



ROBERT BROWNING: AN OPTIMIST

MONIKA RANI

Student

Email: monika7v7chauhan@gmail.com



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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to analyze the optimism, used in the poetry by a great Victorian poet, Robert Browning. Robert Browning was considered as a great optimist, who was also a great philosopher and moralist. His spirit of optimism not only a keyword for his poetry but it was based on his real experiences. He believed 'whatever happens only for good' and for this notion he had the capability to drive hope even in the worst stage of life. This positive attitude of Browning made him a differ poet amongst his contemporaries; especially from Alfred lord Tennyson, who was also a great poet of Victorian era, known as pessimist. Browning took all subjects with equal pleasure and aimed to exhibit the truth lie hidden in both the good and the evil. To express that truth, he didn't care about the style in which he expressed his message. His notion of optimism is the triumph of the individual will over all obstacles. He was with the idea that 'the self is not subordinate but supreme'. In this paper many poems from Browning are cited like Rabbi Ben Ezra, Fra Lippo Lippi, The Last Ride Together, Pippa Passes, and The Patriot etc. with the best examples to clarify his notion of optimism. In the conclusion, this paper shows that Robert Browning was one of the poets of that age, who after a long and difficult journey recognized as a great poet of the Victorian era and how he was full of with optimistic notions in spite of skepticism and pessimism prevailed in the age, belonged to him.

Keywords: Pessimism, Invincible Optimism, Accomplishment, Victorian Era, Skepticisms

INTRODUCTION

Robert Browning is highly regarded as a great poet of Victorian era. He was famous as a philosopher, a moralist and especially as an optimist which made him distinct amongst his contemporaries. Because of his invincible will and optimism, Browning is today regarded as a poet who had spoken the strongest word of 'faith' in an age of doubt and pessimism. His energy, courage and positive attitude even on the last stage of life and faith in life after death make us not to fear of dreadful death but to welcome it with the core of

our heart. It is noteworthy that Browning's optimism is based on his personal life. He knew very well that life is full of obstacles; he never gave up but always continued with a light of hope. And finally, he gained the biggest success as a great poet of English literature. Amongst the poets of Victorian era, no other poet is so completely, so consciously, so magnificently a teacher of men, who was at the very core of his teaching, was an optimist. He was not a 'blind' optimist; he did not shout for evils and sufferings in his life but he knew that the life is a mixture of good and evil, of happiness and sadness, of hopefulness and hopelessness, but he cleverly

drive hope from the hopelessness of life. He faced much ridicule in the very beginning of his career for the obscurity of his style. But he never left the hope, and after thirty years, working bravely, he made the world recognize and follow him. The brave spirit of this brave poet is well expressed in his poem 'Paracelsus', written when he was only twenty-two years old:

"I see my way as birds their trackless way.
I shall arrive,-what time, what circuit first,
I ask not; but unless God send his hail
Or blinding fire-balls, sleet or stifling snow,
In some time, his good time, I shall arrive;
He guides me and the bird. In his good
time."

Victorian age is an age of democracy, of popular education, of religious tolerance, of growing brotherhood, of profound social unrest, of comparative peace. England begins to think less of the pomp and false glitter of fighting and more of its moral evils. People bear the burden and the sorrow and the poverty of the war. Victorian age is especially remarkable for its rapid progress in all the arts and sciences and in mechanical inventions. Many industrial achievements take place in this age; from spinning looms to steamboats, from matches to electrical lights. All these material things have their influence upon the life of every poets but Browning remained untouched from these, because he had the optimistic power in him. Instead of rejecting the conventional rules he accepted them by believing in the existence of God and life after death. He was a great optimist at heart which expresses in his poetry very beautifully.

Before know about Browning as an optimist we have to understand the meaning of optimism. According to the Oxford Dictionary it refers to 'the felling that good thing will happen and that something will be successful'. Browning shows this attitude in his poems. Like Shakespeare he depicted his main characters in some crisis and then this crisis reaches its climax, but Browning ends the poems with an optimistic note. Browning wrote a number of poems that expresses his optimistic spirit. 'The

Last Ride Together' is one of the poems dealing with optimism. In this poem a lover shares Browning's optimism and says it is no use to regret or feel sorry for failure in life but it is necessary to make use of the opportunity that God gives us. The lover loses her beloved when she rejected his love. Even he was rejected in love; he has not any feeling of despair but he satisfies with the view that at least uncertainty is over. He neither blames his beloved, nor he angry with her. He know very well that failure was also made by the supreme power, here also he drive a hope from the difficult moment of life; rejection in love. First he thanks his beloved for those moments of togetherness which were full of happiness. Then he hopefully requests her for a last ride together. The lover very beautifully hoped for eternal love by riding with her side. And so, he would enjoy eternal happiness with her in the life after death. After his wish for last ride with her is granted he said:

"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?"

