

## The Study of Man and Art in Browning's Poems

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### Abstract

The study of all the major poems of Robert Browning is mainly based on two of the most important subjects namely 'Man' and 'Art' that have been delineated with deft touch with profound as well as optimistic philosophies of the poet through his sublime versification. Browning's looking of Man and Art is somewhat different from the other writers of his era who mostly follow the beaten track in expressing their heartfelt emotions and feelings through their mouthpieces in their works. Browning differs with his contemporaries not in the subject presentation rather with his in depth and insightful study of the human mind and the true worth and place of 'Art' and its real objective. Browning is not interested in expressing mere exterior and superficial matter that can be easily avoided rather he aims to penetrate deeper in the mind of his spokespersons and he critically suggests the role of 'Art' and its greatest objective which leave deep impact upon the minds of the readers. In this article, we are going to study the profound philosophies of Robert Browning focusing on the subject of 'Mind' of the 'Man' and 'Art' as elaborated in his most popular poems.

**Keywords:** mind, art, man, philosophies, optimistic, sublime.

### Introduction:

Man is not only a creature of flesh and blood and mere mundane pleasures and enjoyments are not the ultimate objective of all human beings. Man is here not just to fulfill his carnal pleasure and lead a luxurious life without any obstructions and impediments. His aim is something higher and his pursuits must be in commensurate with his stature and dignified position in the scheme of all affairs. Similarly 'Art' is not a mere tool of providing relief and beauty to a sensuous body rather it must go beyond the boundaries of the physical world to explore the metaphysical world with its manifestation of supreme reality that can only be experienced by a living soul who knows it well that this world is not the final world, so all the joys and sorrows are not something to be overrated or to be given utmost importance in our earthly life. Success and failure of

individuals in this temporary world lose their importance when placed against the eternal life of the hereafter, which is the firm belief of the poet in all his major works. As we read the poems of Robert Browning, we tend to readily believe in the philosophies of the benevolent God, the immortality of soul, the existence of the hereafter, the nobility and grace in human efforts and endeavours, the significance of chasing unattainable and lofty dreams, the worthlessness of worldly success in achieving petty goals, the value of failure in achieving some higher object, the equivalent role of body and soul in Art, the permanence and supremacy of Art delineated with soul over mere perfect technical achievements, etc.

### **Man in quest for attaining perfect bliss:**

The reading of poems like 'A Grammarian's Funeral', 'Evelyn Hope', 'Porphyria's Lover', and 'My Last Duchess' clearly suggests that Browning's protagonists are not at all contented with mere petty pleasures of this life and they are constantly pursuing loftier goals which are next to impossible to be attained by anyone, no matter how hard and persistent the efforts could be in chasing the desired object. The Grammarian in 'A Grammarian's Funeral' devoted his entire life in pursuit of achieving excellence in his chosen field while he completely neglected the pleasure and enjoyment of youth which is dear to everyone but not to the Grammarian who believed in persistent striving until the last breath because he wasn't contented with achieving inferior goals rather he preferred to attain the unattainable so that whatever he might have missed in the process can be achieved in Heaven by the mercy of Almighty God. The following lines clearly illustrate this point:

" 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  
That, has the world here\_\_\_ should he need the next,  
Let the world mind him !

This, throws himself on God, and unperplexed

Seeking shall find Him." (A Grammarian's Funeral)

In the poem 'Evelyn Hope' the lover despite being three times older than his beloved, love her sincerely and passionately. But what is more surprising is the fact that this lover never expressed his love until the time his beloved died just at the tender age of sixteen. This is something novel in Browning's poem. This reveals the unique traits of Browning's heroes who are unprecedented in their love-making. The common readers fail to experience the emotions of one-sided love as it is a rarity. Any lover would have become restless and perplexed without having any opportunity to profess his love for his mistress but Browning's hero is altogether a man of different set of emotions. The death of his beloved at such a young age neither dampens his spirit nor makes him wretched rather he harbours staunch faith in the reunion with his beloved in the hereafter. His tone is of utter acceptance of fate. Here he advocates Browning's philosophy of God being very kind to all His servants and He will never do injustice to His devotees. The following lines well elaborate this view:

" No, indeed ! for God above

Is great to grant, as mighty to make,

And creates the love to reward the love :

I claim you still, for my own love's sake !"

