



The Psychoanalytical Reading of Some Selected Poems of Robert Browning



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Abstract

The main aim of writing this paper has been to produce unique, insightful interpretations of a few select poems of Robert Browning that shed more light on Browning's writing style keeps the psychoanalytical theories in mind. The paper includes an introduction to Browning's writing style and Browning as a poet. Consecutively, the paper proceeds with the interpretation of the poems, which have been divided into two categories for a focused analysis. The first group contains poems that were published in a collection called 'Dramatic Romances' (1842) and the second group contains poems that were published in a collection called 'Dramatis Personae' (1864).

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1. Introduction

Robert Browning's life took a hairpin bend at the age of twenty when he found himself envisaged with the idea of taking up poetry as a profession. Browning chose poetry as his profession because of his absolute admiration of Shelley's poetry. Although Shelley cannot solely be regarded as the bearer of the torch of Browning's poetic talent, he was, however, responsible for lighting the brazen flame of poetic brilliance in Browning's heart. This is apparent because of so many references to Shelley in Browning's first work 'Pauline' (1833), where he showcases his unadulterated admiration for Shelley's work and calls Shelley the 'Sun-treade'¹. Browning's first work, 'Pauline', and consecutively other works were majorly Shelley-isque in the beginning of his career and their style and these works stood testimonial to the fact that Browning had taken to the art of poetry keeping Shelley's brilliance in mind. 'Pauline' evidently acknowledges Shelley's brilliance as a poet... Thus, we can safely and resolutely say that Shelley's poetry played an essential role in Browning's poetic calling and therefore Shelley's role cannot be understated.

Browning was mostly home-schooled but that did not stop him from being fluent in French, Greek and Latin, which is unmistakably obvious in the quotes he began his poems with, specifically in the collection of his poems

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published in 1833, and the prefaces that he wrote accompanied by poems. With his reincarnation as a poet, however, Browning was not very confident about his first work and used a pseudonym instead of his own name for the publication of '*Pauline*'.

The beauty of literature can be observed and admired with the simple fact that most of us feel converted in some sense or the other after reading a certain literary text. This simple fact highlights the true essential nature of literature. Writers of literature blossom into legends by becoming readers of literature first. Reading of literature has always been and will always be of utmost importance simply because of its captivating representation of life and its felicity.

As the preceding paragraph states, writers of literature become legends by becoming readers of literature first. For a writer of any sort, reading is not a transitory phase and demands attention extensively and thoroughly. This was partly the reason why Dante Gabriel Rossetti stumbled across Browning's poem and wrote to him, appreciating the poem. For a poet who was struggling with his profession, to receive the attention of a well-known poet who was the founder of the Fleshly School of Poetry (The Pre-Raphaelite Poetry).

"My dear Browning,

I think you have Mrs. Leigh Hunt's original bust of Shelley, have you not?"²

After receiving a positive review from Rossetti, Browning's poetic career took a dive into the ocean of literary excellence with an imperious disregard for the shackles of the religiously conventional society. Browning had now developed a more individualistic, personal style, unlike his earlier works which suggested an impersonal, disconnected approach in the sense that they were extensively Shelley-isque in nature. '*Sordello*' (1840) was his first work, which had hints of his unique style, published after '*Pauline*' (1833), '*Paracelsus*' (1835), and '*Strafford*' (1837). Browning's new individualistic style fervently gained him readers and reviewers and exposed him to the compliments of the likes of Wordsworth and Dickens. His non-conforming style and piercing, thought-provoking characters exposed his readers to layered characters which offered multiple interpretations and assured the dawn of a *poetic singularity*. Here, the term 'singularity' has been used with reference to the unknown part of the black hole where the calculations and the presupposed outcomes fail to hold true. Robert Browning's poetic style developed in a way that was unprecedented in every sense of the term. He failed to conform to the conventional forms of writing poetry, thus proving to be a singularity in his literary endeavor to take the world of literature by storm. Browning's style was unpredictable and it did not conform to the marginalized standards of poetry that were set by the age.