During this ride we can clearly trace Browning's thoughts of optimism in the form of lover, he continuously with a positive thought. He does not despair for rejection but he feels happy in the fact that at least she does not hate him and otherwise it might be possible that he has lost this pleasure of ride. As he rides by the side of his beloved, he thinks about the activities occurred in the world. He thinks that he was not only the person to face failure but every man in this world make efforts to success but not everybody get that success. He said;

"Fail alone, in words and deeds?
Why, all men strive and who succeeds?"

He goes with the idea that in this world after working so hard and suffering a lot, all men have to face failure. But he is happy because, he has at least achieved this much of success that he is riding with

her. The lover compares himself with poet, sculptor and musician and says that he is the luckiest from them. He is with the point that failure in this world is essential for success in the life to come. He does not gain his beloved's love in this life, so he is with the hope that will attain it in next life because "the instant may become eternity". And for him, "both Heaven and she are beyond this ride." And till the last he is with the optimistic view that may this world end tonight:

"And heaven just prove that I and she

Ride, rides together, forever ride?"

'Rabbi Ben Ezra' is another poem that shows Browning's message is an optimistic one. The poem shows that poet is aware of the sorrows and sufferings of men, of pangs and agonies, failures and disappointments, which he has to undergo. But he very smartly drives hope from these very imperfections of life. Being a teacher, he teaches us that failure is the key of success. To realize the taste of sugar one has to taste the salt. Without presence of despair in life we can't estimate the real meaning of happiness. There is no value of laughing without knowing the importance of weeping. Browning was so optimistic at heart that he was with the point that the struggles and the efforts are must be rewarded, if not in this life, then in the life to come. In this world, where all are disturbed with the notion of being old, Browning is one, who said that old age is the golden stage of life, and youth is only a ladder to reach on this stage. He summoned all the youth to grow old:

"Grow old along with me!

The best is yet to be,

The last of life, for which the first was made:

Our times are in His hand.....

..... trust God; see all, nor be afraid."

He continuously insists to human beings that they should enjoy their life which is gifted by God and that they should have a deep faith in Him:

"Rejoice we are allied

To That which doth provide,

And not partake, effect and not receive:"

Browning asserts that Man is superior to another life on this earth. Man has to thanks to God for this life. Browning suggests to human beings:

"As the birds wings and sings,

Let us cry, "All good things

Are ours....."

Browning says that man has the Divine in him; he is akin to God than other life of this world. Human soul is eternal as the God:

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

What entered into thee

That was, is, and shall be;

Time's wheel runs back or stops: Potter and clay endure."

Browning challenges his contemporaries by having deep faith in God and life after death. Both of these facts are clear in this poem. Browning in the form of a philosopher teaches us that life is full of obstacles, but we have to face it bravely with the help of God. Rabbi compares God with Potter and man with pitcher. And he places himself completely in the hands of God in the hope that He should perfect and shaped the cup of his life according to his plan. He also insists that death must be welcomes as it completes the cycle of our life:

"My times be in thy hand!

Perfect the cup as planned!

Let age approve of youth, and death complete the same!"

Next, his poem "Evelyn Hope" is also replete with optimism. He represents his firm belief in this poem that no wish remains unfulfilled in Heaven. God, the supreme power of the world never ever let anybody without fulfilling his wishes. In the form of a middle aged lover Browning shows his belief in positive side of God's doing. The lover falls in love with a young girl of sixteen years old, named Evelyn Hope. But Evelyn passed away at very early of her age. On her death lover enters the room of Evelyn, whose

shutters are shut and there is darkness in it. In this darkness the coming of two rays of light is the symbol of the lover's hope of reunion with his beloved in the life to come. How an optimistic Browning is when he says:

"Little has yet been changed, I think:
The shutters are shut, no light may pass
Save two long rays thro' the hinge's chink."

The lover is not agrees with the people's views that there is a wide age difference between them, so they can't love each other. But he asserts that, his love is true, sincere, and, therefore, he is very much sure that he must be united with his beloved. He does not despair on Evelyn's death because he knows that failure in this life must be rewarded in life to come. God, who creates love in human heart, He surely grants it:

"For god above
Is great to grant, as mighty to make
And creates the love to reward the love."

"Andrea Del Sarto" is another poem showing the optimistic spirit of Robert Browning. It is noteworthy that Browning presents his main character in some crisis, which reaches to climax. Browning also depicts his characters courageous and manly. Thus in "Andrea Del Sarto", a famous artist Del Sarto married with a woman named Lucrezia. But she married him only for his money. This poem presents the husband- wife relationship in this materialistic world. Throughout the poem Sarto is talking with his wife. He tells him to sit down with him calmly. And he begins to think about his past, which is not happy one. He put blame onto his wife for that unhappy life. He claims, if she helped him a little, he would be a great artist like Raphael and Michelangelo. He claims to "regret little" and wants to "change still less" and then he says:

"Since there my past life lies, why alter it?"

