

Critical Appreciation of Robert Browning Poems and His Art: A Study

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Abstract

This research paper examines Robert Browning's penchant towards history, borrowing the themes of dramatic monologues, choice of subjects, the dramatic and psychological elements, style and philosophy. He establishes his special interest in the Renaissance, relevance of his devices like obscurity, exploration of themes, usage of conversational forms to the modernity of characters, recognition of history, perceiving contemporaneity and paving the direction for future. Robert Browning, the renowned Victorian poet, is widely known as the master of dramatic monologue and his profound exploration of love. He possesses the optimistic quality in his poetry that reflects human struggle towards growth and self realization. By strenuous study of his poems, rich with diversity, complex speakers and vivid diction, many readers have ascertained his quiet soul dissection. He fascinates us, not only as a poet, but also teaches us to live more attentively and more inwardly.

Keywords: Hopefulness, obscurity, reflection, debating.

1.Introduction:

Robert Browning (1822-1889)

Robert Browning's native land is Camberwell. His father was a banker. Browning availed scanty education and as an avid reader, studied unusual subjects. He began writing poetry at the age of 12. Shelley influenced him greatly. He spent time in both Russia and London which brought him the association with literary men. His second home is Italy, where he was charmed by Elizabeth Barrett's works and betrothed her. Oxford university bestowed the degree of D.C.E upon him. He passed away in Italy and was buried in Westminster Abbey.

His major poems and works:

Browning's renowned work is *Pauline* (1833). It was a thoughtful poem, which displays the significance of Shelley. During that period, Shelley had great admiration towards him. *Sordello* (1840) deals with the relationship between art and life. This work centers upon the story of the hero, a Mantuan troubadour. *Pippa Passes* play contains songs; it is not fit for stage. Browning's best work is *Men and Women* (1855), it is a dramatic monologue, dedicated to his wife. Some of the famous works of Browning are *Fra Lippo Lippi*, *Andrea del Sarto*, *Cleon's* are blank verse poems. As a voracious writer, Browning's character is reflected in these lines:

“Strive and thrive! “Cry,

“Speed , - fight on, fare ever There as here!”¹

The major poet of the Victorian Age, his poetry, however, differs from Tennyson's both in style and in subject. With reference to Tennyson's *Idylls*, Browning once remarked as: “we look at the subject of Art of poetry differently.”

Browning approaches in his language and imagery, the poetry of his own time. Both are up to some extent, anti-romantic; there are railway-trains, cigars, grand pianos; scrofulous French novels and trousers. Language is often colloquial and even slangy. There is also humor and a kind of self mockery in the grotesque rhymes that Browning sometimes uses in *The Pied Piper*, his children's poem. He also suggests that modern poets are in obscurity, but obscurity does not derive from complexity of thought; it comes from aim, impatience with language and a deliberate desire to dazzle the reader. Browning's vocabulary is large and he has a fondness for little known words that are proverbial. His early *Sordello* is so difficult that of one of the lines. Browning is reported to have said, “When I wrote it, only God and I knew what it meant; now only God knows”.²

Browning, after first paying homage to Shelley in *Pauline*, thought of himself as a dramatist. But his stage plays were not successful, and he found his best dramatic outlet in the form he cultivated the most, the dramatic monologue. “In *Men and Women* and *Dramatis Personae*, he put into the mouths of various historical characters often obscure painters and musicians of Italy and Germany. “³

Certain philosophical themes together make up Browning's answer to the Victorian dilemma. He is aware of division in the human soul and of despondency at failure to achieve mere attempts to order out lives – however unsuccessful – found their reward in heaven; whatever we start and leave uncompleted, God himself will complete. “Abt Vogler puts it succinctly: “on earth the broken arcs, in heaven the perfect round”.⁴ His poems about love are vigorous and virile: he believes again in acting rather than vacillating when love is crossed. *The Statue and the Bust* tells of two lovers who, unable to be together because of circumstantial difficulties, die apart. Now a statue and a bust, perpetually gazing at each other, mock their timidity. Browning's own courtship of Elizabeth Barrett and his elopement with her translated his doctrine into action. Browning's optimism is God in his heaven no longer makes much appeal to an age which finds it hard to be optimistic. We appreciate Browning as best as the dramatic realist. His *Ring and the Book* - a long murder story in verse, has a psychological penetration which is after our own hearts. This technique is always vigorous and fresh, but his message has perhaps lost some of its appeal.