He is also known as the effective creator of the dramatic monolog, along with Tennyson. His writing style was exceptionally unique because of his unusual linguistic capabilities and in the beginning, some of his works seem to be unintelligible. After going through a rough patch, where he had to struggle with his life as a poet, Browning discovered his own capabilities and earned himself a niche in the literary timeline of the Victorian era. His ability to showcase the psyche of his characters in an engrossing whirlpool of an unpredictable chain of events undoubtedly proved his worth as a poet. Browning's characters and diction were infused with an extensive understanding of the human psychology, this was unambiguously apparent, as Browning made sure it would be. His casual dismissal of propriety, when it came to his writing and his characters, broadened the spectrum of his readership. The discovery of his own distinctive writing style coupled with a deep understanding of his main themes of revealing new facets of the human psyche, religion, love, and philosophy provided him with varied themes which turned into various works that are credited to have sculpted the Victorian poetry. Although the entirety of Browning's literary work was asserted, upon careful and analytical study, it can be deduced that the prominent thematical pillars of Browning's work were psychology, love, satire, and religion with respect to spiritualism. His earlier plays and poems led to the development of his style and gave him an iron grasp on the human psychology that allowed him to take a plunge into the human consciousness, providing him an unparalleled insight into the psyche of his beautifully etched characters. His knowledge of the core of his character's being allowed him to portray his characters in an engrossing manner that left a sense of beguiling wonder on the reader's face and had an inconsequential impact on the reader's mind provoking afterthought. What is observable with Browning's work is how he attacked similar themes with new, dissimilar perspectives. His poems which revolved around the theme of love observed a different approach every single time. The acknowledgment of his poem by Rossetti was another reason why the Fleshly School of Poetry had an influence on Browning's work and was essentially reflected in the Victorian society as well. In '*The Last Ride Together*', he observed the character of a man who wishes to make love to a woman he would not be seeing again. In '*Life in a Love*', he observed the character of a man who has been a victim of cupid's unskilled, torturous game of unrequited love. In '*Meeting at Midnight*', he observed the character of a man who is to meet his beloved at

midnight after a long time. In *'In Three Days'*, he talks from the perspective of a man who has to wait three days before he sees the love of his life again. He portrays the feelings of the man and the anguish of the wait so deftly that it would definitely leave the reader mesmerized by the sheer simple beauty of the lines, as it left me. Browning's varied literary endeavors are each unique to their own because of their original, independent existence and literary brilliance. He observed the same themes with slight variations but stark characters that showcased his extensive understanding of human psychology and deemed him worthy of the accolades that became associated with his name and writing. This special approach that was undertaken by Browning was so deftly adorned in verse that the success that followed further enraptured the readers of his poetical acuity. The layered and complex, yet simple, structure of his poetry enabled multiple interpretations of his poems. The relatable nature of his characters forms a part of their charm and at the same time, the complexity of his characters also forms a great part of their appeal to the readers. His characters showcase his skill at simplifying the psyche of his characters in a way that makes it easy to study them extensively and simultaneously understand them simply. This skill cannot be understated and emphatically propagates how skilled of a poet Browning was, to have sketched characters that could be understood at both primary (superficial) or secondary (extensive) levels, to transfix the reader in a state of uncompromised wonder and admiration.

2. Research Method

I have made use of biographies of Robert Browning and an extensively well-assembled book accommodating the poetical works of Robert Browning. I have also made use of books on the history of English literature to aid me in understanding the times and Browning's style. I have not made use of papers available online because I wanted the content to stand in an "otherness" altogether.

