

## Robert Browning: “Porphyria’s Lover”

- I. Browning’s education and influences
  - A. Much of Robert Browning’s education was based on his own reading of his father’s extensive library
  - B. He admired Romantic poets such as Keats and Shelley, and was encouraged by his parents
  - C. At 20, he was influenced by a performance of Shakespeare’s *Richard III*
  - D. He became fascinated by the concept of character, and how it is represented dramatically
  - E. He began producing plays and writing experimental dramatic poems
- II. Poetic form
  - A. Browning eventually settled on the dramatic monologue form, used by Andrew Marvell (“To His Coy Mistress”), Tennyson, and others
  - B. Browning’s characters are sometimes real historical figures, and sometimes imaginary
  - C. Browning represents them in moments of crisis or intense emotion
  - D. Sometimes his characters are presented comically (as in “The Bishop Orders His Tomb”)
  - E. Sometimes he puts us inside the heads of some questionable characters
  - F. The emphasis is on psychological realism
- III. Personal life and later success
  - A. Browning wrote a fan letter to the semi-invalid Elizabeth Barrett, then a much more famous poet
  - B. They began a correspondence that led to a secret marriage and elopement to Italy
  - C. He later achieved success on his own
    1. “Browning societies” were established throughout England and America
    2. His book-length poem, *The Ring and the Book* depicts a sensational seventeenth-century Italian murder trial
    3. He uses a variety of points of view, with various characters, each heard through dramatic monologues
- IV. “Porphyria’s Lover”
  - A. An excellent, short example of his skill with the dramatic monologue
  - B. The speaker strangles his lover with her hair at the moment of sexual climax
  - C. He then props her head on his shoulder and reopens her eyes, sitting up all night with her
  - D. As God has said nothing, he feels he has gotten away with it
  - E. The first-person pronoun puts us inside his deranged mind, to very disturbing effect
  - F. The plot summary cannot do justice to the experience of reading the poem