The Victorian Age:

In the early years of the nineteenth century, the French Revolution acted as a tremendous impulsive and creative force. The feelings of people roused by what appeared to some as a sacred manifestation found expression temporarily in the early poetry of Coleridge and Wordsworth and permanently in the visions of Shelley and in the political philosophy of Godwin. Its opponents, like Burke, regarded it as a manifestation of diabolic power and a romancer like Sir Walter Scott by his genuine interest in feudal times and medieval history exercised a great influence in checking this diabolic power. Byron is the clearest exponent of the deep disappointment and cynicism, which followed the failure of the Revolution in actual practice.

While the outward failure of the Revolution was complete, its real failure was only partial. The democratic movement of the nineteenth century was profoundly influenced by the French Revolution. A new world was to be created out of the ruins of the old, not by magic but by a slow and painful process. The chief steps in this progress are clearly marked. In England, there were successive reform bills, Catholic Emancipation, the abolition of the Corn Laws, and various constructive measures which in later days had helped to humanize the lives of the industrial multitudes. Of special importance from the literary point of view was the enfranchisement of the press; for the abolition of the paper tax and of the stamp duty upon newspapers, was in effect disenfranchisement. But for this enfranchisement, the novel could not have predominated in the nineteenth century for a long time. This also stimulated the growth of newspapers and of journalism. In the nineteenth century, the system of patronage in literary domain had completely disappeared and writers had to depend upon the reading public, which multiplied rapidly owing to the spread of education. As already pointed out, the sale of *Maud* enabled Tennyson to settle comfortably at Farringford and 60,000 copies of *Enoch Arden* were sold on its first appearance.

The age is noted for its rapid material progress. Several mechanical agencies contributed towards it. The first important railway was opened in 1825, electric telegraph was introduced in 1837, mail began to be transmitted by railways in 1838, steamer service between England and the United States was started in the same year. Tennyson's poems appeared in 1830 and 1832, Browning's *Pauline* in 1834. Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* in 1833-34, Dicken's *Sketches* by Boz in 1832-36 and Thackeray's *Yellowish papers* in 1837. A sense of elation, a sanguine temper succeeded the gloom and apathy of the 1820-30 decade. The Reform Act of 1832 had broken the political monopoly of the land-owning oligarchy, but the newly emerged working class was not much benefited by it. The consequence was renewed agitation for the extension of the franchise, which culminated in the Chartists movement (1836-39).

Queen Victoria succeeded her uncle William IV in 1837. The Corn Laws and the Chartists movement kept the country in a state of constant upheaval during the first twelve years of her reign. The Corn Laws were repealed in 1846 and the Chartists movement, which at bottom was a knife and fork question died away and it, was not until 1867 that the second Reform Act made the steady development of democracy certain; meanwhile, the progress of science was as remarkable as that of democracy. The practical application of science brought new comforts to human life and affected a great change in the habits of the people. The doctrine of evolution of Darwin, Wallace and Herbert Spencer, revolutionized all current ideas about

nature, man and society. Science helped to foster a materialistic temper, and pillars of orthodoxy were rudely shaken. Thus, followed the religious and spiritual unrest of the central years of Victoria's reign. Hence, the return of the mood of doubt and the pessimism were reflected in much of the literature of the period.

2. Research Method: We have ascertained Robert Browning's Biographies and elaborate secondary sources of him. We deeply studied the history of English literature for better understanding of his contemporaneity and style.

3. Results and Analysis:

My Last Duchess was included in Dramatic Lyrics (1842), and later in Dramatic Romances (1863). There was an Italian nobleman coming from a great family, who, stern and severe as he was, was showing his picture gallery to the envoy of a count whose daughter, he had to marry. This duke is a widower, and he comes to the portrait of his last duchess. He tells the envoy that "the depth and passion of her earnest glance" was not limited for her husband only. That "spot of joy" came into her; for, "her heart was too soon made glad, too easily impressed"⁵. She was his property and therefore he welcomed her smiles in his presence. But she smiled on everyone, and this is a violation of his rights of property. He could not tolerate it and so he "gave commands". And "then all smiles stopped altogether".

In this line, it was concentrated and compressed the whole tragic story. The duke is a dealer in human souls and he dismisses the memory of his wife. He at once begins talking of a fine bronze group and then discusses the dowry he is to get with the successor to his last duchess.

In all probability, the speaker was Alfonso II, fifth Duke of Ferrara, born in 1553. His young wife Lucrezia di medici died at the young age of seventeen. It was believed that she was poisoned. Later he had an Austrian bride, niece of the count of Tyrol. Innsbruck was the home of the second wife.

A Prominent critic John Bryson remarks "The outstanding quality of this short monologue is the tenseness and economy with which the dramatic situation is handled. It displays Browning's mastery of irony and understatement. It also demonstrates his remarkable historical imagination, his power of projecting himself into the mood and the characters of the past age."