3. Results and Analysis

Psychoanalytical Study of some Dramatic Romances

*"Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;
Then all smiles stopped together."*³

'My Last Duchess' is one of Browning's most popular poems. The poem drifts away from the stereotypical appreciation of the beauty of a woman, rather it traverses through the mind of a character so psychotically unique that one cannot help but admire Browning's work. The poem begins with the Duke of Ferrara addressing a foreign Count. Browning was not a pioneer of the Victorian times just because he could write brilliant characters, it was the way he introduced them and how the story unfolded that made him worthy of the title of being one of the most prominent poets of the time. At the beginning of the poem, the Duke, who seemingly appears to be a man of high stature, is telling the Count about his Duchess. The beginning gives no indication whatsoever, about what was to come and that makes the discovery of the plot twist even sweeter. As the poem progresses, a hint of jealousy and possessiveness can be detected in the tone of the Duke. The Duke spoke about everything with an air of superiority and class. With whatever information he gives away to the Count, his character comes out as ostentatious and impervious. Each consecutive line emphatically secures his impression as a domineering megalomaniac. His sheer possessiveness is absolutely apparent with the impudent whims that he 'suffered' because his Duchess was too kind. The character of the Duchess can plainly be interpreted as a woman who was never exposed to an atmosphere around men and therefore she treated every man the same way. Instead of understanding why she did what she did, the Duke expresses his vexation to the Count and subtly justifies the reason why he had the Duchess assassinated. The tone in which he does so is so casual and callous that it might come off as a shock to the reader the first time. This was the brilliance of Browning; He managed to create characters that had both evil and goodness inherent in them. The overpowering characteristic that makes the Duke so psychotic is his calm insanity. He masks his psychopathy so deftly, that it becomes quite unnerving for the reader to try and figure out why he does what he does. His insanity is furthered by his treatment of everything (inanimate or animate) as if it were an object. Throughout the poem, he takes ample opportunities to make the Count aware of his taste and his liking in paintings and all this exquisite and extraordinary, for he finds himself to relate to those works of art. He is proud of his collection and he wanted his Duchess to be a part of that collection. He wanted her to be something that was unique and special for him and only him. But the naïve character of the Duchess turned out to be a hindrance. Although she was the prettiest woman that the Duke had

ever seen, his plan to make her a part of his own personal collection failed because of her naivety. His constant show off of his works of art shows also captures the obsessive love some men had for the ultimate collection of art. This was the reason why he had the Duchess killed because she was no longer unique to his own, personal collection. The last line of the poem emphatically proves the aforementioned fact.

*“Notice Neptune, though,
Taming a sea-horse thought a rarity,
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!”⁴*

The Duke’s fixation on the possession of all things rare and unique and the lengths to which he can go to make that happen showcases a skillfully written character that leaves the reader in awe and horror.

Browning had a unique dexterity when it came to the inspirations with his poems. As it has already been mentioned before, a writer becomes a legend by becoming a reader first. Browning was surprisingly aware of obscure local myths and legends that not many would know about. *‘The Statue and the Bust’* is based on one such Florentine legend. The legend was that the Grand Duke Ferdinand built a statue of himself in front of the Riccardi Palace’s East window because he had fallen in love with the lady whose Husband’s love kept her imprisoned in the palace. Instead of taking a bold step in retrieving the lady’s love(for she loved him back), he took a timid step and built a statue of himself in front of the Riccardi palace in order to make the lady’s husband aware of his affections for his wife.

*“He looked at her, as a lover can;
She looked at him, as one who awakens:
The past was asleep, and her life began.”⁵*

The Grand Duke went experienced the power of love when his eyes fell upon the Lady in the Riccardi palace but his absolute lack of resolution got him nowhere and the way he acted absolutely frustrates Browning and he expresses his distaste for such cowardly behavior. With his string of words that appeal to the reader like music to the ears, Browning manages to breathe life into this Florentine legend and the protagonists of the legend (The Lady and the Grand Duke).

