

ROBERT BROWNING (1812 - 1889)

Robert Browning was born in 1812 in a wealthy family. He had no faith in the traditional system of education, and so he had aversion to school life. He studied Greek for sometime. His life was devoted wholly to the writing of poetry. He loved Elizabeth Barret and married her in an adventurous way. After his marriage and as long as his wife lived, his home was Italy to which he always remained deeply attached. His happy cheerful life is reflected in his poetry and his philosophy of life.

Browning's first poem "Pauline" is a self-confessional monologue. It is an introspective poem, a half-dramatic study of the type of spiritual life in the career of Shelley. This poem is Browning's homage to Shelley. His all-engrossing interest in the study of a soul is faintly suggested in this work. His next work "Paracelus" is the history of a soul. The poem aspires to a coherent philosophy with Festus, Michael and Aprile the poet. In 1840 he produced the most controversial and obscure work of his life namely "Sordello". In the work the poet sought to decide the relationship between art and life. The work centres round Sordello, a mountain troubadour, and is rich in historical allusions and archaeological references. The style of the poem too compact and succinct. These early works of Browning concentrate on the life of the Renaissance, with its restless quest for knowledge and power.

Browning wrote a great deal of poetry in the form of dramatic lyrics and monologues. He introduced new techniques into verse, for example, whereas the lyric had been previously used to express a poet's own feelings. Browning used it to express the feelings of others. His unfailing interest in man's character, and their reactions to his favourite subjects of art, religion and love, caused him to express their feelings in his poetry in the form of dramatic monologues. In 1842 "*Dramatic Lyrics*" was produced, and in 1845 followed "*Dramatic Romances and Lyrics*." In "*Dramatic Lyrics*" Browning comes out as a poet rich in every conceivable way. In "*Dramatic Romance and Lyrics*" the majority of the poems are narrative or monologues including such well-known poems as "My Last Duchess", "The Italian In England", "The Last Ride Together", "A Grammarian's Funeral", "The Heretic's Tragedy", etc. The method in these poems is the same and the treatment exhibits a ripening of powers and greater accomplishment and ease.

Browning has struck into his note of optimism. Among the *Dramatic Lyrics* there are some rousing poems of breathless speech and movement, like "How

They Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix". To a different type belongs the poem "Waring" a portrait of a dear friend and fellow-poet, Alfred Domett. Its interest lies in its being a bit of self-revelation, showing his concern for the stage, painting and politics. "Porphyria's Lover" illustrates a favourite theme of Browning's insight into the intricacies of love affairs. Here we have the story of a man, Porphyria, who quietly strangulates the woman he loves, because she was fickle. The poem is a study in morbid and abnormal psychology. The poet's probing into the innermost recess of the disappointed lover's mind is deep and sharp. "My Last Duchess" is a lyrical monologue. It portrays the brutal egoism of a Renaissance noble man who was a humanist in spite of his inhumanity. The poems of this series show the wide range of Browning's scholarship and interest, and the penetrating quality of his psychological insight into the devious workings of the human heart. The excellence of the art lies in evolving character in a dramatic situation, which is different from developing character through the interaction of the characters. The dramatic monologue as evolved by Browning is best suited to his peculiar genius. A fine example is "The Bishop Ordered his Tomb", which contains more of the Renaissance spirit than any other English prose or poem. *Man and woman* (1855) is Browning's next collection of poetry. It contains some of the best and most characteristic poems of Browning and exhibits a marvellous range of thought and feeling. The poems, in mood, thought and style, have a wider range and variety than there have been since the seventeenth century metaphysicals. It contains his richest poems of love. It opens with 'Love among the Ruins' with its subtly implied contrast, of the desolation of old ruins and the eternity of love. The volume concludes with the wonderful dedicatory poem "One Word More", addressed to his wife. "The Last Ride together", "By the Fireside", "Erelyn Hope", "In a Gondola", are among the finest lyrics written by Browning.