There is only one speaker, but three characters are presented. Browning asks the reader here and elsewhere to collaborate with him in imagining the implied situation. Fra Pandolf and Claus of Innsbruck are imaginary artists. The duke seeks to impress on the envoy and on his master that his wife must exhibit a certain kind of behavior. He would not tolerate any rivals for the smiles of his next wife. As Neptune tamed a horse, he tamed and killed his last wife. The new wife must concentrate all her attention and life on him alone.

The Duke and the duchess are delineated in the masterly of fashion into the portraits, have gone to remarkable insight, a keenness of portraiture, brevity and selection. It is the duke's nature that kills her. The Duke has jealousy and not loves. He has self love and the tyranny of possession. He is vain of "a nine-hundred-year-old name".

An eminent Oxford critic Professor Young quotes thus: This monologue is spoken in the presence of the ambassador of a foreign count whose daughter is being sought in marriage by the widowed Duke. The basis of his character is the complacent egotism of the aristocrat whose name is centuries old, who regards his wife as a dependent, and her innocent gaiety and graciousness as presumptions to be summarily extinguished. His most salient idiosyncrasy is that connoisseurship and pride of mere possession of a masterpiece which Browning felt to be a phase of the decadent Renaissance: The Ferrarese duke shares it with the Bishop of St. Praxedes. One may venture a suggestion that these pathetic stifled figures, the last duchess, and the duchess of the flight, owe something of their existence to duration of Elizabeth Barrett in Wimpole Street.

Dr. Phelps considers *My Last Duchess* one of the finest dramatic monologues in the whole range of English Literature. The speaker is the duke of Ferrara, an important city of Italy. It was an important cultural center during the Renaissance. The monologue is an admirable piece of the character of study. It is a poem merely of fifty lines but within description of both the Duke and the Duchess. The tyranny, the pride and self-conceit, the hard-heartedness, and the dictatorial attitude of the Duke have been thrown into sharp relief by contrast with the genial and cheerful good nature of the Duchess. "As Phelps states, she was a frank-hearted, charming girl with a genial disposition and zest for life. But all her expressions of delight, and her frank innocence, uncorrupted by the ways of the world, received only cold reception at the hands of her husband."⁶ The result was either pined away or was murdered at the orders of the tyrant duke, her husband. Critics claimed the portrait, an autobiographical significance. They likened her life in the home of her husband to that of Elizabeth Barrett, suffering from the tyranny of her unsympathetic father, so did the duchess suffer from the tyranny of her proud and arrogant husband.

Not only is the monologue an admirable piece of character study, but it is also the very epitome of the Italian Renaissance. The very spirit of the age has been captured in this short piece. Its intrigue, its avarice, its cunning and hypocrisy, as well as its love of the fine arts, have all been brought out. The style of the Monologue is dense and epigrammatic. The line, "all smiles stopped together", is a concentrated expression of a whole life's tragedy. But despite this density and concentration, the poem is lucid and clear. It is entirely free from the usual faults of Browning. No doubt, there are a few parentheses, but they do not come in the way of understanding. The poem is composed in heroic couplets, but as the sense runs from one line to another, the readers are hardly conscious of the rhyme.

His Choice of Subjects:

Browning was essentially the poet of Man, and his chief interest was "soul-dissection". As a poet of man, Browning was especially interested in the analysis of human emotion and chiefly concerned with its causes and sources. For his subjects he ranged over centuries and continents and found them in the Italy of the Renaissance and today, the French camp, the Spanish cloister, Palestine and Russia, just as the Pre-Christian era afforded him a Cleon, the Middle Ages a Paracelsus, and the nineteenth century a Blougram. In the choice of his subjects, he proves himself to be a thorough-going cosmopolitan.

Browning was specially fascinated by Nature, the Arts and Love. As a poet of Nature, he shows a partiality for brilliant clear colors, and a characteristic liking for sudden and startling contrasts. His landscapes are real but generally subordinated to the thought and emotions of man, who finds the nature he is fitted for. In the short poems, such as 'Meeting at Night' and 'Parting at Morning', nature is little more than a part of man's environment. Browning is conscious of the connection between man and nature, for both, emanate from the God. But he never hints at a sympathetic co-ordination existing between the two.

The arts play by no means an insignificant part in the poetry of Browning. Poetry, painting and music were the arts which especially attracted his study. Andrea del Sarto proves that he had a poor estimation of more technique and craftsmanship, for, he held that the artist's life is a struggle for expression and so it is the soul of the artist that really counts. Master Hugues and Abt Vogler are musicians, while Fra Lippo Lippi and Andrea del Sarto are contrasted studies of two painters.

