

Shelter from the storm



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In Robert Browning's dramatic monologue, "Porphyria's Lover," the love-stricken frustrations of a nameless speaker end in a passionate, annihilating response to society's scrutiny towards human sensuality. Cleverly juxtaposing Porphyria's innocent femininity and her sexual transgression, Browning succeeds in displaying society's contradictory embrace of morality next to its rejection of sensual pleasure. In an ironically tranquil domestic setting, warm comfort and affection come to reveal burning emotional perversions within confining social structures. The speaker's violent display of passion ends not with external condemnation, but with the matter-of-fact sense of a duty fulfilled. Porphyria's lover sits next to his murdered love without any regretful aftermath or consequence; from the narrator's viewpoint, a perception wholly distorted by the forced internalization of his feelings for Porphyria, not even the ultimate hand of God can rob him the serenity of a moment free from judgment. Browning's presentation of an unreliable narrator is necessarily so, for in the ironically ordinary setting of Victorian simplicity, the speaker's insanity is justified and accounted for. With traditional notions of nature's wrath and God's omnipotence framing the start and finish of the scene, Browning employs the narration's natural poetic flow in order to heighten the blow of the unexpectedly unorthodox turn of events. The speaker's great passion comes to parallel that of God, nature, and ultimately, social expectations, thus embodying the force of the "sullen wind" (Line 2) itself. Browning's poem cannot be seen merely as a character analysis of a nameless speaker; its events frame not only the speaker's apparent insanity but the primary source of his distorted emotions. The narrator's own "struggling passion" (23) impedes his ability to think and act in a way that society views appropriate; yet, paradoxically, it is society's

limited notion of what is appropriate that kindles the ultimately fatal fire of his passionate endeavor. Browning grants certain credibility to the narrowness of the speaker's viewpoint in that it displays the most extreme result of lifelong subservience to the world's own confining expectations. Introducing nature's unpredictability at the onset of the poem, Browning suggests the detrimental effect of an outside force and foreshadows the speaker's equally spiteful gesture: " It tore the elm-tops down for spite, / And did its worst to vex the lake: / I listened with heart fit to break" (3-5). Here the speaker muses about his apparent powerlessness to weather's force, the symbolic obstacle of the outside world that keeps Porphyria away. Importantly, " When glided in Porphyria" (60), the narrator's weakened heart has already been broken many times if not once, both by social restrictions on his love affair, and the subsequent limitations on Porphyria's love for him. Therefore, the speaker's distance from the world outside becomes also an inability to respond to Porphyria upon her entrance; he sits in the cottage wanting only her love, without need of explanation, so that when he is spoken to, " no voice replied" (15). Soon, Porphyria's gift of comforting warmth within the storm exacerbates his obsession to the point of insanity-driven violence. Paradoxically, the warmth of Porphyria's love appears to the narrator to be so temporary that it incites his own predominant passion. Innocently seeking to comfort her afflicted lover, Porphyria forces him to embrace her and makes " her smooth white shoulder bare" (17). Abruptly, Browning's scene of chilling weather interrupted by warm companionship becomes a picture of overt sexual expression amidst the cottage's roaring fire. The initial presentation of traditional domesticity, a comforting shelter from a raging storm, turns quickly now to unstoppable, passionate pace. The

reader cannot presume to know whether Porphyria's expressed love for the speaker is true; what is important is that Browning's speaker sees murderous action as the only way to preserve the moment and eliminate social barriers. The speaker's lust for precedence over other forces in Porphyria's life evidently leads to her fatal end. His ecstasy at her new, momentary devotion leaves him at the gate of attaining his dream, but without any sense of trajectory: " Porphyria worshipped me; surprise / Made my heart swell, and still it grew / While I debated what to do" (33-35). On the instantaneous realization of Porphyria's love, the speaker's requited passion and rational mind still stand separate to some extent. However, it is not long before his heated desire to keep her " Perfectly pure and good" (37) lead him to find " A thing to do" (38). The narrator's being situated above social law, if but only once, proves to be so stunningly empowering that he loses rational ability to decipher anything but a self-centered whim. The complacency of Browning's speaker in carrying out his murderous deed ironically reflects the complacency of society towards the sexual, aesthetic, and sensual pleasures of life. Exhibiting no definite regret beyond the weariness of having taken what was the only available path, the speaker points to the painlessness of his lover's necessary death: " No pain felt she; / I am quite sure she felt no pain" (41-42). However, Browning's presenting the reader with an unreliable narrator serves only to intensify the psychological effects of his unrequited love, and says nothing for the supposed convictions and yearnings of Porphyria. While Porphyria finds her way to the speaker through the symbolically oppressive weather of the outside world, the speaker kills her upon realizing not only society's restrictions on their relationship, but Porphyria's own unwillingness to love him fully but for the present moment.

He proclaims somewhat vehemently, “ Porphyria’s love: she guessed not how / Her darling one wish would be heard” (56-57). Browning presents the justifiability of the murder only through the stricken eyes of the narrator; while the poet points to social confines as the cause of the speaker’s insanity, he does not discount the narrator’s moral responsibility for the deed. The narrator perceives to some degree the selfishness of his decision, for “ As a shut bud that holds a bee” (43), he limits Porphyria’s sexual freedom by ending her life. Yet in freezing the moment and liberating the two of them from social structures, he distorts the deed to a point where it appears to be a divine event foreseen even by God. In toying with Porphyria’s dead body, the narrator relates not the coldness of sudden death, nor the warmth of sitting with his love, but the blazing, untouchable serenity of enacted passion: “ her cheek once more / Blushed bright beneath my burning kiss” (49). In the moment of Porphyria’s death, the existence of her heated love for the speaker appears to him to be so infallible that God cannot even intervene: “ All night long we have not stirred, / And yet God has not said a word!” (59-60). Browning presents the viewpoint of a speaker educated in the divine workings of an ultimate force, yet the long-stifled yearnings of an unjustly socialized man color the intensity of the situation. In Browning’s dramatic monologue, God’s hand of judgment shifts away from the murderer himself and onto the culture that first inhibited the speaker’s rational thought. Browning’s characterization of a nameless speaker in “ Porphyria’s Lover” forms an unexpectedly conclusive response towards the sensual numbness of Victorian society. While the suggested insanity of the speaker would traditionally indicate the narrator’s unreliability in a moral sense, Browning constructs the isolated scene such that the lover’s

emotional internalization is not only understandable, but divinely justified. The musings and actions of this unreliable narrator serve to illustrate the consequence of society's confines in a shockingly violent release. Through naturally flowing language, this poetic account of burning emotion within a setting of tranquil domesticity presents the all-consuming power of human sensuality in its bleakest attempt to override social structures.