

ART OF LIVING & THEME OF LOVE IN THE POETRY OF ROBERT BROWNING: A READING OF SELECTED POEMS

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ABSTRACT

Browning, certainly is a very difficult poet various reasons are given for the obscurity and difficulty of his poetry. His poetry is a piece of intellectual vanity indulged in more and more rudely as his years and fame increased. Browning's long life and career show that he was not at all vain. All his contemporaries agree that he never talked cleverly or tried to talk cleverly which is always the case with a man who is intellectually vain. Browning did not elaborate, explain, and clarify because he was humble, and so did not think that he had anything new or significant to say. He was humble enough to think that what he knew was quite common place, and was known even to the man in the street.

INTRODUCTION

The present study seeks to explore ground realities of man's love-life through the poetry of Robert Browning in the background of Victorian Age. Though Browning couldn't gain high esteem among his contemporaries but in the modern context he is being read and explored zealously. His interests were wide and varied, but primarily he was a poet of man. The study of soul remained the main subject of his poetry from first to last. His characters belong to different ages and countries, and take up various professions. Some are normal human beings while others are abnormal. Browning's philosophy is strengthened by his faith in mortality of soul. He never questions the existence of a supreme authority, or God, controlling the manifold energies of the world. Even his knaves and rogues have firm faith in God, and rely upon His perfection and His mercy. They constantly talk of their relation with him, and are sure of ultimate union with the Absolute. Sympathetic communion, according to Browning, between man and God is possible because in addition to His attributes of power and knowledge, he has the highest attribute of all, the attribute of love.

It is love which kindles and exalts both knowledge and power, and as love is common both to God and Man; it is through love that Man touches the infinite. It is love which harmonises and unites all their living beings; and it is on love that all Browning's characters build their faith. According to the poet life in this world is worth living, for both life and the world are the expressions of Divine Love.

Browning and Tennyson are the two giants of the Victorian era. Both, roughly speaking, began creating at the same time and both towered head and shoulders above their contemporaries, from 1830 to 1890, practically the entire period of the reign of Queen Victoria. The formative years of their lives were passed in the very beginning of the new era, and the impulses they received at the beginning of their career continued to inspire them all through. While the poetic methods and ideals altered around them, they remained curiously unaffected by it. The changes we notice in their work result from the natural growth of their own characters, from the maturity of their artistic powers, and from the decay of their powers with increasing age.

Browning wrote poetry, broadly speaking, of two kinds of love poems – personal and dramatic. Though his personal poems are very few, yet, he poured out his personal experiences in the form of verse fully. *By the Fireside*, *One Word More*, or *Prospice*, are a few poems which can surpass the passion of love and where the veil of reserve is lifted to reveal poet's personal feelings for his wife. However most of the other poems by Browning dealing with love are dramatic in essence. In each, there is a certain situation and revelation of the emotions of a character placed in the situation. As a consequence, the individuality of the speaker is brought out. The dramatic mode naturally gave Browning the opportunity to deal with "Love" in various aspects. It is significant that his own love was smooth and fortunate, and yet, he deals very well with rejected or unfulfilled love. It speaks for his objectivity and sense for the dramatic.

Some of the memorable dramatic love poems are *Evelyn Hope*, *Porphyria's Lover*, *The Last Ride Together*, *The Statue and the Bust*, *One Word More* and *My Last Duchess*. Browning exploits that moment in the course of love which promises to distil love's richest significance and he realizes that these moments need not always be those of the rapture of possession and enjoyment or the fierce bitterness of rejection. They may be any of the diverse episodes in love relationships. Thus, his poems have novelty of situations.

There is no doubt about Browning being a poet of love- many of his poems deal with love in various aspects. Certainly some of his poems convey the passionate aspect of love – what has been termed as raw passion in its crude elemental form. The intensity of feeling which to Browning was essential to life naturally finds expression in poems dealing with so basic a human emotion as love. There is in his poems the reflection of that infinite passion and the pain of finite hearts that yearn. While he firmly believed love to be the guiding principle of the universe, Browning is more concerned in his poems with love between man and woman. When we talk of Browning as a love poet we have in mind the poems which deal with the isolating passion of one sex for the other chiefly in youth whether moral or immoral. Realism is the central working principle of Browning's poetry, and elemental passion is certainly part of this realism. It can be pointed out here that elemental passion consists not merely of love but also of such other feelings as envy, jealousy, suspicion, etc., all of which Browning's dramatic lyrics reflect.

REVIEW OF STUDIES

Yet, a review of the four key works, **Dramatic Lyrics**, **Dramatic Romances and Lyrics**, **Men and Women**, and **Dramatis Personae**, in the light of what has already been said about his

previous work, "Browning continued to depend for inspiration on the sources which had fed his imagination from the start."⁽³³⁾

From the records of his early flamboyant personality, his flowing hair and his lemon-coloured gloves, it is probably enough that he was vain of his good looks. But everything is against the idea that he was much in the habit of thinking of himself in his intellectual aspect. In the matter of conversation, for example, some people who liked him found him genial and talkative.

In reconsidering the poetry of Robert Browning the inevitable **first** general point is the nearly complete contrast with Tennyson. For the melody and exquisite beauty of phrase and description which make so large a part of Tennyson's charm, Browning cares very little; his chief merits as an artist lie mostly where Tennyson is least strong; and he is a much more independent and original thinker than Tennyson.