"As a love poet, Browning stands supreme, if others have surpassed him in the rendering of certain aspects of love, no one is his superior in range of matters. He writes of actual passion and he stays at whatever moment in his course promises to distill its richest significance."⁷ He is necessarily of those of the rapture of possession and enjoyment, the scores of episodes in the long chronicle. Hence, it is the novelty of situation in his love poetry. Numerous poems like *The Lost Mistress*, *The Last Ride Together*, *Evelyn Rope*, *In a Gondola*, the love simply illustrates the infinite variety of Browning's love poetry.

The Psychological Element in His Poetry:

Browning's aim was soul-dissection. He had an analytic mind which reveled in the search of the causes and sources of human emotion. He could think with the minds of his characters and in his poems, he takes us into the inside of their minds. "The soliloquy of the Spanish cloister is a fine study of the mind of a monk who flames into hatred against his inoffensive and saintly brother in religion. The Bishop orders his Tomb at St. Praxedes church is a penetrating study of the emotions which welter in the Bishop's mind now that his natural forces are too enfeebled to restrain them. "8 Bishop Blougram's Apology takes us right into the most intimate crannies of the Bishop's mind and makes us admire its surprising agility. In *Fra Lippo Lippi and Sludge the Medium*, Browning makes Fra Lippo and Sludge reveal the innermost secrets of their heart. It is possible to multiply such examples endlessly. But the psychologist is seen at his best in *The Ring and the Book* where we are allowed to look at the same incident through nine different minds.

The Dramatic Element:

Browning's genius was essentially dramatic, and no one since Shakespeare has surpassed his power to illuminate some striking phases of characters. But although he possessed some of the elements of dramatic genius in abundant measure, he did not possess all of them. As a result, his regular dramas cannot be regarded as successful, great, though they often are in parts. *Pippa* contains the intensely dramatic scene of Ottima and Sebald. *Colombe's Birthday* is a thrilling dramatic romance. *A Soul's Tragedy* is a thoroughly dramatic conception and *A Bolt in the Scutcheon* has obvious elements of greatness. But none of them, not even the last, judged as a whole, is a really great drama.

His Style:

“Browning’s style is often described ‘Obscure’. There is really an element of obscurity in Browning’s poetry. Firstly, he had a fondness for recondite subjects, and his allusions are drawn from little-known sources.”⁹ Secondly, he compressed an excessive use of ellipsis of relatives, connectives and the like: thirdly, he had a habit of juggling with words and meters. He chose obscurity style; this can be seen from poems such as Evelyn Hope, and How they brought the Good news from Ghent to Aix and The Glove. Browning’s occasional use of grotesque rhymes and rhythm was due to deliberate iconoclasm, to his defiance of convention.

Browning’s Philosophy:

Browning’s outlook on life was optimistic, never questioned the existence of a supreme authority, God, controlling the affairs of the world. God’s in his “heaven- All’s right with the world!” is the cry of a sincere optimist. Superficially judged,”¹⁰ Browning’s optimism may give one “the impression of being facile and shallow. But this is not really so, for his optimism was the result of experience. He did not shut his eyes to the darker side of life; he fully recognized the existence of evil. But evil, he believed, is a condition of a man’s moral life, and of his moral progress. “Browning believed in the theory of evolution and held that life is persistent struggle towards an ideal but never completely attained, never even to be completely attained. “¹¹

Browning’s two great theories of the universe have been asserted by a prominent critic “Chesterton in the two phrases, “the hope that lies in the imperfection of man” and “the hope that lies in the imperfection of God”. From the first phrase he draws a definite hope for immortality and the larger scale of life, for an imperfect thing, according to the theory of evolution, must tend towards perfection, and the sense of incompleteness must lead to completeness.”¹² The second phrase sums up the faith that sorrow and self denial. They are therefore burdens of man and also his privileges. Man is “ever a fighter”, and sorrows and sufferings test him and brings out the best that is in him.

Browning had complete faith in the immortality of soul. It is the nobility and greatness of an individual’s ideal that counts, not his failure or imperfection in this life. “Since “man lives forever” there is no reason why he should be weighed down by disappointments, failures in this life.”¹³ He should aim high and should not mind if his achievement falls short of his ideal. The funeral of the Grammarian who immerse himself all his life in the study of Greek syntax is a triumph and fulfillment for man’s soul lives forever.

Browning teaches the lessons of hope and happiness. He tells us that life means intensely good. He exhorts us to hope for the best and to strive after our ideal. He awakens us to fear nothing, to live like a fighter all our lives. Browning was passionately interested in, and in love with, existence, and his poetry is a wholesome tonic which helps us to enjoy life and realize its value.

Conclusion:

The paper is an exploration of numerous themes in Browning's work like philosophy, love, and psychology through analytical study. It is an amalgamation of insights and values can be learnt from the poet's contribution towards better society.

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