*“‘Who rides by with the royal air?’
... ‘The Grand- Duke Ferdinand.’”
“‘Who is she?’
-A bride the Riccardi brings home today.”⁶*

The Duke and the Lady share the deepest love, but they do not take any concrete decision to do anything about it, whatsoever. The only substantial thing that the Duke did was that he built a statue of himself in front of the Riccardi Palace, which was the lady’s dwelling. Browning stunningly captures yet another facet of love. He emphasizes on how there are all kinds of love and how not every couple has the courage to run away or stand up for their love. Here, Browning manages to unravel yet another complexity of the human mind. He condemns the lover’s inability to stand up for their love, but he undeniably proves that there are as many kinds of love as there are lovers.

*“And still, as love’s brief morning wore,
With a gentle heart, half smile, half sigh,
They found love not as it seemed before.”⁷*

Browning was intricately aware of the complexities of the human mind, and he kept this in mind whilst creating his characters. This is what made his poems so admirable, for it is never just the diction that attracts the reader... It is the capability of the author to breathe life into his characters in such a way that the reader finds them palpable. In *‘The Statue and the Bust’*, Browning critically rebukes the fear of a society that exists in us. The Lady did not leave her husband because she was afraid of ruining her father’s reputation.

*“(She checked herself and her eye grew dim)
‘My father carries to bless my state:
‘I must keep it one day more for him.’”⁸*

Browning and the reader (for Browning managed to convince the reader quite thoroughly) both feel an intense vexation when the only step they took to make their love eternal was undertaken by the Grand Duke, in building a statue and by the Lady, in religiously staring at it. However, there is a tonne of admiration that can be detected in the poem because had the Grand Duke not built the statue, the legend would have slipped through the sands of time. Browning strings the choicest words together to give away the exact amount of hesitation in the characters. He makes it absolutely obvious in a way that keeps the reader’s eyes glued to the page to find out the fate of the lovers who were, for once, overwhelmed by the shackles of society and were dubious of taking any steps that would result in conflict. Browning sheds light on how every story is different because every character is different. He wittingly acknowledges the fact that not all love stories are supposed to have headstrong lovers who callously disregard the consequences of their actions. Some love stories are love stories because the characters would rather live their lives peacefully on earth and then eternally in heaven, instead of letting violence engulf their lives. Browning was seemingly upset with the lover’s inability to take a stand for their love, through the perspective of the third person. He essentially managed to capture the fears that the lovers felt. He enraptured the reader with his simple yet beautiful writing style and laid the characters bare for anyone to observe superficially, or study analytically and understand the reason behind their actions and their psychology.

*“And both perceived they had dreamed a dream;
Which hovered as dreams do, still above:
But who can take a dream for a truth?
Oh, hide our eyes from the next remove!”⁹*

‘*Porphyria’s Lover*’ is another poem by Browning in which the male character kills the female character because of reasons that can only be explained by detailed psychoanalysis of the characters. ‘*Porphyria’s Lover*’ is a poem that can be interpreted and analyzed in many different phases. The title itself seems somewhat strange after reading the poem, as does the title of ‘*My Last Duchess*’, for both of them have been possessively mentioned by their murderers in the title. In ‘*Porphyria’s Lover*’, the title itself throws light on the psyche of the character. The fact that his own name is not mentioned in the title of the poem and how he is shown to have no identity of his own as such. Before the arrival of Porphyria, he has been sitting alone in the cold dark room.

“I listened with heart fit to break.”¹⁰

The use of the words ‘sullen’, ‘spite’ and ‘vex’ to describe the weather and before Porphyria’s arrival settles quite a daunting air. Porphyria adores the protagonist and he kills her. Porphyria’s lover can be interpreted in many ways. He can be interpreted as a lunatic, who killed an innocent woman, or as a man whose actions can be justified. The lover makes it clear that Porphyria’s mere presence makes him feel alive.

