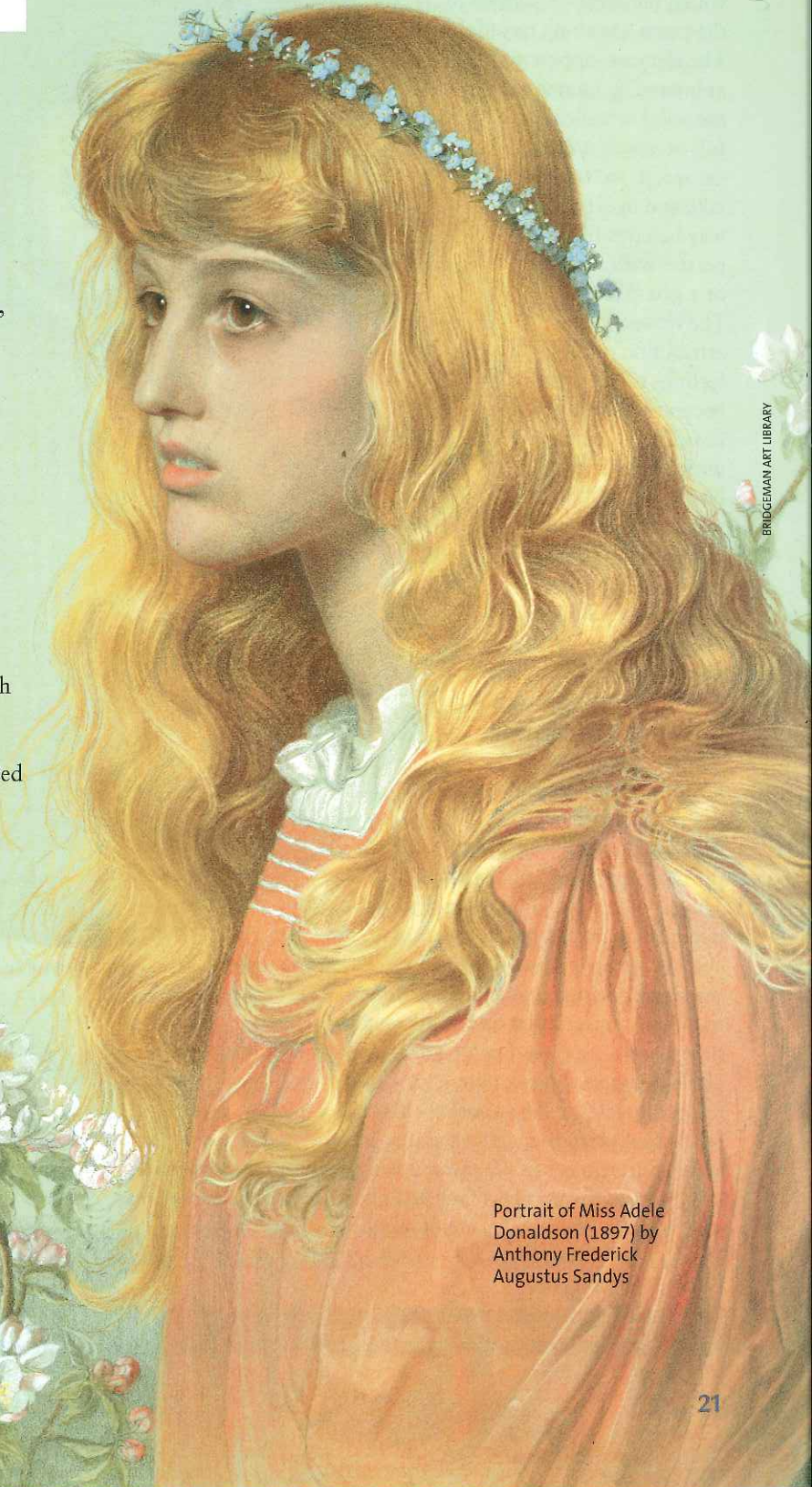
'Porphyria's Lover'

Paul Cheetham explores the psychological dimensions of Browning's dramatic monologue

As a young man Robert Browning (1812–89) was fascinated by what he called 'unusual states of mind'. As a means of exploring these, he developed the literary form known as 'the dramatic monologue', which the *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* defines as follows:

A kind of poem in which a single fictional or historical character other than the poet speaks to a silent 'audience' of one or more persons. Such poems reveal not the poet's own thoughts but the mind of the impersonated character, whose personality is revealed unwittingly.

