The very first question that came to mind upon my initial read-through was: Who, or what, is Annandale? In the first stanza, the narrator of the poem so often varies between referring to Annandale as a person and an object that it was very difficult to tell. The narrator then confuses matters in the second stanza by talking about themselves in a seemingly negative light as well. It was only after dividing the poem and analyzing each line that I was able to discern a reasonable connection between the two. I don't pretend to know what the author's real intentions were, but I personally believe that the narrator of this poem is telling us that he is blaming himself for what it was that happened to someone named Annandale, (whom he objectifies as something he can't fix), and is fully convinced that, were we in his shoes, we would feel the same guilt.

The majority of clues we have as to how and why the narrator objectifies Annandale are given in the first stanza. As previously mentioned, he varies between referring to Annandale as a person and an object; sometimes calling Annandale an “it” (1) and even an “apparatus” (6), and other times calling Annandale a “him.” (4,7) We also get the distinct impression, from this stanza as well as the title, that something has happened to Annandale. The narrator consistently refers to Annandale in a negative light, labeling him as a “wreck” (7) and a “sight not so fair.” (4) However, the part I found most interesting about this stanza, is that the narrator keeps mentioning that he “was there” (1,8) and that he “watched” Annandale. (4) The repetition of this particular idea leads me to believe that the fact that the narrator was present at the time of Annandale's “wreck” is a very concerning piece of information for him. This is made even more apparent by him claiming that Annandale was “not for [him] to mend.” (6)
To put a symbolic example to this: it's as if the narrator watched Annandale, just as you or I might watch a precious set of china falling to the ground, and was greatly distressed upon witnessing the “wreck” and not being able to “mend” it. A set of china appears to be an apt symbolic stand-in, considering the term “apparatus” that he uses to describe Annandale is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as either technical equipment (or machinery), or a complex structure within a system; either of which, coincidentally, can be easily broken or rendered useless.

This divide of perception between person and object is stated almost as a riddle in the very beginning of the next stanza. The narrator calls Annandale both a “ruin” and a “man” and then challenges the reader to “put the two together, if [they] can.” (9-10) However, it is the lines after these that stuck out to me most, because they are the ones that give us a better idea of how the narrator perceives himself. The lines are stated much like another riddle; at first asking us to remember “the worst we know of [him],” then asking us to step in his shoes and “view ourselves as [he] was.” (11-12) He also mentions that he was “on the spot – with a slight kind of engine.” (12-13) To me, this means that he was “placed on the spot,” (given a sudden choice, or a sudden scenario) and he didn't have much time to think it through.

The “engine” he refers to caused me the greatest confusion out of the entire poem, as it seemed remarkably out of place. However, when we symbolize the “engine” with trying to “view ourselves as [he] was,” we can get a better visual symbol of what he means. Simply put, if we are to step fully into the narrator's shoes, then not only do we need to know the “worst” of him, not only do we need to know the situation he was placed in, but we also need to know what drives him. In other words, we need to know what “makes him run”, or what “makes him tick”. We need to know what his “engine” is. Finally, once we have put together everything we know of him, he places great emphasis on making
sure we understand, “Do you see? / Like this...” and then asks us to answer what judgment we would give based on what his actions were. Or, as he puts it, whether or not we would “hang” him. (13-14)

The interesting part of this riddle is that he appears convinced he already knows what our answer would be, and goes on to pass judgment on himself by stating “I thought not.” (14) This final statement is a bit tricky, given that there can be two different interpretations of his answer simply based on how the question is worded. Given the question: “You wouldn't hang me,” the response “I thought not” could either mean “I thought you wouldn't,” thereby claiming that he believes he is innocent, or “I didn't think you wouldn't,” thereby claiming that he believes he is guilty. Personally, I believe the second interpretation fits better, because it better connects with what we have already learned so far about the distress that Annandale's “wreck” has caused him, and how he's asked us to remember the “worst” of him.

This is because, when he asks us to “remember the worst we know of [him],” at first I didn't think he had told us anything about him. I was then drawn back to the beginning of the poem, which reads: “They called it Annandale – and I was there / To flourish, to find words, and to attend: / Liar, physician, hypocrite, and friend,” (1-3) Given that he mentioned Annandale, I initially assumed that the colon after “attend” meant that that is what the narrator was attending to, and that the adjectives following were meant to describe Annandale, and not the narrator. However, after reading it again, it made more sense to interpret it as that is what he was attending to Annandale as, and that the adjectives are meant to describe himself. If we take this interpretation, then not only do we get a better idea of how the narrator perceives himself, but we also get a bigger glimpse into the kind of relationship that may have existed between him and Annandale.
Although I cannot say I have been in a similar relationship and/or situation as the narrator and Annandale were, I can personally empathize to some degree the kind of self-loathing and self-blame the narrator places upon himself. There have been many times in my life where I am convinced that if someone truly knew me; knew all the “worst” of me; my doubts, fears, and my own personal “engine” that drives me... they would place the same judgment on me that I did at the time. Whether or not I was actually at fault or not is irrelevant to me. The very fact that I “was there” and that I “watched” leads me to place at least partial blame and guilt on my own shoulders for what happened. Thus, I can relate in at least some small way to how the narrator feels about himself for whatever it is that has happened to Annandale.

Putting all of this into perspective, we can clearly see that something terrible has happened to Annandale, and we know that the narrator feels an incredible burden of guilt about it; even going so far as to say that if we were in his shoes, we would also condemn him for his actions. Although, potentially he also could be condemning himself for any inaction about Annandale, (considering guilt can manifest itself after either action or inaction). Curiously, the title of the poem, “How Annandale Went Out” initially leads us to want to focus on Annandale and what happened to him. But, according to the narrator, “How Annandale Went Out” is his fault, and, although the poem largely mentions Annandale, it is meant rather to center around the narrator and his own failings and mistakes. Again, I don't claim to know what the author's real intentions behind this poem were, but given this analysis of the poem, it's hard for me to discern a different interpretation.