*“When glided in Porphyria: straight
She shut the cold out and the storm,
And kneeled and made the cheerful grate
Blaze up, and all the cottage warm.”¹¹*

As soon as Porphyria enters the scene, the lover makes use of the words ‘cheerful’ and ‘warm’ to signify how significant she was to his mood. Perhaps the reason why he killed her was that he believed that she had betrayed him and been with somebody else. The fact that suggests this is the use of the word “soiled”. Although it seems like an innocent adjective describing the gloves, Browning was an expert in layering meanings and that is what he had been doing in the previous lines. The reason why he killed her was that she dishonored him and he snapped. His instability is suggested when he mentions her beautiful hair a few times before strangling her with it. Browning had managed to create a unique character yet again, for every character (and every human being)

reacts differently to any situation. Porphyria's lover was so distraught and lonely that he had no one else to be with from the outside world, and he felt undying rage when he found out that the only person he believed to be with him eternally had betrayed him. Here we can question Porphyria as well. Maybe she is aware of the fact that her lover can be a dangerous person and thus she tries to tell him how much she loves him. But when she sees no light at the end of the tunnel, she gladly accepts her fate and lets her lover take her life without putting up any struggle.

*"Murmuring how she loved me- she
Too weal, for all her heart's endeavor,"*¹²

He observes that Porphyria feels no pain when he strangles her and this is how he somehow unconsciously or consciously realizes that Porphyria suffered her rightful fate.

*"No pain felt she;
I am quite sure she felt no pain."*¹³

Another line that suggests that Porphyria had been unfaithful is:

*"That moment she was mine, mine, fair,
Perfectly pure and good."*¹⁴

This indicated that with death, she was purely his and his alone and now she could not be anyone else's. Porphyria's lover feels content with what he had done and he feels that she deserved what she had got what he had deserved because her unfaithfulness had scorned him.

*"That all it scorned at once is fled,
And I, its love, am gained instead!"*¹⁵

Therefore with 'Porphyria's Lover', we see a more personal thought process. In 'My Last Duchess', the Duke treats the Duchess like an object and wishes to possess her for his own private collection. He has no attached human feelings when it comes to the Duchess, other than displaying her like his own private collection. The Duke feels so detached from the Duchess that he hires someone to kill her. In 'Porphyria's Lover', however, the lover is bent on making Porphyria his and only his and which is why he kills her. He murders her himself because he believes she has been unfaithful. The two characters are similar and yet so different. This was the brilliance of Robert Browning. Although the lover's murder of Porphyria is not justified, it is simply explained by his point of view and is what is rightly supposed to have been done; he manages to justify his actions by the implication of Porphyria's adulterous behavior. The ulterior motive behind this poem could have been a wild spin off of some personal experience of Browning, exaggerated to maximum effect and observed and acted upon by his rich, unique character. The last line of the poem furthers the justification of the Porphyria's lover's actions, where he believes that God is silent because God believes that the lover did the right thing. This can also be a deluded attempt by the lover to ease his conscience and make him feel better about what he did, by justifying it.

These three poems manage to enlist Browning's might as a poet with their diverse, individualistic train of thought. His brazen, rich characters manage to mesmerize his readers, timelessly, over and over again.

Psychoanalytical Study of some Dramatis Personae

In 'James Lee's Wife', Browning manages to capture the feelings of alienation that are going through James Lee's wife as she goes through the failure of her marriage and how she finds solace in nature, because that is the only thing that remains constant with time unlike relationships and love, which crumple up and ruin like a piece of paper lying uselessly on the ground. The entire poem consists of several lyrics that paint a bold picture of the transience transition that exposes us to another facet of her personality. Throughout the poem, the woman's desire to regain what has been lost turns into desperation to avail that which does not belong to her anymore.

*“Wilt thou change too?
Should I fear surprise?”¹⁷*

The woman is at yet another crossroad in life but she finds herself to be lost. She has lost her husband, which was why she asks him if he would change and leave her, in surprise. Even the title of the poem shows that the woman has given way to over-thinking now that she is getting old and she fears the instability of her marriage. The essential theme of the poem is the woman's insecurity because her marriage is falling apart and she cannot do anything about it, except brood and mull over why fortune struck her this fate. Though every lyric is unique in its “otherness”, the idea of losing her husband is what is running through her mind like blood runs through veins. Every lyric makes a subtle, noticeable hint towards the wife's paranoia.

