

The Concept of 'Success' and 'Failure' in Browning's poems

Iftekhhar Ahmed

B.A. (Hons) in English, MA in English

UGC NET Qualified

Assistant Teacher at Howrah Muslim High School (H.S)

Abstract

Different people define 'Success' and 'Failure' differently taking into account multiple factors. There are people who think mere accumulation of wealth and treasure is the greatest success anyone could ever achieve whereas there are others who think if anyone succeeds in leading a respectable life then he/she is a successful person. Again there are people who think if someone gets power and authority then he/she is the most successful person. Yet again there are people who think if someone succeeds in love affairs, they are the most successful people on Earth. And those who fail to achieve what they aimed for in their lives, they are the ones who may be regarded as 'Failures' as per the opinion of majority of people. But it was Browning who altogether changed these aforesaid perspectives and he gave a new perspective of his own to the world through his masterpieces which completely changed our outlook in assessing the 'success' or 'failure' of someone. In this article I am going to throw some light on the perspectives, philosophies and viewpoints of Robert Browning which he proclaimed through most of his verses directly or indirectly while writing dramatic monologues.

Keywords: success, failure, strivings, persistence, optimism, immortality, endeavour, lofty ideals etc.

Introduction:

No other poet or thinker was as innovative and unique in deciphering the concept of failure with all its extremities as Browning did through his insightful and thought-provoking dramatic monologues which helped him gain a special place for himself in the field of English Literature. Undoubtedly he was a philosopher who propounded his views through the medium of exciting dramatic monologues which not only mesmerizes us with their fantastic themes and charms but they also show how talented and prodigious Browning was in terms of writing meaningful verses of qualitative features. Since the mind of Man was the main domain of Browning, he effortlessly expressed all its capabilities or covert potentialities with the deft touch of words just like a psychologist who analyses different cases taking into considerations the different temperaments and different attitudes which sometimes even unravel the uncanny and strange workings of somewhat abnormal minds. Most of his poems that deal with love as its central theme, describe also the concept of 'Failure' and 'Success' in an innovative and exciting way which creates tonic

effects for those who feel depressed and languid in their lives. The love poems of Browning don't follow the beaten track of glorifying the beauties and charms of the beloved or the profound sense of grief and sorrow on the part of the lover for his unrequited love rather they highlight the courage, determination, and positive outlook of the lovers even when the circumstances don't allow them to be united with one another. The protagonists of Browning's poems are different from the common-folks in their attitudes and demeanor. At times they behave strangely beyond expectations. The analyses of some of his poems would justify this point crystal-clearly.

Browning's optimism in 'The Last Right Together':

In this poem the lover realizes that he has failed in his love as the lady whom he loved sincerely and passionately has rejected him as her lover but nonetheless she has accepted the last wish of her so-called lover i.e. to ride on the horse's back sitting in front of him. The lover instead of getting frustrated and depressed, gets excited as his last wish at least has got fulfilled which to him is a moment of greatest success in this world. The lover thinks that since this world is created for a temporary period of time by the Almighty, nobody could ever attain perfect success and glory in the true sense of these terms, hence he considers himself lucky as this last ride along with his beloved gives him ample opportunity to experience the joy of riding immensely. The rejection of his love on the part of his beloved doesn't dampen his soul rather he thinks he would be able to regain the lost love of this mundane world in the hereafter as God never does injustice to anyone even in the least degree. Moreover, he justifies his failure by assessing the failures of a large concourse of people who too have failed like him in their respective pursuits. He says:

"Fail I alone, in words and deeds?"

Why, all men strive and who succeeds?"(The Last Ride Together)

The lover also hopes for eternalizing this moment of achievement as he thinks that perhaps the world might end at the very moment when he is riding along with his beloved and if this really happens then his dream would get fulfilled. The lover expresses his joy in these words:

"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."(The Last Ride Together)

Strange Kind of 'Success' in 'Porphyria's Lover':

This poem of Browning altogether changes the parameter of love where a strange lover in order to eternalize his lady love safeguarding her from all the ills of society, kills his own beloved in

the most unrepentant way believing that he has done the act of kindness to his lady with such strange way of killing by throttling her with her own beautiful hair thereby making his love eternal where none could separate him from his beloved. The lover in this poem is believed to be insane and abnormal but this is not true if we analyse the way he considers the present situation when his beloved defying all the social restrictions and braving the turbulent storm has just come to embrace her lover overpowering all sorts of inhibitions and calumniations and expressing her dormant passion in the arms of her lover. The lover on his part thought the gravity of the situation and he had a plan to eternalize this moment of perfect bliss and happiness when Porphyria was absolutely pure and chaste and she belonged to him alone. Thus he proceeded to kill her not out of any ill-will or malice or any negative tendency rather it was his expression of love for her though it may seem weird and incomprehensible but this is not what it looks like. Browning implies the fact that even this seemingly brutal act doesn't incur the wrath of Almighty as the lover says after committing the crime:

“ And thus we sit together now,

And all night long we have not stirred

And yet God has not said a word!”(Porphyria’s Lover)

These aforesaid lines clearly approve the prompt act of the lover by the Almighty God. The intense feeling of love and passion reaches its culmination in the very act of killing. The deprivation of the beloved's body for the lover is not a failure of his love rather it's a kind of success as he embraced the soul of his love in that moment of impulsive action.

