



## **ROBERN BROWNING - ONE OF THE FOREMOST VICTORIAN POETS WITH SPECIALITIES IN DRAMATIC VERSE**

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### **Early life of Robert Browning**

It was a lucid and public and yet quiet life, which culminated in one great dramatic test of character, and then fell back again into this union of quietude and publicity. And yet, in spite of this, it is a great deal more difficult to speak finally about his life than about his work. His work has the mystery which belongs to the complex; his life the much greater mystery which belongs to the simple. He was clever enough to understand his own poetry; and if he understood it, we can understand it. But he was also entirely unconscious and impulsive, and he was never clever enough to understand his own character; consequently we may be excused if that part of him which was hidden from him is partly hidden from us. The subtle man is always immeasurably easier to understand than the natural man; for the subtle man keeps a diary of his moods, he

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practises the art of self analysis and self-revelation, and can tell us how he came to feel this or to say that.

But a man like Browning knows no more about the state of his emotions than about the state of his pulse; they are things greater than he, things growing at will, like forces of Nature.

There is an old anecdote, probably apocryphal, which describes how a feminine admirer wrote to Browning asking him for the meaning of one of his darker poems, and received the following reply: "When that poem was written, two people knew what it meant—God and Robert Browning. And now God only knows what it means." This story gives, in all probability, an entirely false impression of Browning's attitude towards his work. He was a keen artist, a keen scholar, he could put his finger on anything, and he had a memory like the British Museum Library. But the story does, in all probability, give a tolerably accurate picture of Browning's attitude towards his own emotions and his psychological type. If a man had asked him what some particular allusion to a Persian hero meant he could in all probability have quoted half the epic; if a man had asked him which third cousin of Charlemagne was alluded to in Sordello, he could have given an account of the man and an account of his father and his grandfather. But if a man had asked him what he thought of himself, or what were his emotions an hour before his wedding, he would have replied with perfect sincerity that God alone knew.

This mystery of the unconscious man, far deeper than any mystery of the conscious one, existing as it does in all men, existed peculiarly in Browning, because he was a very ordinary and spontaneous man. The same thing exists to some extent in all history and all affairs. Anything that is deliberate, twisted, created as a trap and a mystery, must be discovered at last; everything that is done naturally remains mysterious. It may be difficult to discover the principles of the Rosicrucians, but it is much easier to discover

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the principles of the Rosicrucians than the principles of the United States: nor has any secret society kept its aims so quiet as humanity. The way to be inexplicable is to be chaotic, and on the surface this was the quality of Browning's life; there is the same difference between judging of his poetry and judging of his life, that there is between making a map of a labyrinth and making a map of a mist.

The discussion of what some particular allusion in *Sordello* means has gone on so far, and may go on still, but it has it in its nature to end. The life of Robert Browning, who combines the greatest brain with the most simple temperament known in our annals, would go on or ever if we did not decide to summarise it in a very brief and simple narrative.

Robert Browning was born in Camberwell on May 7<sup>th</sup> 1812. His father and grandfather had been clerks in the Bank of England, and his whole family would appear to have belonged to the solid and educated middle class—the class which is interested in letters, but not ambitious in them, the class to which poetry is a luxury, but not a necessity.

This actual quality and character of the Browning family shows some tendency to be obscured by matters more remote. It is the custom of all biographers to seek for the earliest traces of a family in distant ages and even in distant lands; and Browning, as it happens, has given them opportunities which tend to lead away the mind from the main matter in hand. There is a tradition, for example, that men of his name were prominent in the feudal ages; it is based upon little beyond a coincidence of surnames and the fact that Browning used a seal with a coat-of-arms. Thousands of middle-class men use such a seal, merely because it is a curiosity or a legacy, without knowing or caring anything about the condition of their ancestors in the middle Ages. Then, again, there is a theory that he was of Jewish blood; a view which is perfectly conceivable, and which Browning would have been the last to have thought derogatory, but for which, as a matter of fact,

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there is exceedingly little evidence. The chief reason assigned by his contemporaries for the belief was the fact that he was, without doubt, especially and profoundly interested in Jewish matters. This suggestion, worthless in any case, would, if anything, tell the other way.

### 1. Early works of Browning:

IN 1840 Sordello was published. Its reception by the great majority of readers, including some of the ablest men of the time, was a reception of a kind probably unknown in the rest of literary history, a reception that was neither praise nor blame. It was perhaps best expressed by Carlyle, who wrote to say that his wife had read Sordello with great interest, and wished to know whether Sordello was a man, or a city, or a book. Better known, of course, is the story of Tennyson, who said that the first line of the poem—

“Who will, may hear Sordello’s story told,”

and the last line—

“Who would, has heard Sordello’s story told,”

were the only two lines in the poem that he understood, and they were lies.

