



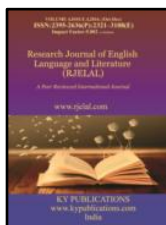
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## THE OPTIMISTIC SPIRIT OF ROBERT BROWNING

**Dr. MARIAM THOMAS**

Head, Dept. of English,  
Mahatma Jyotiba Fule College,  
Amravati



### ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to analyze and depict the spirit of optimism pervading over the illustrious works of the great Victorian poet Robert Browning. His nonchalant and unbridled optimism had found expression in his own personal life and the reflection of the same can be seen in many of his poems. It mentions as to how he differed from his contemporaries just because of this aura of optimism and throws light on how great was his optimism in an era tormented with war, scepticism and hopelessness. His inimitable style of characterization is also dealt with. Some of the most famous poems like Fra Lippo Lippi, Rabbi Ben Ezra, Andrea Del Sarto, The Last Ride Together etc., with the best examples are analyzed and the lines are quoted here to make the point clear to the readers. Different levels of the poet's optimism or the different shades of optimism as portrayed in different poems are discussed. The paper ends on a positive note of assurance that Robert Browning was a poet who had an abundant store of optimism emanating from his manifold poems irrespective of the note of scepticism that prevailed in the Age in which he lived.

Key Words:- Victorian Era, Scepticism, Unbridled Optimism, Uncompromising Foe, Immense Variety, Italian Renaissance, Utilitarianism, Incarnation, Full Throttle, Impact, Reverberating, Milieu, Contemporaries, Accomplishment.

### Introduction

Robert Browning is highly respected as a distinguished poet of the Victorian Era. What marked him apart from the other poets of his times is the unbridled optimism that he possessed. A close look at his various poems reveals that Browning is not only an optimist but is a moralist and religious teacher too which distinguishes him from the other writers of the Victorian Age. This great optimism of the poet bears witness to the fact that he is an uncompromising foe of "Scientific Materialism". The central truth of the philosophy of Browning's life finds expression in God and Universality. Moreover he was quite optimistic about the existence of god and the notion of a perfect heaven. A reflection of this is seen in his poetry where he deviates from the

scientific temperament quite typical of his age. In this context it is highly essential to note Browning's relation with the Victorian age in which he lived and created many of his noteworthy collection of poems.

### Browning and the Victorian Age

To have a perfect understanding about Browning's optimistic spirit the poet's relationship with the Victorian Age has to be considered. Victorian Age can quite rightly be regarded as a watershed Age in English Literature on account of the influence of Classicism, Italian Renaissance, British Renaissance, Individualism, Socialism, Utilitarianism, Neo-Classicism, Romanticism, Modernism and Scepticism. At the back drop of this, Browning is seen as a very consistent thinker of the optimistic philosophy of life. His poetry is marked by

his immense variety which is co-ordinated by the poet's unchanging philosophical view of human destiny. Instead of challenging the old dogmas, Browning accepts and upholds the conventional view of God, the immortality of the soul and the Christian belief in incarnation.

It can be seen that the Victorian Age was tormented by lots of confusions and conflicts. Some of these can be mentioned as the conflict between art and life, art and morality, content and form, man and women, classic education and progressive education, flesh and spirit, body and soul etc.. It is quite strengthening and refreshing to note that in these situations of confusions and conflicts that prevailed, Browning remained totally unaffected, that is, he kept himself aloof from all these. He could accomplish this just because of the fact that he is a thorough optimist at heart. And this optimism of the poet finds an echo even in the very style of his writing. Thus it can be noted that he always portrays the central character of his poem either in crisis or in some critical situation and when this crisis reaches the climax, it is resolved ultimately and the poet ends his poem on a note of optimism. A very good example is the poem "Patriot in to Traitor" where he says: "t is God shall repay one, I am safer". Similarly in the poem "Fra Lippo Lippi" Browning says in the words of Brother Lippo:

"Don't fear me!

There is a grey beginning. Zooks!"

It is quite praiseworthy that Browning's poetry is an articulation of Victorian Optimism and belief in progress at a period when England had ascended the pinnacle of prestige and power in the world. This is for being the first country to leap full throttle into industrialism and also for its uncontested naval and military superiority after defeating the French in the Napoleonic wars. This was maintained throughout the Nineteenth century.

