

Robert Browning's treatment of love in its myriad moods and manifestations



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When we attempt a general assessment of Robert Browning's poetic caliber and overall achievement, his multi-faceted genius and his rarer treatment of love and its myriad moods and manifestations, all this strike our mind and heart intensely. The most characteristic of Browning's poetry is his love-lyrics which remains the first and foremost of his total bulk of creative-production.

After having a glance over the greater portion of the poetry written by him, one can easily constitute the idea that his lyrics haunt the mind of the reader, his poems seem to be the beautiful gallery of men and women, and these men and women are as simple, or as complex as life has to offer or can offer.

The sphere of his poetic creation is a world of specific men and women, that too the lovers of all temperaments, faithful, criminal, jealous, cheaters, rogues, and the true lovers of their beloved, the ardent lovers, who, want to accompany their beloveds in the other world of souls, the lovers who are thirsty of flesh of their beloved and the lovers who just want a place in the heart of their beloved in lieu of the whole they possess. "Here's God's Plenty" as Dryden said of Chaucer, which is also applicable to Browning. His love poems are the real pictures of life drawn on the canvass of all human impossible limits.

Robert Browning was born in the comparatively rural parish of Camberwell in London on May 7, 1812. His father was a clerk in the Bank of England. In his Inner heart, he was an interesting combination of the scholar and the artist, possessing an skilled touch in both. His mother was the daughter of a German Ship-owner, who had settled at Scotland. She, Browning's mother,

was a woman of sentiments, lover of music and full of artistic tastes. Her elevated personality exercised a great influence on him, and for his ripened maturity in childhood. In his childhood he did not join any school, his real education was done at home.

His father would recite from the Greek epics and other literatures, thus he picked up the origin of Greek poetry. The first literary influence on Browning was that of Byron, but it did not live longer. From latter, his guiding interest turned to Shelley whose excellent creation *Queen Mab* influenced him to a great extent. Keats was also a source of lasting influence and inspiration for him. In *Pauline* the influence of these two poets is clearly perceptible. He wrote *Pauline* at the early age of twenty. Next, he visited Russia and met a French woman who formed the subject of his next poetic-creation *Paracelsus*.

Browning visited Italy in 1838 and fell under the charm of Venice. The wonderful moments that he had spent here, were on his mind and heart all through his life. He read the poems of Elizabeth Barrett, a renowned contemporary poetess, and came to know that she knew his poems and even him and she liked his poems full of robust optimism and manliness.

Gradually all these developed a friendship between them which ultimately assumed the form of love. Elizabeth's father was a callous-hearted person, thus, he refused the permission of marriage, as a result, the lovers decided to marry despite paternal opposition.

On September 12, 1846, they were secretly married at Marylebone Church and at once left for Italy, where they lived happily for many years. This span of time may be appreciated as the life's golden phase of the Brownings. At

this place their only child Robert Wiedman Barrett Browning was born in 1849. He found deep emotional satisfaction in his marriage with Elizabeth Barrett, as has been reflected in some of his personal love lyrics like *By the Fireside*, *One Word More*, and *Prospice*, in which Browning pours out his true sentiments for his wife.

After the death of his wife in 1861, He returned to England to edit her unpublished poems. At this period of his life, he became highly popular figure in London society. He was honoured by Oxford with a fellowship while Cambridge presented him an honorary degree. On December 12, 1889, Browning breathed his last, on the day his last poetic-volume *Asolando* was published. He was buried in Westminster Abbey. In 1832, Browning was twenty, and was writing *Pauline* an autobiographical poem in which, particularly Shelley's influence is easily perceptible. His next work *Paracelsus* (1835) is like *Pauline*, the soul history.

In this work, he considers love greater than knowledge. Further, he tried his genius on dramatic form, *Sordello* was published in 1840, it is usually taken as the most controversial and obscure work by him. During the years 1840-46, he produced a number of poetic drama and poetry. Having suffered from the criticism of obscurity, he wrote a series of delightful poetical plays. The best of them are *Pippa Passes* (1841), *King Victor and King Charles* (1842), *The Return of the Druses* (1843), *A Blot in the Scutcheon* (1843), *Colombe's Birthday* (1844), *A Soul's Tragedy* (1846).

In the duration of these seven years (1840-46), the poet along with dramas, composed lyrics of first water. They all appeared together with plays under

the title *Bells and Pomegranates*. After that he attempted to come out of the eclipse of *Sordello*, thus, he came in open air and sunlight, in the shorter poems of *Dramatic Lyrics* of 1842 and *Dramatic Romances* of 1845.

Browning continued writing poems of dramatic lyrics, and the result was *Men and Women*. It was published in two volumes in 1855. This volume brought him great name and fame which remained everlasting.

After that, came *Dramatis Personae*, published in 1864, this volume was also a great achievement in the poetic art of his genius. In the coming four years, he worked on his masterpiece production *The Ring and the Book* (1868-69), which is regarded as his crowning effort, both in thought and technique.

Asolando (1889) was the last pearl from him to the ocean of literature. The volume was first published in London, which was whole-heartedly received. On the same date of the publication, Browning died on December 12, 1889. Browning has written upon a variety of subjects.