Significance of This Mundane World:

In one of his most famous dramatic monologues entitled ‘**A Grammarian’s Funeral**’, Browning through the character of the Grammarian vehemently expressed his notion that this world is created for a temporary period and everything will perish in the end, hence it is futile to aim for petty goals and celebrate the winnings of trivial objectives. The Grammarian all through his life strove for perfection in his chosen field, therefore he had to renounce all pleasure of the world which the common-folk used to enjoy. The Grammarian unlike the common masses struggled vehemently for achieving perfection but in the course of his pursuit of lofty ideal he died leaving his dream unfulfilled but Browning suggests here that in this world winning or losing doesn't matter at all but what matters is the intent and lofty ideals for which how passionately someone devotes his/her life because God is very kind to all His creatures and He would not let anybody's sincere endeavours and efforts to go in vain. Since the soul of human-being is immortal, every unfulfilled ambitious striving will get fulfilled in the next world after one's death. The Grammarian had a lofty goal, hence he deserved a topmost place for his burial and he got it as well from his disciples who performed his last rites in commensurate with his dignity and **stature**. According to the Grammarian's view, the accomplishment of hundreds of petty objectives signify nothing in comparison with the unfulfilled ambition of a man who sets for

himself quite a huge task for which he sacrifices all the pleasure of life. The following lines from the aforementioned poem clearly indicates this view:

“ That low man seeks a little thing to do,

Sees it and does it:

This high man, with a great thing to pursue,

Dies ere he knows it.

That low man goes on adding one to one,

His hundred’s soon hit:

This high man, aiming at a million

Misses an unit.”(A Grammarian’s Funeral)

Love as the Greatest of Success:

In most of his poems such as ‘Evelyn Hope’, ‘One Word More’, ‘Love Among the Ruins’, ‘The Statue and the Bust’, ‘Fra Lippo Lippi’ and ‘Andrea Del Sarto’, Browning through different characters intends to suggest that in this world those who are in love with some professions or women, can never fail in their strivings because if they fail in this transitory world, it means nothing to them as they are damn sure that their love will reach its highest point in the hereafter and there they are bound to be successful. Browning has the firm belief in the hereafter and he believes whatever a man misses in this world, he surely gets it in the heaven if his striving was sincere and whole-hearted. For Browning the struggles, the obstructions, the evils of society, the darkness and the negative tendencies of lives are complementary elements to strengthen one’s faith in the glories and kindness of Almighty God who would reward each of his servant an undefinable heaven for their consistent and selfless devotion towards some lofty ideals.

The lover in the poem ‘Evelyn Hope’ is three times elder than his beloved who died at the tender age of 16, yet irrespective of this age difference, he loved her from the bottom of his heart and quite surprisingly he never expressed his love to his beloved till the time she was alive. The lover doesn’t think that his love has failed rather he is very hopeful that they would unite again in the heaven as his love for her was genuine and pure and God will never let them separated for a long period of time. Instead of moaning or sobbing at the grave of his beloved, the lover positively accepts her premature death and is very hopeful to meet her in the next world to fulfill his dream. In the poem ‘The Statue and the Bust’, Browning aims to disseminate the fact that it is not a sin to love someone from the depth of one’s heart even if the woman he loves be married to someone else but to him if the lovers don’t take any initiative to consummate their heartfelt love

and keeps procrastinating their plans to unite with each other out of fear of the societal restrictions, then they are worth contemptible as true love doesn't succumb to any external pressure. According to Browning if someone fails in his love to get united with his beloved even after trying desperately from the core of his heart, then he is not to be blamed for his failure in love but if someone doesn't take the required action which should have been taken without any inhibitions to fulfill his love, then surely he must be condemned for his lack of daring and courage in the face of crisis. And this is reckoned as his 'failure' in the true sense of this term.

In the poem '**Andrea Del Sarto**' the lover realizes that as an artist he failed to achieve the glory as attained by Raphael, Michael Angelo and Leonard as their paintings reflected the soul of those sketches which they achieved as a result of their divine inspiration whereas his paintings though technically superior to their paintings, fail to make a distinctive mark in this world because his spirit is dull and he also lacks a super model which is needed for gaining some sort of inspiration. The lover realizes he has failed miserably in his chosen field but still he is not utterly depressed and worried as he has got a very beautiful wife in the form of Lucrezia who like his paintings is outstanding in exterior features but lack the soul to experience divine inspiration. It seems the lover has compromised with his life and career and he is satisfied with his little achievements. His story is the story of a man who instead of trying desperately to make a mark in the world in his chosen field, gives up all his courage, determination and hope in the midst of life with meagre satisfaction.

Conclusion: The brief analysis of all the aforementioned poems clearly presents the philosophy of Robert Browning who always believes in the immortality of soul, and the positive outcome of persistent efforts and endeavours. He is of the opinion that in this world winning or losing doesn't matter at all but what matters is the intensity and sincerity of one's strivings and struggles that he undertakes in order to fulfill his most-cherished dream. This mundane world is not the place where every effort will get its due reward rather it is the life beyond death that really pays back the full compensation to those who truly deserve them. Each of his poem is replete with robust optimism that provides immense joy and satisfaction to every reader.

Works Citation

- 1.W.T.Young: *Browning: Selected Poems*
- 2.J.Fotheringham: *Studies of the Mind and Art of Robert Browning*
- 3.G.W.Cooke: *A Guide Book to the Poetic and Dramatic Works of Robert Browning*
- 4.W.C.De Vane: *A Browning Handbook*