THE LAST RIDE TOGETHER

I

I said — Then, Dearest, since 'tis so,
 Since now at length my fate I know,
 Since nothing all my love avails,
 Since all, my life seemed meant for, fails,
 Since this was written and needs must be —

My whole heart rises up to bless
 Your name in pride and thankfulness !
 Take back the hope you gave, — I claim
 Only a memory of the same,
 — And this beside, if you will not blame,
 Your leave for one more last ride with me.

II

My mistress bent that brow of hers;
 Those deep dark eyes where pride demurs
 When pity would be softening through,
 Fixed me a breathing-while or two
 With life or death in the balance : right !

The blood replenished me again;
 My last thought was at least not vain :
 I and my mistress, side by side
 Shall be together, breathe and ride,
 So one day more am I deified —
 Who knows but the world may end to-night.

III

Hush ! if you saw some western cloud
 All billowy-bosomed, over-bowed
 By many benedictions — sun's
 And moon's and evening star's at once —

And so, you, looking and loving best,
 Conscious grew, your passion drew
 Cloud, sunset, moonrise, star-shine too,
 Down on you, near and yet more near,
 Till flesh must fade for heaven was here !
 Thus leant she and lingered — joy and fear !
 Thus lay she a moment on my breast,

IV

Then we began to ride, My soul
 Smoothed itself out — a long-cramped scroll
 Freshening and fluttering in the wind.
 Past hopes already lay behind.

What need to strive with a life away?
 Had I said that, Had I done this
 So might I gain, so might I miss.
 Might she have loved me? just as well
 She might have hated, — who can tell?
 Where had I been now if the worst befell?
 And here we are riding, she and I.

V

Fail I alone, in words and deeds?
 Why, all men strive and who succeeds?
 We rode; it seemed my spirit flew,
 Saw other regions, cities new,
 As the world rushed by on either side.

I thought, — All labour, yet no less
 Bear up beneath their unsuccess.
 Look at the end of the work, contrast
 The petty done, the undone vast,
 This Present of theirs with the hopeful Past !
 I hoped she would love me : here we ride.

VI

What hand and brain went ever paired ?
 What heart alike conceived and dared ?
 What act proved all its thought had been ?
 What will but-felt the fleshly screen ?
 We ride and I see her bosom heave.

There's many a crown for who can reach,
 Ten lines, a statesman's life in each !
 The flag stuck on a heap of bones,
 A soldier's doing ! what atones ?
 They scratch his name on the Abbey-stones.
 My riding is better, by their leave.

VII

What does it all mean, poet ? well,
 Your brains beat into rhythm — you tell
 What we felt only; you expressed
 You hold things beautiful the best,
 And pace them in rhyme so, side by side.
 'Tis something, nay 'tis much — but then,

Have you yourself what's best for men ?
 Are you — poor, sick, old ere your time —
 Nearer one, whitt your own sublime
 Than we who never have turned a rhyme ? 75
 Sing, riding's a joy ! For me, I ride.

VIII

And you, great sculptor — so you gave
 A score of years to Art, her slave,
 And that's your Venus — whence we turn
 To yonder girl that fords the burn ! 80

You acquiesce, and shall I repine ?
 What, man of music, you, grown grey
 With notes and nothing else to say,
 Is this your sole praise from a friend,
 "Greatly his opera's strains intend, 85
 "But in music we know how fashions end !"
 I gave my youth — but we ride, in fine.

IX

Who knows what's fit for us ? Had fate
 Proposed bliss here should sublimate, 90
 My being; had I signed the bond —
 Still one must lead some life beyond,
 — Have a bliss to die with, dim-described.
 This foot once planted on the goal,
 This glory-garland round my soul, 95
 Could I descry such ? Try and test !
 I sink back shuddering from the quest —
 Earth being so good, would Heaven seem best ?
 Now, Heaven and she are beyond this ride.

X

And yet — she has not spoke so long ! 100
 What if Heaven be that, fair and strong
 At life's best, with our eyes upturned
 Whither life's flower is first discerned,
 We, fixed so, ever should so abide ?
 What if we still ride on, we two, 105
 With life for ever 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, for ever ride ?