The subject-matter of poetic creation is the endless range of human experience and thought. It is evident that the subject of poetry is that, which appeals to or attracts the heart and mind of the poet, who pours out his creativity on the same subject, and thus, this subject becomes of perennial interest. Browning has portrayed God, Nature, artists, poets, painters, religious persons, and above all, lovers and their myriad moods in love, crime, philosophy and religion are the integral components of his poetry. In fact, his comprehension of life was very much profound.

In his colourful art gallery of characters, we find the picture of not only normal human beings, but the abnormal and eccentrics as well. Browning

has presented his taste and interest of art and the artist. They always hold a very important place among his selection of the subject-matter. He does not bother much for the technical skill of the art of the artist as with its aesthetic culmination and the force of creation. Poems like, Fra Lippo Lippi and Andrea Del Sarto are the perfect examples of it and even technically Andrea is quite flawless.

He can even commit some correction in the lines wrongly drawn by the great Raphael. In the poem, Old Pictures in Florence, we have the idea of Browning's in-depth knowledge, not only of the art of painting but also the artist hidden behind it. Browning's themes of God, Nature and Man as three inter-connected truths. In his poems, the description of natural scene, sights and landscapes, are not beyond man, rather they both seem closely-interconnected, which is not isolated from the man's world. They are tremendous, realistic, brilliant and colourful. His choice falls on the spring season, sunrise and sunset.

His world of natural-beauties is a very much part of the human world, which classifies almost all human sensations, emotions and feelings. In the poem, A Grammarian's Funeral the high shooting of the meteors is in keeping with the loftiness of Grammarian's aims and his learning-light. The poem Rabbi Ben Ezra represents, his whole religious conception and God, representing God and man relationship. According to Browning, God always compensates man's each failure, and for the judgment of this compensation, he becomes the final authority of perfection.

In his faith on religion, he believes that whatever man loses or misses in this mortal world, receives in the next world. This thought keeps him in line with Eastern culture and faith in rebirth. Browning is also interested in abnormality or eccentricity. He shows his likeness in psychology of abnormal behaviour. In the poem *Porphyria's Lover*, we face a lover, who strangles his own beloved to death with the string of her own hair. In *The Laboratory*, we come across a woman who wants to poison her opponent. His choice specially lies in the cases of abnormal mental process.

In Bishop Blougram's *Apology*, the behaviour of Bishop is also doubtful and demands analysis, for on the one hand he is mean and on the other, he is firm in faith for God. The same thing can be cited for Mr. Sludge in *Sludge* and *The Medium*. Browning's a number of poems are abound in the Italian Renaissance spirit to the extent of exactness what he writes of Renaissance spirit or the Middle Ages. The Chief characteristics of the Renaissance are clearly visible in his poems, lust for materialism, beauty, possessiveness, praise of bravery, sex etc. are the chief components of his poems, about which he talks openly and boldly.

Above all, his writing upon the subject of love, including physical or spiritual, is par excellence. Through his love poems, he became the chief exponent of the love-lyricist in literature of any language. The most characteristic and the most original work of the poet is to be found in his love poems. While he deals with physical love, he seems to talk of purely sexual relationship between the opposite sexes, at higher level love becomes the pillar of morality and religion, without which no modesty or civilization can stand or possible. Love becomes the source of aesthetic-ecstasy for the poet.

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Among the important aspects of love, the high nectar of force of life, drips only from love, as Browning speaks that the real love is its own award and the best fulfillment is itself. He glorifies failure, particularly failure in love, which is unique in the whole range of English literature. We do observe that many of his poems related to love intensely, have been written on unfulfilled love, after his wife's death. According to his conception, such unsuccessful or isolated lovers have their complete compensation, by the grace of God, for they have its scope to reunite in the other world.

The poet is always keeps himself with brave lovers, who, in order to achieve their love, break all the rules and regulations prescribed by society, facing all the thunders that come in the way of love. For him love means only love, the true and passionate. He is so positively optimistic that he believes a sincere and devoted lover, who has power to face all the vicissitudes on the way of love, ultimately wins the lovely hand of his beloved. Browning has dealt with a variety of love. The love of man and woman has been presented in many shapes in his love-poems.

He presents a lots of colours of love in his love poems, we do observe, rather closely feel, the fierce animal passion in *Ottima*, in *Pippa Passes*, which stands as quite contrast to the romantic love as presented in *The Last Ride Together*. *Two in the Compagna* signify the deep longing for the old assurance. At the same time *Evenly Hope* presents love, not only as a truth but presents it with an idealistic beauty. Whether personal or dramatic, his treatment of love is the ecstasy or the impulsive passion of youth.

Love Among the Ruins, Two in the Campagna and Cristina, deal with not easily understood riped-love, and above all comes By the Fireside, the real experience and expression of love, which becomes the hall-mark of his depth of understanding for love and its treatment. Wherever and whenever he deals with physical love, he tries to represent the passion of love with all its intensity and with all sensual appeals and other aspects. Physical love for him is so satisfactory, that he seeks all the truths and ideals of the universe in the burning kiss of a girl.