Secondly, Browning is the most thoroughly vigorous and dramatic of all great poets who employ other forms than the actual drama. Of his hundreds of poems the great majority set before the reader a glimpse of actual life and human personalities—an action, a situation, characters, or a character—in the clearest and most vivid possible way. Browning employs the form, which without having actually invented it he developed into an instrument namely the dramatic monologue in which a character discusses his situation or life or some central part or incident, of it, under circumstances which reveal with wonderful completeness its significance and his own essential character. To portray and interpret life in this way, to give his readers a sudden vivid understanding of its main forces and conditions in representative moments, may be called of Browning and his poetry. The dramatic economy of space which he generally attains in his monologues is marvelous.

Thirdly, despite his power over external details was the study of souls. The number and range of characters that he has portrayed are unprecedented, and so are the keenness, intenseness, and subtlety of the analysis. These are merely some of the secondary aspects of his peculiar genius. Browning's favourite heroes and heroines are men and women much like himself, of strong will and decisive power of action, able to take the lead vigorously and unconventionally and to play controlling parts in the drama of life.

Fourth, Browning's poetry arises in large part first from the subtlety of his thought and second from the obscurity of his subject-matter and his fondness for out-of-the-way characters. It is increased by his disregard of the difference between his own extraordinary mental power and agility on the one hand and on the other the capacity of the average person, a disregard which leads him to take much for granted that most readers are obliged to study out with no small amount of labour. Moreover Browning was hasty in composition, corrected his work little, if at all, and was downright careless in such details as sentence structure. But the difficulty arising from these various eccentricities occurs chiefly in his longer poems, and often serves mainly as a mental stimulus. Equally striking is his frequent grotesqueness in choice of subject and in treatment, which seems to result chiefly from his wish to portray the world as it actually is, keeping in close touch with genuine everyday reality; partly also from his instinct to break away from placid and fibreless conventionality.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The reputation of Browning has found favour with the critics and readers and of course the researchers of modern times due to a variety of reasons, besides his psychological analysis. “Once the intuitional psychology at the heart of Browning's thinking is fully understood, all the major thematic concerns in his poetry become meaningful as deriving there from.”

RESULTS

Browning's interests were wide and varied, but primarily he was a poet of man. His business was, “soul-dissection”. He lays stress on the incidents in the development of the soul and that remained the main subject of his study from first to last. But the ‘soul’ has contacts with the outer world at numerous points. It has contacts with the world of nature, and the world of other men, and men belong to different ages and countries, and take up various professions. Some are normal human beings, while others are abnormal. Though the soul remains the same basically, yet men in different circumstances behave differently, or reveal different facets of their soul at different moments. A poet illustrates these facets by selecting a wide variety of human types belonging to different professions, ages and countries. This explains the wide variety of subjects which Browning treats in his poetry. Crime, art, love, religion, philosophy, nature, human personality, etc, are the main themes of Browning's poetry.

Robert Browning was born in comparatively rural parish of Camberwell on May 7, 1812. His father was a clerk in the Bank of England. He was a man of more than ordinary culture and originality of mind, who possessed a library of six thousand volumes. The poet's mother was a Scotch. The poet's upbringing was somewhat narrow. He went to no public school and to no university. Till the age of fourteen he remained at a school for young gentlemen, run by a Mr. Ready at Peckham, after which he was placed under the care of a private tutor. When he was seventeen, he went for a term to a Greek class at University College, Gower Street.

The systematic use of his father's admirable library was probably the most important factor in the poet's early education. Whilst still a minor boy, he read the great Elizabethans and Byron with special delight; and when he was only fourteen, his good, loving, religious minded mother brought him from London the works of Shelley, adding, at the suggestion of the book seller, those of Keats—poets whose fame does not appear to have previously penetrated into the rustic retreats of Camberwell and Peckham.

The most striking fact in Browning's youth is, perhaps, the way in which at the age of seventeen or eighteen he made up his mind that he would make poetry his career and his profession. Influenced by Byron, and afterwards still more strongly by Shelley, he deliberately chose, and without any important hesitation adhered to, this lofty election. What is almost more strange is that his choice had the entire approval of his father, which is alone sufficient to mark off the elder Browning as no ordinary bank clerk.

PROPOSED RESEARCH WORK

The present study seeks to explore ground realities of man's love-life through the poetry of Robert Browning in the background of Victorian Age. Though Browning couldn't gain high esteem among his contemporaries but in the modern context he is being read and explored zealously. His interests were wide and varied, but primarily he was a poet of man. The study of soul remained the main subject of his poetry from first to last. His characters belong to different ages and countries, and take up various professions.

CONCLUSION & FUTURE WORK

The sense of satisfaction is the core of his poetry. Browning says that whatever may be the predicament one should feel satisfied. A statement of Carlyle regarding the poet may be cited, " but there's a great contrast between him and me. He seems very content with life and takes much satisfaction in the world. It's a very strange and curious spectacle to behold a man in these days so confidently cheerful."21

Browning regards bodily love as the part of divine love. His emotional gnosticism is based on the sovereign virtue of love. Were knowledge all man's faculty he would be compelled to confess that ' the prize is in the process.' The poet, however immediately adds, But love is victory, the prize itself.', God! Thou art love! I build my faith on that!,22 Browning writes in Paracelsus. and this statement is the corner-stone of his belief and spiritual conviction. It follows that despite the apparent contradiction between the testimonies of the heart and the head, the loving purpose of God must be working themselves out in the life of man and in the eternal universe.

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