Robert Browning

INTRODUCTION TO THE POEM : "The Last Ride Together", published in 1855 in volume I of Browning's poems entitled *Men and Women*. It is a long-love poem, consisting of ten stanzas, each of eleven lines. It is regarded as a specimen of Browning's dramatic monologue. His dramatic monologue is simple. He chooses a character, faced with a crisis or conflict. He also chooses a situation, which is decisive point in the life of the character.

His "My Last Duchess" fulfils the ideal aim of a dramatic monologue. It gives the faithful self-portrayal, without ulterior purpose, of the personality of Duke. The Duke, in expressing his own ideas, does not act, as the mouthpiece of Browning. In "The Last Ride Together" he chooses a rejected lover through whom he expresses his optimistic philosophy of and attitude to life and love. He makes the lover talk on the painful pleasure of the moment. The lover contrasts his failure with that of the statesman, soldier, poet, musician, sculptor, who have given their talents, as he has given his youth, for no lasting reward. But they have none of the mementary glory of possession that he has in his last ride, in the intoxication of which he has some wild anticipation that the world may end that night and eternity break upon them as they ride side by side. This talk is expressive of the lover's optimistic attitude towards the earthly failure, and his belief in the immortality of soul.

Browning has portrayed the lover's character as a heroic soul who is not depressed and dispirited by his failure in love. He derives consolation from failure itself. He shares the poet's cheerful optimism, his faith in the immortality of the soul, and believes, like him, that "God creates the love to grant the love." The poem deals with love as an aspiration which was not to be realised here at all, but must have its completion in the other life." It is a poem of unrequited love in which there is nothing but the noblest resignation. There is no despair, no wounded pride, and no anger. W.H. Phelps regards this poem as "one of the greatest love-poems in all literature."

The poem is written in very simple, lucid style. It is free from Browning's usual fault of obscurity. The language is easy and graceful. The poem is arguentative and analytical. It brings out the poet's skill as a metrist. The rhythmic beat of the verses is a fitting accompaniment to the movement, thought, and mood of the poem.

♦ **SUBSTANCE :** A lover who is crossed in love regards this failure as a decree of fate. He is resigned to his fate. He is proud to have been his former lover. He requested her to ride with him for the last time. The lady fails to decide immediately whether to grant the prayer or reject it. She thinks deeply about the prayer. Her virgin pride and modesty is in conflict with her pity for the lover. Her feelings of pity prompts her to grant his last prayer, but her maidenly modesty prevents her from granting the same. At last she grants his prayer. His last desire is thus fulfilled. They begin now to ride together, side by side. The lover's mind is enlivened and refreshed by the joy of the ride. The lover, as he rides by the side of his beloved, muses on the sorry lot of humanity in this world.

All men make efforts, but none succeeds. Despite life-long work, man can achieve very little. Actual achievement is small in comparison with much that remains undone. Man plans much but achieves little. A statesman works hard all his life, but all his skill and labour is rewarded merely with a few lines published as obituary notice in the newspapers. Similarly, a great soldier and warrior lays down his life fighting for his country, but the reward he gets for his historic service in the battlefield is the inscription of his name upon his tombstone. The lover thinks his reward much better and more concrete and solid. A poet never gets what is considered best for men. He dies in poverty. He never achieves his own sublime ideal in life. A sculptor devotes long years of life to his art. People admire his statue, but they turn away from it as soon as they see a real girl. The musician also is as successful as the sculptor. The lover consider himself happier and more successful than the musician as he does not enjoy the happiness of the lover, derived from the long ride in her company. He realises that human life does not end in this world; man has a life to live in the other world also. If a man gets consummate happiness on this earth, heaven will have no charms for him. To enjoy heavenly bliss, failures and disappointments in this life are necessary. Heavenly bliss is nothing but the achievement of one's aspirations. The lover's heavenly bliss lies in the continuation of their riding together for an eternal period of time.