While looking in the field of religion it is quite astounding to note that when Darwinism was shaking the faith of the other poets in the divine order and the existence of God, Browning alone could maintain a strong faith in conventional religious thinking and an afterlife that followed it.

### **Browning's Optimism**

To gain a perfect understanding about the trait of optimism that underlined Browning's poetry, it is quite essential to know the meaning of the term "optimism". Optimism the word refers to positive attitude or thought process. Consequently if an individual is optimistic, he will be gifted with the tendency to concentrate on the good or positive side of everything that happens, even though it seems challenging or negative at the outset. This has a great impact on the poet Robert Browning whose attitude to life is reflected in his poetic works also. This optimistic note is found only in the poetry of Browning and not in other poets of his time which makes him all the more superior. When the entire period and people were pestered with and weighed down by the spirit of sadness, sorrow, meaninglessness and hopelessness, Browning's is the only manly voice reverberating with peace, hope and joy for all the troubled race. He inspired them to get rid of their fear, scepticism, hopelessness and frustration and inspired them to be full of vigour and life.

### **Browning's Contribution to Poetry**

To assess, understand and to appreciate the great contribution of Browning to the realm of poetry, an awareness of the attitude of the period/times in which he lived and wrote poetry is necessary. It is noticed that when Browning was writing, the attitude of the milieu/times was scientific and materialistic on account of which people had lost their faith in religion, morality and spirituality. And it is at this point that Browning and his works, were totally different from his contemporaries. Robert Browning was found quite confident and optimistic about the existence of God and the idea of a perfect heaven. The typical scientific temperament of his Age was absent in his poetry, which was full of optimism on the contrary. This is quite beautifully delineated in the lines of his poem " Rabbi Ben Ezra" where he exhorts one and all to

"Grow old along with me!

The best is yet to be".

There are many such examples available in his different poems but it is not possible to quote all of them here.

### Browning's Philosophy of Life

To fathom the optimistic spirit of Robert Browning it is essential to have a look at his philosophy which is reflected in all his works. And that is none other than the fact that Browning is a very consistent thinker of the optimistic philosophy of life and it is clearly visible that as an optimist he is a moralist and religious teacher. It is quite noteworthy that Browning's optimism is based on the realities of life. According to him, life is full of imperfections, but he strongly believes that in this very imperfection lies hope. To put it more simply, it can be seen that the philosophy of Browning is the philosophy of a man looking at the world with more than a ray of hope in his eyes. Just because of this optimistic spirit that he embodied Browning occupies a very distinct place among the writers of the Victorian Age.

It is observed that Browning's optimism has its foundation on the rock solid realities of life and hence, it is not 'blind' as the poet never shuts his eyes to the evil lurking in the daily life routine of human beings. He confidently believes that human life is a mixture of good and evil, of love and ugliness, of despair and hopefulness, but he cleverly derives hope from this imperfections of life. Hence it can rightly be said that Browning's optimism is "founded on the imperfections of man". This very optimistic feeling of the poet is reverberated in the famous line of "Pippa Passes"

"God is in His Heaven

All is right with the world".

This clearly manifests the poet's hopeful attitude to the struggles of human life. He believes that endless struggle provides a greater and deeper meaning to life. To him it does not matter, if the struggle's outcome is nothing other than failure. Browning strongly believes that the purpose of life rests on the "effort to become perfect, not in accomplishment, but in the strife to accomplishment".

### Examples of Optimism in Browning's Poetry

A closer look at the myriad works of Robert Browning reveals that they all are clear manifestations of the optimistic spirit of the poet. His well-known poem 'Rabbi Ben Ezra' abounds with examples of his optimism. In this poem he

celebrates both the incarnate life and the life of the spirit. The lines are:

Let us cry "All good things are ours".

In his famous poem "Andrea Del Sarto", an optimistic faith in progress and striving for achievements are beautifully portrayed in the lines:

"A man's reach should exceed his grasp  
Or what's heaven for?"