One of Browning's best known dramatic monologues, and certainly one of his most accessible, is 'Porphyria's Lover', which contains all the ingredients for a riveting short story — tempestuous weather, romance (with a dash of sexual titillation thrown in for good measure), class-consciousness, a mentally unbalanced central character, homicide and a touch of religion — all effortlessly delivered in a mere 60 lines of rhyming verse.



Portrait of Miss Adele Donaldson (1897) by Anthony Frederick Augustus Sandys

Nature and emotion

The opening of the poem is highly atmospheric:

The rain set early in tonight,
The sullen wind was soon awake,
It tore the elm-tops down for spite,
And did its worst to vex the lake. (lines 1–4)

This does more than give us a vivid picture of the background against which the events described in the poem are about to unfold.

The elements appear to be animated by human feelings:

the wind is 'sullen'; it is full of 'spite'; it does 'its worst' to 'vex' the lake and in every way behaves like a person with a grudge or a grievance.

The reason for the attribution of these feelings to the wind becomes clear in the next line: 'I listened with heart fit to break' (line 5), which gives us our first insight into the mind of the narrator.

It suggests that his distress (at present unexplained) colours his view of the weather and leads him to find in it a reflection of his own feelings. Nature, in other words, acts as what T. S. Eliot called an 'objective correlative' for the narrator's sense of heartbreak.

The air of desolation at this point in the poem is intensified by the mention of 'the cheerless grate' in line 8, which reveals that, despite the storm raging outside, the narrator has been so absorbed in his own misery that he has allowed the fire to go out. Before we leave these opening lines it is worth remarking on Browning's choice of verse form and the skill with which he manipulates it. The unusual choice of a five-line stanza (with an *Ababb* rhyme scheme), not immediately apparent since the poem is usually printed without any stanza divisions, ties line 5 to the previous four and gives us our first important clue as to the narrator's state of mind.

Seductive angel

Porphyria is introduced to the reader with something approaching reverence, almost as though she is an angelic figure:

she 'glided in'. She transforms the atmosphere and appearance of the cottage, and from the detailed description of what she does (lines 6–13) it is clear that the narrator is watching her every movement. Then, finally 'she sat down by my side / And called me' (lines 14–15). The use of the caesura at this point in line 15 is masterly. The reader waits in vain for the narrator's response and after a long pause is

then intriguingly told 'When no voice replied', as though the narrator is describing someone else. His silence also reminds us of the use of the word 'sullen' in line 2 and reinforces the image of someone brooding and self-absorbed. This strange mixture of detachment and self-absorption may make us begin to wonder about the narrator's grip on reality.

Provoked by his unresponsiveness and not surprisingly hoping to win round her gloomy and taciturn suitor, Porphyria now embarks on a little gentle seduction, slipping her gown off 'her smooth white shoulder' (line 17) and gently pulling his head down onto it. At this point she makes what proves to be the fatal mistake of 'Murmuring how she loved me' (line 21), which then prompts the narrator to provide us with some crucially important information, both about Porphyria's circumstances and his own interpretation of her behaviour. He tells us that she is:

Too weak, for all her heart's endeavour,
To set its struggling passion free
From pride, and vainer ties dis sever (lines 22–4)

It is easy to take this as a statement of fact, but it is, of course, the narrator's version of the facts. The references to 'pride' and the 'vainer ties' suggest not merely that Porphyria comes from — or aspires to — the company of a higher stratum of society than the narrator but that she is also married, or at least engaged, to someone of that class. It is the narrator who credits Porphyria with a struggle between what he perceives as her 'passion' (mentioned in line 23 and repeated for emphasis and



Robert Browning (1812–89)
by Thomas Buchanan Read

self-reassurance in line 26) and her social aspirations. He then proceeds to reveal his conviction that Porphyria's passion has, at least momentarily, got the better of those aspirations, as proved by her willingness to battle 'through wind and rain', but at the same time he lets slip the reason for his sense of desolation: he tells us that he is 'pale / For love of her, and all in vain' (lines 28–9). This man is desperate for Porphyria to 'give herself to me for ever' (line 25 — once again the resounding last line of a stanza). Many people have the experience of harbouring — and recovering from — an unrequited passion, but the narrator's feelings for Porphyria look dangerously like an obsession. We begin to sense that, without her being as yet aware of it, Porphyria may well be about to find herself in a much more serious situation than she had in mind when she set out for what she probably anticipated would be nothing more than a couple of hours' dalliance with her admirer.