CRITICAL APPRECIATION

The Last Ride Together, published in 1855 in his volume of poems entitled *Men and Women*, is a popular poem of Robert Browning. The popularity of the poem is based on the lover's optimistic view of life and love. He presents the world as the ground of failure because nobody succeeds in this world. Failure is the unavoidable reality of life here. None can claim to have been successful in his life. None can say that he has achieved what he has desired. Life is full of dissatisfaction and disappointment. Man does much, but achieve a little. This realization brings consolation to Browning that though he has been crossed in love, his former lover has granted his last request to ride together. Here he contrasts his failure with those of the statesman, soldier, poet, musician, sculptor, who have given their talents, as he has given his youth, for no lasting reward. But they have none of the momentary glory of possession that he has in his last ride, in their intoxication of which he has some wild anticipation that the world may end that night and eternity break upon them as they ride side by side.

The poem is a dramatic monologue; it lays bare before us the soul of the lovers. As he muses over his past failure in love, his bliss in the present, and his hopes for the future, we get a peep into his soul. He is a heroic soul and is not discouraged by the failure in love. He deserves consolation from failure itself. His boundless aspiration mundane love shows how it transfigures the human in him till it becomes almost supernal. His love unrequited on earth thus, becomes a thing of beauty. He is confident of the life beyond. He considers it better to have the bliss of heavenly love hereafter "to die with dim-remembered". In any case his spiritual exultation is enduring.

The poem expresses Browning's optimistic philosophy. Failure in this world is essential for success and achievement in the life to come. He has failed in this life, but this is blessing in disguise. He can now hope for happiness in the other world. Failure in this world is best and so the lover hopes for "the instant made eternity" and they may ride together for ever. He meditates on other's failures and places arguments that he is lucky because he has achieved partial success and others nothing. He also represents Browning's philosophy. His philosophy is coloured by optimism which is clearly reflected in this poem. His optimism is also best seen in his treatment of love. In this poem the poet uses the dramatic monologue for study of character and of particular mental states and moral cries in the soul of the rejected lover.

The poem is widely praised as a love poem. W. H. Phelps calls it, "One of

the greatest love-poems in all literature." In his treatment of love, Browning has attached more importance to the intellectual study of the emotion of love than to romantic passion of love. He is more concerned with the psychology of love than with the passion of love. It is a poem of unrequited love in which there is nothing but the noblest resignation. There is no hope, no wounded pride, and no anger. The poem conveys a message of cheer and optimism to despairing humanity, as well as "glows with pure poetic fervour."

This is a beautiful poem with a wonder simplicity poetic art and technique employed in this poem. The theme of the poem thrives on the poet's optimistic attitude to failure and his derivation of consolation from failure also. This theme has been systematically developed in the poem. The language and style of the poem are equally simple, lucid and graceful. It is entirely free from the usual faults of Browning. There is no obscurity. There is no display of learning, no unusual, and far-fetched comparisons, and no excessive use of parenthesis. Words used in the poem are also easy and ordinary. The poem contains many memorable phrases, such as "The petty done, and the vast undone" and "the instant made eternity." The images of the "Billowy bosomed cloud", and of the poet's soul opening out like a "cramped scroll," are very exquisite. The poem also brings out the poet's skill as a metrist. The rhythmic beat of the verses is a fitting accompaniment to the movement, thought, and mood of the poem.

"*The Last Ride Together*" is an excellent poetic creation of Browning. Optimistic philosophy which moulds the poet's view of love is clearly expressed here. He looks upon failure not as a matter of frustration and sorrow but as that of great joy that this failure will ensure his success in heaven. The poem expresses the universal truth that none is happy on earth as none achieves fully what he strives to have. This is the reason of the sad lot of humanity. The poet, though rejected by his beloved, considers himself luckier than others on the earth as he has got what many have failed to do. This is his optimism.

The poem is written in a very simple language. The poet's optimistic love and philosophy of life have been clearly expressed in simple words. No idea about it is obscure and abstruse. Its style is simple and lucid and has a sustained elevation. The optimistic mood of the poet is spontaneously expressed in this poem.