It won't be an exaggeration to say that Browning was a great fighter.... one who was not ready to accept failure neither in his personal life nor in anything he did. This can be seen in the incidents of his own love and married life such as his love affair with poetess Elizabeth Barrett and his fight to marry her against the wishes of her father who considered her as an "invalid" and denied her to marry. With great valour, he eloped with her, married and took her to Italy, for the revival of her health. Their unflinching love is celebrated in many of the poems of both poets. Browning's love had revived and rejuvenated her ailing self and they had a fruitful married life. Till the death of his wife they made Italy their home or rather it was their adopted country. If the poet had hesitated or was scared of Elizabeth's father, the story would have been totally different. Hence the poet acclaims in his poem "The Last Ride Together" that one should:

"Welcome each rebuff

That turns earth's smoothness rough,  
Each sting that ages not sit nor stand but  
go".

In this same poem the poet suggests that we should not consider any struggle as painful. He further elaborates that judgment is not passed on the accomplishment, but on the impulse and the intention of the soul which promotes the efforts.

Browning's optimism in depth is beautifully delineated in "Rabbi Ben Ezra" in the lines:

"All I could never be  
All, men ignored in me,  
This I was worth to God,  
Whose wheel the pitcher shaped".

The poet emphasizes that there can never be "broken arcs" on earth but only in heaven can be found "a perfect round".

Browning strongly believed that this life on earth is a preparation for the life to come. This same

thought is expressed in the poem "Evelyn Hope" where the lover does not allow despair to overcome him, but he finds consolation from his faith derived out of optimism and tells that

"God creates love to reward love"

The lover is quite hopeful just like the poet that true love will surely be rewarded in the life after death, if not in this life. This unwavering optimism of the poet is beautifully portrayed in the famous poem "Andrea Del Sarto" where he asks:

"What would one have?

In heaven, perhaps new chances,

One more chance--"

Andrea is quite optimistic to find something better in the next life. He says quite confidently that he will be given another opportunity or at least one more chance to prove his greatness as an artist. It can be noticed that Browning's optimism is strictly founded on the fair faith in God. He always glorifies the relationship between God and humanbeings.

It is quite reassuring to note that Browning's optimism is firmly based on his faith in the immortality of the soul. The poet strongly believes that even if the body dies, the soul does not die, it is immortal and it lives on in the Infinite. This faith of his is portrayed in the form of a metaphor.....that of a potter and the clay he moulds, in the poem "Rabbi Ben Ezra" in the lines:

"Earth changes, but thy soul and God stands sure:

What entered into thee, that was, is and shall be;

Time's wheel runs back or stops:

Potter and clay endure".

In the above lines, undoubtedly, the potter is a symbolic representation of God, clay of man and the wheel refers to time. Again in "The Last Ride Together", the speaker opines that, through their death, his and his beloved's soul will enter into eternity and as a result their ride will go on eternally. And what they could not achieve here will be achieved in the next world. The lines are:

"The instant made eternity,---

And heaven just prove that I and she Ride, ride together, forever ride?"

Browning was gifted with an optimistic attitude towards failure and held the opinion that

every human must leave some of the desires unfulfilled on the earth so that he can fulfil the same in his next life. Hence he was always ready to face death. In a similar fashion he had strong faith in the futility of this earthly life. He believed that failure can work as a source of inspiration for a man's progress which is expressed in "Andrea Del Sarto" in the lines:

"Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp,

Or what's heaven for?"

This same thought is expressed in "The Last Ride Together" as:

"We fall to rise, are baffled to fight better Sleep to wake".

In this greatest love poem of the poet, the rejected lover is portrayed as manly, brave and optimistic like a typical Browning character. He is depicted as consoling himself for his failure to gain his beloved's love with great optimism. He is shown as extremely optimistic that he does not want to regret the frustrating past. This same attitude is beautifully delineated in "Rabbi Ben Ezra" with the Rabbi's statement that he does not show any regret for his lost youth and he never considers his present condition of old age as useless rather he takes it as the most excellent part of his life. And hence he invites all to grow old eagerly and exhorts!

"Grow old along with me!

The best is yet to be,

The last of life, for which the first was made ---See all, nor be afraid".

Really this is the most wonderful expression of Browning's robust optimism which can lend hope to many a dejected soul who sits and weeps bitterly for the lost youth and waning beauty. Thus Browning's philosophical view of old age is optimistic which is made explicit through Rabbi Ben Ezra.