Perhaps the best story, however, of all the cycle of Sordello legends is that which is related of Douglas Jerrold. He was recovering from an illness; and having obtained permission for the first time to read a little during the day, he picked up a book from a pile beside the bed and began Sordello. No sooner had he done so than he turned deadly pale, put down the book, and said, “My God! I’m an idiot. My health is restored,

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but my mind's gone. I can't understand two consecutive lines of an English poem." He then summoned his family and silently gave the book into their hands, asking for their opinion on the poem; and as the shadow of perplexity gradually passed over their faces, he heaved a sigh of relief and went to sleep. These stories, whether accurate or no, do undoubtedly represent the very peculiar reception accorded to Sordello, a reception which, as I have said, bears no resemblance whatever to anything in the way of eulogy or condemnation that had ever been accorded to a work of art before.

There had been authors whom it was fashionable to boast of admiring and authors whom it was fashionable to boast of despising; but with Sordello enters into literary history the Browning of popular badinage, the author whom it is fashionable to boast of not understanding.

Putting aside for the moment the literary qualities which are to be found in the poem, when it becomes intelligible, there is one question very relevant to the fame and character of Browning which is raised by Sordello when it is considered, as most people consider it, as hopelessly unintelligible.

It really throws some light upon the reason of Browning's obscurity. The ordinary theory of Browning's obscurity is to the effect that it was a piece of intellectual vanity indulged in more and more insolently as his years and fame increased. There are at least two very decisive objections to this popular explanation. In the first place, it must emphatically be said for Browning that in all the numerous records and impressions of him throughout his long and very public life, there is not one iota of evidence that he was a man who was intellectually vain.

### **2. Treatment of love in Browning's Earlier Poems :**

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Love is undoubtedly the spirit of human life the finer breaths of pious souls, the throbbing of passionate hearts and the exuberant force of inspiration to a creative action. Robert Browning knew this quintessence of life. He was an ardent lover. The nucleus of his poetry, the enthusiastic love, has been reflected into almost all his poetic creations. The inertia of love was fully bloomed into a lovely rose of optimism, with its two sub-ordinate leaves, his wife Elizabeth Barrett Browning and his child Robert Weidman Barrett Browning. Perhaps, it was Browning's passionate and forceful love for Elizabeth Barrett that has endowed him great success almost in all the fields, he attempted;

"There is nothing sickly or dreamy in him: he has a clear eye, a vigorous grasp, and courage to utter what he sees and handles." (George Eliot 1974).

In Dramatic Lyrics and Dramatic Romances,- there are a number of poems, which grow less from Browning's mental or intellectual study that from his keen observation and his own personal experience of life. One of the most characteristics and the old element in Browning's poetic creation, his interest in the intense and forceful passion of love, is now given a new emphasis and direction for several of the poems were written, as he courted Miss Elizabeth Barrett. Till now the shadow of Plutonium owed much to doubt, to Shelley, But it was after all a conception, that was vital to the whole of his thought concerning human relationship and that remained from a thing of lasting importance on his mind as well as heart. Especially for Browning in his union with his beloved wife Elizabeth Barrett Browning was to live and feel that very experience to which Shelley had restlessly and strongly aspired but all was in vain. This meeting and marital-unions of Browning with Elizabeth Barrett was the peak of pleasure for Browning in comparison of other ecstasies of his life.

This was the supreme experience of Browning's whole life feelings supreme experience did not make him a poet rather; Elizabeth Barrett made him a love poet. Through the love that she endowed to him, the man of supreme love experience became the supreme love poet. Her reward was- By the Fireside, which could be treated as a poem

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which treasures Browning's almost all romantic feelings, which are kept with the final lock of memory in the heart. This poem could be called the greatest love poem in the English language, or the other language that has dealt with the topic love. In this poem we may name the glimpse of almost all the real feelings of love, of Browning's heart that can be regarded as the real and supreme feelings of Browning's love. Browning watches her beloved Elizabeth as she "musing by fire-light" and thus, he said to himself.

