

# The Spirit of Optimism in the poetry of Robert Browning.

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“I find earth not grey but rosy/Heaven not grim but fair of hue.”

Robert Browning, a cherished poet of the Victorian era, has many of his poems filled with unbridled optimism. “Browning is emphatically the poet-militant, and the prophet of struggling manhood. His words are like trumpet-calls sounded in the van of man’s struggle, wafted back by winds, and heard through the din of conflict by his meaner brethren, who are obscurely fighting for good in the throng and crush of life”, very aptly remarks a critic.

When Browning started writing, the attitude of the milieu was scientific and materialistic. And this means, people had lost faith in religion, morality and spirituality. He was optimistic about the existence of God and the notion of a perfect heaven. His poetry is a reflection of this, deviating from the scientific temperament typical of his age.

Robert Browning is an optimist, and as an optimist, he is a moralist and a religious teacher holding a very distinct place among the writers of the Victorian Age. He is “an uncompromising foe of scientific materialism”. He preaches God and universality as the central truth of his philosophy of life.

Browning is a very consistent thinker of optimistic philosophy of life. And as an optimist, he is a moralist and a religious teacher. His optimism is based on life's realities. Life is full of imperfection but in this very imperfection lies hope, according to Browning's philosophy. He does not challenge the old dogmas. He accepts the conventional view of God, the immortality of the soul, and the Christian belief in incarnation. Actually the philosophy of Browning is the philosophy of a man looking at the world with more than a glimmer of hope in his eyes.

There are a lot of confusions and conflicts in this age. There are the conflicts between art and life, art and morality, content and form, man and woman, classic education and progressive education, flesh and spirit, body and soul and what not.

In this entire prevailed situation, Browning remains unaffected by these confusions and conflicts. He is at heart an optimist. His optimism is clear even in his style of writing a poem that he always picks up his central character in crisis or in some critical situation, then this crisis reaches the climax and ultimately resolved and he ends his poem with optimism. As in his poem "Patriot into Traitor", he says:

'Tis God shall repay one, I am safer so.

As in "Fra Lippo Lippi", he says: Don't fear me! There is the grey beginning. Zooks!

Browning's optimism stresses on the constant struggle of human life. The Rabbi encourages,

“Strive, and hold cheap the strain;

Learn, nor account the pang; dare, never grudge the throe”

Moreover, according to Browning, life's value lies not in achievement but in aspiration, in spiritual condition that distinguishes a human from an animal and it is the struggle which can lead to achievement and to spiritual development.

Browning looks at the failure in this world in a very unconventional way. The speaker in *The Last Ride Together* holds that some of his desires must be left unfulfilled on this earth so that they can be accomplished in the next life; it is the hope of this future happiness which helps him face death readily.

“Earth being so good, would heaven seem best?

Now Heaven and she are beyond this ride.”

Thus there must be a gap between aspiration and achievement in human life.

However, Browning does not consider life on earth unimportant. As Fra Lippo Lippi says,

“The world's no bolt for us,

Nor blank, it means intensely, and means good.”

Rather, the soul may not be the body, the breath is not the flute, but “Both together make the music, either marred and all is mute”

Browning's optimism is firmly based on his faith in the immortality of the soul. The body may die but the soul lives on in the Infinite. Browning believes in the futility of this worldly life. He thinks that failure serves as a source of inspiration for progress as in *“Andrea Del Sarto”*:

“Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp,  
Or what's heaven for?”

Browning's philosophical view about old age is optimistic which is made explicit in *“Rabbi Ben Ezra”*. Regret for lost youth and terror for the old age are stock ideas. But the Rabbi invites everybody to grow old eagerly:

“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”

Browning's optimism finds the passion of joy; no one has sung more fervently than Browning of the delight of life. David in *“Saul”*, Pippa in *“Pippa Passes”*, Lippo in *“Fra Lippo Lippi”* and a host of other

poems are keenly alive to the pleasure of living. The Rabbi in "Rabbi Ben Ezra" condemns the aesthetic negation of the flesh, and asserts the necessity and moral usefulness of the flesh and the soul. The Rabbi in "Rabbi Ben Ezra" often passes philosophical judgments.

"As the bird wings and sings, Let us cry 'All good things.'"

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

In the Last Ride Together we find Browning's optimistic attitude towards love through the words of the rejected lover:

"The instant made eternity, –  
And heaven just prove that in and she  
Ride, ride together, forever ride?"

Despite, all this we call him as an optimist because of his firm faith in God."His poems are full of courage and inspiration, telling people that there are no difficulties if they have self-dependence and self-control. It was a good sign for English literature that the two leaders in Poetry, Tennyson and Browning differed from one another. Tennyson was at heart a pessimist. But Browning was at heart a strong optimist.

Finally we can say that Browning speaks out the strongest words of optimistic faith in his Victorian Age of skepticism and pessimism. Moody comments, "Browning's robust optimism in the face of all the unsettling and disturbing forces of the age is thrown out in sharp relief." Of all English poets, no other is so completely, so consciously, so magnificently a teacher of man as is Browning.

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