*“Who lived here before us two?
Old-world pairs...
Watch the man
With whom began”¹⁸*

With the passage of time and each lyric, her demeanor gets soaked with a little more desperate.

“My heart shrivels up and my spirit shrinks curled.”¹⁹

She unrelentingly spirals down into her mind's own creation. She contrasts her love's greatness by making literary and religious (Biblical) references throughout the poem. The poem captures the fear of a being alone and how it deteriorates the soul of the person into nothingness and ruin.

'Prospice' was published in 1864, after the death of Browning's wife. He wrote his poem as his acceptance of death because, in death, he would reunite with the love of his life. Through this poem, Browning lets go of the fear of death and embraced it as a gateway to get to his soul mate and live in perpetual bliss with his wife by his side and in the presence of God.

*“Fear Death?—to feel the fog in my throat,
The mist in my face,
When the snows begin, and the blasts denote
I am nearing the place,”²⁰*

Although there are various instances hinting at the poet's acceptance of death, he admits to the fear that is running through his veins. Even though Browning is writing as himself, he can sense the complexity of his own desires and wishes.

“The Fear Arch in a visible form,”²¹

He gives a glorious detail of how life has been a climb and now that the summit has been reached, it is the time that another journey has to begin. This is the journey of the afterlife. It is the last journey that has to be undertaken by the human soul before acquiring eternal happiness in heaven.

*“For the journey is done and the summit attained.
I was ever a fighter, so—one fight more,
The best and the last!”²²*

Here the uniqueness of the poem is the blinding optimism that can be wrung out of every single line in the poem. Unlike the other poems that have been discussed, this poem is a rather positive poem that shows that light can be found in the darkest of times if the only one makes a diligent effort in trying to avail it. The character in the poem shows his utmost belief in afterlife and goodness and is capable of convincing people that acceptance can lead to goodness. The poet expresses his desire to feel pain and darkness as well as the light upon his death. He wants to

accept all of it all because he knows that his soul's merging with his beloved's would make it all the more worth it.

"No! let me taste the whole of it,"²³

This poem has such a positive, inspiring ring to it because death is not something the poet dreads anymore. It is a life that he does not like living anymore, because of the absence of the love of his life. He is eagerly ready waiting for death, for death promises something life cannot anymore... The union with his beloved. And he is persistently waiting for Death because he can no longer wait for his beloved. The fear of death is overpowered by the strength of love.

4. Conclusion

The main objective of this paper was to present a unique, in-depth interpretation of some selected poems of Robert Browning, using Freud's psychoanalytical theories. The true aim of the paper was to analytically study the psyche of literary characters and understand their behavior as and to decipher the concealed meaning and insightful interpretation.

Robert Browning was one of the pioneers of the Victorian era and was responsible for shaping the Victorian society with his unequalled contributions to the field of literature. In the second chapter titled 'Browning as a Poetic Singularity', I have used the term singularity to define Browning's poetic work, because of his unadulterated excellence. He was a versatile genius and his poems with the munificent use of rusting legends in order to bring them into the spotlight of the readers. Browning designated himself to the themes of philosophy, love, psychology, and religion, mostly. However, Browning never conformed to these themes religiously and the presence of variety and surprise was another reason that helped him gallop onto the road of success and popularity.

*"Stand still true poet that you are!
I know you; let me try and draw you.
Some night you'll fail us: when afar
You rise, remember one man saw you,
Knew you, and named a star!*

*His clenched hand shall enclose at last,
I know, and let out all the beauty:
My poet holds the future fast,
Accepts the coming ages' duty,
Their present for this past."²⁴*

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I am currently pursuing my Bachelors in English from Amity University. My interest in literature oscillates back and forth from poetry and novels. I actively participate in debates. I am also a part of the literary society – Sahitya Adda where we traverse through the world of literature on a weekly basis.