My own, confirm me! If I tread  
 This path back, it is now in pride  
 This think how little I dreamed it led  
 To an ago so blest that, by its side,  
 Youth seems the waste instead?  
 (By the Fireside L121-25)

For art's sake only, poet seems transporting the perfect meeting of lover's spirit into a forest scene. Otherwise, this poem, in reality just have taken place in London's dreary Wimpole street. Browning feels the pleasure as much as he could, for that rarest communion of hearts;

.....like the heart you are,  
 And filled my empty heart at a word.  
 If two lives join, there is oft a scar,  
 They are one and one, with a shadowy third;  
 One near one is too far.  
 (By the Fireside 226-30)

Again-

A moment after and hands unseen

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Were hanging the right around us fast;  
 But we knew that a bar was broken between  
 Life and life: we were mixed at last  
 In spite of the mortal screen.  
 (By the Fireside 231-35)

In the poem *By the Fireside*, we observe two souls of love, the lover and the beloved completely in each other with full contentment. But commonly such a marvelous communion of spirits is not to be known to the most of men, or by chance, if they know it, they know it fleetingly or rarely. It is not specific with the love characters of Browning, rather the most of us have lived our life alone and in such a case, between among us there flows an unquenchable, salty and estranging sea. In the poem, *Two in the Campagna*, - as common, the lovers never meet with each other, in spite of the speaker's strange desire for such a meeting.

I yearn upward, touch you close,  
 Then stand away. I kiss your cheek,  
 Catch your soul's warmth, - I pluck the rose then  
 And love it more than tongue can speak-  
 Then the good minute goes. (*Two in the Campagna* 146-50)

"To him love is the supreme experience and function of the soul, testing its temper and revealing its probable fate. In such poems as *Cristina*, *Evelyn Hope*, *The Last Ride Together*, *My Star*, *By the Fireside* and many more, he has presented love in its varied phases and has celebrated its manifold meanings not only on earth but in the infinite range of worlds through which he believes that the soul is destined to go in search after its own perfection." (Moody & Lovett 1994)

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In many of Browning's poems the element of hope finds its full play. In many cases, the lovers are rejected by their beloved but as a result they do not lose their heart, rather they act much forcefully. In dejection, they do not surrender themselves completely to frustration on the contrary by such failure they store food for their future success. Browning's all the lovers act on the principal "all men strive and who succeed" if they go in the shelter of such sorrowful emotion, that remains for a short while and the lovers are soon replenished with fresh aspirations and hopes. The truly tragic love-story for Browning was not the story of love rejected in the real sense, but of love flagging, fading or crusted-out. The lover in the Last Ride Together, the final rejection by the beloved, at last refuses to accept his failure in love and remains still full of new hopes and for the fulfillment of these hopes:

What is we still ride on, we two  
 With life forever old yet new,  
 Changed not in kind but in degree,  
 The instant made eternity,-  
 And heaven just prove that I and she  
 Ride, ride together, forever ride? (The Last Ride Together L 105-110)

In Evelyn Hope, the choice of theme is very much heart touching. The lover is about a middle aged person, who, in the heart of his hearts loves a girl who has just stepped in her youth and hardly has crossed the sixteen springs of her life, Evelyn hope, the girl who his loved dies in flourishing age. The lover sits by the side of the dead body. The lover thus, meditates upon the blessed days that have ended with her, with her sad demise. Like a true and typical heroic creation of the optimistic-poet, the love begins to meditate upon the realistic and philosophical facets of human life and death. The lover is fully convinced of the immortality of the human soul as also of the immortality of the certain and perfect power of love. The poem exhibits that the death of the teen aged

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beloved is not at all worth creasing the lover from loving her in such glorious moment of death. Thus, the lover decides for the continuous pursuance of this maiden through ages with increasing passion. Browning puts forth the thought that the true and sincere love never goes in vain or unrewarded. If the love of the lovers is really sincere and true, their unsuccesses do not matter at all, they will get their reward in the other world of heaven.

This is the quint essence of faith of the lover which keeps up his spirit of union:

I claim you still, for my own love's sake!

Delayed it may be for more lives yet,

Through world I shall traverse, not a few:

Much is to learn much to forget

Ere the time becomes for taking you. (Evelyn Hope L 28-32)

The entire poem is characterized with the deepest of emotions, pathos and tenderness. The young lady lying dead in the arms of her miserable lover naturally presents a strong situation too deep to shed tears:

Beautiful Evelyn Hope is dead!

Sit and watch by her side an hour.

That is her book-shelf, this her bed;

She plucked that piece of geranium flower,

Beginning to die too, in the glass;

(Evelyn Hope L 1-5)

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