Browning held an optimistic view to love as expressed in the poem "Andrea Del Sarto" where Andrea is drawn as not in a mood to quarrel with his wife Lucrezia, rather he just wants a chance to draw a painting. And for that purpose, he is even willing to give all the money he has in her hand and coaxes her. Irrespective of the fact that his wife does not

pay any attention to him or entertain his desire, he neither nurses any objection nor anger for her. On the contrary he loves her so much and longs to draw inspiration from her for his next painting. He fondly cherishes the hope that her smile will inspire him to create better works.

The poem "The Last Ride Together" is again a fine depiction of Browning's optimistic attitude towards love. The lover is so hopeful that his sincere love will be rewarded and he tries to find solace and satisfaction in today's reality where they are riding together. Thus he states:

"I hope she would love me; here we ride"

What a beautifully delineated attitude of optimism! Truly here lies the real greatness of Browning and his positive attitude and unflinching faith in God and life. The poet ends the poem with the soaring hope that heaven might just prove the present condition permanent and bless them. He expresses his hope that paradise is nothing other than the bliss enjoyed by the lover and his beloved and tells that:

"The instant made eternity,----

And heaven just prove that I and she

Ride, ride together, forever ride?"

The secret of Browning's robust optimism is his supreme and firm faith in God and his mercy. He proclaims that life in this world is really worth living as both life and world are the expressions of Divine Love. His poetry was an expression of the strongest words of optimistic faith in the Victorian Age of scepticism and pessimism to which the poet was alive. The optimism of Browning is clearly visible in his characterization too. It is his technique to pick up and present his main character in crisis, and when the crisis reaches its climax he finishes it with optimism. Thus it is noticed that his characters are mostly presented as manly, courageous and optimistic. Thus in the poem "Fra Lippo Lippi", the Fra, Lippo Lippi finds the meaning of life in the love of a woman. In his opinion loveless life is nothing better than a grave. Again in the celebrated poem "Love Among the Ruins", the lover can be seen singing the victory of life.

Browning's optimism was based on his rock solid theory of evolution that life is constantly progressing to higher and higher levels. He

confidently believed that evil is a great opportunity that the divine power had offered to humans so that they can advance in spirituality. It can be noticed that Browning the great poet's life came to an end at the end of 1889, while everything, the atmosphere and the prevailing conditions were suitable at least for his social class and in words "right with the world". Fortunately neither was he forced to experience the carnage of First World War nor did he witness the manner in which that had shaken the intellectual world's optimism or faith in human progress.

### Conclusion

Browning's optimism finds the passion of joy that no other poet of his period had sung more fervently than the poet himself of the delight of life. The best examples for this are Browning's portraits of David in "Saul", Pippa in "Pippa Passes", Lippo in "Fra Lippo Lippi" and also a host of his other poems which are keenly alive to the pleasure of living. The incomparable character of Rabbi in "Rabbi Ben Ezra" condemns the aesthetic negation of the flesh and strongly advocates the necessity and moral usefulness of the flesh and soul. Thus he claims:

As the bird wings and sings,

Let us cry "All good things

Are ours, nor soul helps flesh more, now,  
than flesh helps soul".

Browning's poems can be seen as abundantly abounded with characters and images of courage and inspiration exhorting people that they will face no difficulties which are too hard to overcome, if they possess self-dependence and self-control. Truly it was quite fortunate for English literature, that the two giants in Victorian poetry, Alfred Tennyson and Robert Browning, were different from one another in their thoughts and attitudes, vision and philosophy of life. An analysis of their works reveals that when Tennyson was a pessimist at heart, Browning was optimism personified.

Thus it can be safely concluded that, Robert Browning, one of the major Victorian poets, is an optimist, and as an optimist his position is superior to almost all writers of his era. And the optimistic attitude of the poet towards love depicted in his poems lends him the position of an optimist in every

aspects of life. As an optimist, Browning had great faith in the essential goodness of man and his salvation through the hard struggles he had to undergo. Hence Browning always wanted his readers to refrain from the habit of judging others. Browning had cherished and propagated the opinion that every human being should possess at least a noble aspiration even if he fails to accomplish them. Hence Browning can be seen as a strong voice against the scepticism and pessimism that had engulfed the Victorian era. He is a great poet in every sense, as he always sought optimism in any and every situations of life, preached and propagated the universality of the soul, he always engaged in advocating God and encouraged and inspired people to be optimistic irrespective of the plight they were in.

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