Here the poem brings out Browning's optimism, his faith in God and in the immortality of the soul. He is with the belief that man must enjoy the life given by the god without any regret for the evils in this life. But he must feel consolation with the view that the

desires, which are not fulfilled in this life, will be in the life to come. Del Sarto hopes to be rewarded in the heaven for being underrated on earth:

"'Tis safer for me, if the award be strict,
That I am something underrated here,
Poor this long while, despised, to speak the truth."

In the last of the poem, Del Sarto does not want to let go these moments of happiness by floating in sad memories of the past. But he is happy that in last he is with his wife in great moments of happiness. Browning's optimism can clearly be traced in the words of Andrea Del Sarto:

"You loved me quite enough, it seems to-night.
This must suffice me here. What would one have?
In heaven, perhaps, new chances, one more chance-
For Leonard, Raphael, Angelo and me.
To cover- the three first without a wife,
While I have mine! So-still they overcome
Because there's still Lucrezia,-as I choose."

In his poem "The Patriot" the same feeling of optimism can be seen in the form of a patriot, who narrates his story. He tells once he was loved by all, but now he is despised by the same people for his misdeeds. He tells he is innocent for having done any misdeed; rather it is out of the misunderstanding that he is being put to death. Though he is punished for the wrong reason but he has no sadness in him, rather he looks at his predicament as a triumph; he considers himself victorious on his defeat; which is in the form of death. He believes that God might wash away my sins in the form of people's punishment to me. He has deep faith in God that now He make his life free from every corruption. What a great optimistic Browning was when he said:

"Paid by the world, what dost thou owe
Me?"-God might question; now instead,
'Tis God shall repay: I am safer so."

Robert Browning's poems are replete with the strongest expression of optimism. His optimism can be seen in his characterization too. Thus in "Fra Lippo Lippi", Fra Lippo Lippi, finds the meaning of life in the love of a woman. In his opinion loveless life is not better than a grave. Same thing also recited in his poem "The Last Ride Together":

"It is better to die, without a glory garland
round one's neck"

In another poem "Love Among the Ruins", the lover can be seen singing the song of victory on this life. So, Browning's optimism is based on the philosophy of life after death and in the immortality of the soul. He is with the point, if we face evils in this life on earth, it means that it wash away the evils of our life to come and thus we will must lead a life of happiness. This very optimistic feeling of poet is expressed in his poem "Pippa Passes":

"God is in His heaven

All is right with the world."

Here, he clearly suggests us for a hopeful attitude towards the struggles of the life. Browning strongly believes that the purpose of life rests on the "effort to become perfect, not in accomplishment, but in the strife to accomplishment".

CONCLUSION

Thus, in the last it can be said that Robert Browning is the most stimulating poet in our literature with the spirit of optimism. This optimistic spirit made him distinct poet amongst his contemporaries. This is the strange fact that in the same period of Victorian era, we have two great pillars of literature; Robert Browning and Alfred lord Tennyson; both of are opposite to each others. Tennyson is first the artist and then a teacher; but for Browning message is the important thing, and he is too much careless of the form in which message is delivered. The two poets widely differ in their message too. Tennyson's message is with the view of fatalism and pessimism. Browning's message, on the hand, is the triumph of the individual will over all obstacles. There is nothing Oriental, nothing doubtful, nothing pessimistic in the whole range of his poetry. He raises his voice in the face of all

obstacles and saying "I can and I will". His influence upon our life is positive and tremendous. His strength, his joy of life, his robust faith, and his invincible optimism enter into us, making us different and better men after reading him. His range is enormous, and brings all sorts and conditions of human life in his poems. The musician in "Abt Vogler", the artist in "Andrea Del Sarto", the early Christian in "a Death in the Desert", the sailor in "Herve Keil", the Hebrew in "Saul", the monster in "Caliban", the immortal dead in "Karshish",- all these and a hundred more histories of the soul show Browning's marvelous versatility. This great range of sympathy with different and every class of life made Browning a great poet and similar to Shakespeare. And his positive attitude towards life made him a great optimist in every aspects of life. Because of his invincible optimism, Browning is at present regarded as the poet, who has the courage to speak the strongest word of 'Optimism' and 'Faith' during an age of doubt, skepticism and pessimism. His energy, his faith in life and in the immortality of soul awaits us beyond the portals of death, are like a bugle-call to good living.

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