Eternal possession

The next few lines enable us to learn more about the narrator's state of mind. Convinced by Porphyria's battle through the storm to reach him (again emphatically placed at the end of a five-line stanza, line 30), the narrator takes a breath-taking leap to the conclusion that 'Porphyria worshipped me' (line 33). He admits to his 'surprise', though it does not prompt him to consider other possible reasons for her behaviour, such as that she may feel sorry for him or might simply enjoy the frisson of an occasional illicit liaison (after all, we have seen in line 17 that she is willing to engage in quite suggestive behaviour), and the tension mounts as he 'debated what to do' (line 35). Why should he be wondering what to do, other than enjoy the moment?

A further insight into the narrator's increasingly fevered, although outwardly placid, mood is provided by his triumphant comment, 'That moment, she was mine, mine, ...' (line 36). The repetition of 'mine', reminiscent of a child jealously claiming a toy or present, exposes the narrator's love for Porphyria as possessive and exclusive. The consequence to which he finds himself inexorably driven by his firm belief in Porphyria's love for him is made all the more chilling by the banality of the word he uses to introduce his solution to his dilemma: 'I found / A thing to do' (lines 37–8). This trivialisation of the significance of his act in strangling Porphyria means that the act frequently takes fresh readers of the poem totally by surprise, and what can only be described as his euphemistic treatment of the sequel begins to confirm our suspicion that the narrator's mind has been seriously unhinged by his emotional turmoil. He tells us not once but twice that 'she felt no pain' (lines 41 and 42), raising suspicions that, like Lady Macbeth, he 'doth protest too much', and there is something macabre about the natural imagery he uses ('As a shut bud that holds a bee' — line 43) in his attempt to convince both himself and the reader that in a sense Porphyria is still alive and enjoying being liberated from all the constraints that previously prevented their union.

His sense of triumph at his realisation that at long last he is in control is brilliantly conveyed by the syncopated rhythms of

lines 50 and 51 ('Only, this time my shoulder bore / Her head, which droops upon it still') where, because of the context, the stresses fall on the unpredictable words 'this', 'my' and 'her'. The slowing-down of the verse, necessitated by the shift in stresses and so noticeable after the smooth narrative flow that has been such a feature of the poem up to this point, may reflect the relish with which the narrator dwells upon the changed situation. Whereas we may assume, from the obvious awe in which the narrator holds Porphyria, that previously it was she who dominated and determined the relationship, now it is the narrator who is in charge. His self-delusion is shown to be complete by the conclusion he draws from the expression on the face of the 'smiling rosy little head' of the corpse sitting beside him. For him it is convincing evidence that it is:

So glad it has its utmost will,
That all it scorned at once is fled,
And I, its love, am gained instead! (lines 53–5)

He is clearly quite satisfied that he did Porphyria the ultimate favour in liberating her from the social constraints from which she really wished to be freed but which she could never quite bring herself to shake off. With supreme irony he quite correctly comments, 'she guessed not how / Her darling one wish would be heard' (lines 56–7); in the context 'darling' is particularly chilling.

And so Browning comes to the end of the poem, but in signing off, the narrator leaves us with an enigma: how is the last line to be spoken?

And yet God has not said a word. (line 60)

Is the narrator disappointed that God has not shown His approval of his act? Or does he regard God's silence as a sign of His tacit approval of what the narrator has done? Or is he merely puzzled at the divine silence, not knowing what to make of it? All three interpretations — and there may be more — can be justified.

Whatever our interpretation of the last line, there is no doubt that in 'Porphyria's Lover' Browning has achieved a masterpiece of psychological exploration. The narrator begins by projecting his own embittered feelings onto the wind and rain and then proceeds to project his adoration of his beloved onto the beloved herself, so that, in his imagination, it is reciprocated. And so begins the process of bizarre logic in the narrator's unbalanced mind which leads to Porphyria's death. The poem is tantalising in all sorts of ways. Anyone who reads it inevitably feels a pang of regret that we never hear Porphyria's side of the story, but at least Browning gives us enough clues to enable us to read between the lines and construct a vivid profile of a narrator who, in the best traditions of the dramatic monologue, tells us much more about himself than he ever realises.

Paul Cheetham has recently retired after 40 years of teaching English literature, the last 20 of them at Fettes College, Edinburgh.