Another great dramatic monologue 'Porphyria's Lover' presents the mastery of Robert Browning in depicting a character whose way of showing love to his beloved startles all the readers. This poem whereas exposes the abnormal behaviour of the lover in his most unexpected treatment of his beloved at a time when she braved all the fierce storm raging outside and defied the social conventions and restrictions, the lover reckoned that's the moment to eternalize his love, at the same time it also shows the dramatic genius of Browning who with his protagonist shocked the readers with the strange behaviour of the lover as he strangled his beloved through her own yellow hair while she was ardently embracing her lover. Much have been said about this strange kind of murder but none of the interpretations seems to be fully justified as every argument lacks the motive behind such horrible act. The lover after committing such ghastly act, behaved as if nothing grave had happened and everything was quite normal. In fact he was cent percent sure that this act was approved by Almighty God Himself. Let's read these final lines which were spoken by the lover after the heinous act of murder was committed:

" 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)

In the poem ' My Last Duchess ', Browning presents a character who is an epitome of supreme arrogance and uncontrollable dictatorship. The Duke of Ferrara is so haughty and supercilious in nature that he never ever tried to rectify the innocent mistakes of his good natured wife with jolly temperament as he considered it some sort of stooping before his wife which he abhorred thoroughly. Unable to bear the tantrums of his wife over a period of time, he hatched a murder plan to teach her a good lesson which she won't forget forever. Just have a look at the genius of Robert Browning in expressing the events of a lifetime in brevity of words with such subtlety and terseness:

" This grew; I gave commands ;

Then all smiles stopped together." (My Last Duchess )

The Relative Importance of both 'Body' and 'Soul' in Browning's Art forms:

Browning not only excelled in depicting the multi-faceted personalities in their sublime as well as enigmatic traits, he also opened the vistas for determining the rightful place of 'Art' and its blend of 'Body and Soul' as necessary components. Prior to Browning, there were some poets who only highlighted the importance of technical perfection in Art forms whereas there were others who only highlighted the importance of 'Soul' in representation of Art forms, but very few poets regarded both 'Body and Soul' as the integral part of artistic representations. Browning gave equal importance to 'Body' and 'Soul' for an artist to succeed in that domain. His poems like 'Andrea Del Sarto ', and 'Fra Lippo Lippi' beautifully enumerate this subject with great appeal to both mind and heart of any reader. Browning's poems themselves are great examples of true representations of Art as they not only vouchsafe his skill in expressing series of thoughts in elliptical and condensed pattern, they also unravel the mysterious working of human mind when it is suffused with too much of thoughts and emotions.

In the poem 'Andrea Del Sarto', Browning through the character of Andrea wanted to convey the readers that though Andrea was the master craftsman in drawing painting which was his forte yet he failed to flourish as a great artist of somewhat high stature like Michael Angelo, Leonardo Da Vinci and Raphael. The reason for his comparative low stature was his failure to

capture the 'soul' in his paintings which the aforesaid painters greatly excelled in. Andrea could have easily superceded these greatest artists of Italy but he just never tried his best and utilized his potential to its utmost degree as he was lured to the 'serpentine beauty' of his wife Lucrezia who was like Andrea's art\_\_\_ beautiful body but bereft of divine spirit. Andrea was the master craftsman as far as drawing physical body was concerned as he drew the pictures with ease and finesse but he was bereft of the divine spirit which was the most important requirement for drawing a perfect picture. Though Andrea failed to achieve perfection in his profession as a great artist, he was not at all disappointed with his fate rather he expressed Browning's philosophy of achieving perfection in Heaven in these words:

" Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp,  
Or what's a Heaven for? all is silver grey  
Placid and perfect with my art: the worse !" (Andrea Del Sarto)

In another poem 'Fra Lippo Lippi' Browning altogether shows a different scenario where a baby who had lost both his parents and was homeless, was somehow supported by his aunt who left him in a nearby church to be looked after by the Church custodians at the mercy of all the priests and clergies serving there. This boy, bereft of all the basic necessities of life, was forced to become a monk against his will in order to survive. But this boy was not at all interested in renouncing the pleasure of life and living a monk's life of austerity and simplicity. He was more attracted towards the pomp and glory of this material world and he also learnt the art of painting pictures while he was residing in the church building witnessing all sorts of common people coming for prayer and different types of monks and friars engaged in this Holy service of communion with the Almighty God. He was engaged for painting the walls of the church as he possessed a great talent in it. His paintings were admired by many a monk but the priests of superior ranks did not like his paintings which according to them lack the vitality and divinity of the Divine Spirit. This friar was well-versed in painting the body but his paintings were devoid of the soul. The speaker of this poem does not agree with the views of the higher priests as he thinks the very purpose of 'Art' is not to preach divinity and lead people to do noble deeds like fasting and praying. Art should not be used as a mere tool to preach a preconceived idea or a notion rather it should have its own intrinsic value without being influenced by any biased agenda or propaganda. To look for divine spirit and soul in 'Art' is just to demean its value. Here the speaker of this poem seems to deviate from the philosophy of Browning who tends to give equal importance to both the physical and metaphysical aspects of any form of 'Art'.

Conclusion: The brief analyses of all these poems present a crystal clear picture of sublime philosophies of Robert Browning who believes in the immortality of the soul, the value of

persistent struggle against all odds of life without bothering about success and failure, the reward of worldly toil and sufferings in the afterlife, the imperishable nature of love and its unique expression even without expressing in words, the worth of failure in achieving something bigger or loftier, the perfect form of 'Art' that doesn't segregate body and soul as two different entities rather they are comprehended as a whole compact unit in its representation. Browning's majority of poems, as a matter of fact, are indeed the study of 'Man' and 'Art' in their entirety.

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