

Delving Deep into the Mind: Psychological Study of Robert Browning's Select Poems

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Abstract: Robert Browning, a Victorian Poet, is pre-eminently known for his dramatic monologues. He is at his best in the depiction of complex human natures. Browning's poetry is the poetry of the great moment or the psychological moment which stirs the whole personality of his characters. There is no external movement or action as in a drama but there is intense internal moments, events and incidents and the incidents are entirely within the mind of the character. He is perhaps unrivalled in his studies of mental steeps and moral crises made from within (mind). No other English poet except Shakespeare has shown such a varied and subtle insight into the human characters.

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Robert Browning, a Victorian Poet, is pre-eminently known for his dramatic monologues. He is at his best in the depiction of complex human natures. 'He was inquisitive and endowed with a psychological insight.' (Dalal, 2016) His real interest was not in the external presentation of the characters but the incidents that cause the development of the soul. He does not define the physical charms of even his female characters. But he was much interested in probing deep into the mental processes of his characters rendering the inner man, painting the inner landscape. Central to Browning's narrative techniques is his ability to delve into the depths of human psychology. 'His monologues often showcase characters grappling with complex emotions, internal conflicts, and moral ambiguities.' (Madhusudana, 2022). His purpose was soul dissection. The literary form, dramatic monologue was very perfect and suitable for his purpose. In dramatic monologues the central figures in the poems reveal the inner working of their mind.

As such Browning's poetry is the poetry of the great moment or the psychological moment which stirs the whole personality of his characters. The characters talk about reactions to the situation, thereby, revealing what goes inside their mind. Browning does not depict the complete human action. There is no external movement or action as in a drama but there is intense internal moments, events and incidents and the incidents are entirely within the mind of the character. No other poet before Robert Browning has ever provided such a significant details, with such an intimate and convincing self-revelation. Thus, in 'The Last Ride Together' the critical situation for the lover is rejection of his love. In this moment of the crisis he has a ride with his beloved. Then the lover is engaged in detailed self-examination and self-introspection thereby laying his soul and mind bare before the readers.

In 'Andrea del Sarto' again the critical moment in the life of the painter arrives. He must surrender his wife to her lover. In fact, Andrea is infatuated with her and he knows that her lover is waiting outside. Then he begins to introspect and through his introspection the readers come to know what happens to his soul and also learn why he has neglected his parents or why despite all his skills he has failed to rise to the greatest heights in his art.

Readers understand why there is greyness of autumn into his life and art and why his life and art have become a twilight piece. His monologue reveals the strength and weaknesses of a perfect painter whose passionate love for a soulless woman with a pretty face saddens his life pathetically. In great frustration and resignedly he utters:

But all the play, the insight and the stretch—
(Out of me, out of me! And wherefore out?)

Had you enjoined them on me, given me soul,
We might have risen to Rafael, I and you! (Browning, Andrea delSarto)

Andre clearly speaks about his unfulfilled ambitions, his frustrated aspirations, his helplessness for his uncontrollable passion for his wife, his sad recognition of the superiority of lesser artists over him, his realisation that even in heaven he will choose Lucrezia rather than artistic supremacy. His inner urge makes him dissect and exhibit his mind and also the mind of Lucrezia. 'Andrea delSarto' scrutinizes the mind of a painter as 'AbtVoglar' is the study of a musician's mind.

Even Browning's love poems, despite their passionate intensity, are largely argumentative, psychological and intellectual in character. In 'The Last Ride Together', passion is expressed in the opening stanzas but in the remaining poem the lover speaks about the philosophy of failure. The poem explores the mind of a rejected lover. He refuses to accept defeat and interpret his failure in love as a glorious achievement.

The work of Browning is one of the richest and the most deep reaching treatises in practical Psychology. 'His ability to showcase the psyche of his characters in an engrossing whirlpool of an unpredictable chain of events undoubtedly proved his worth as a poet.' (Zaidi, 2016). There is indeed an excess of thought or the intellectual element in his verse. It affords his readers a keen intellectual pleasure. He is perhaps unrivalled in his studies of mental steps and moral crises made from within (mind). No other English poet except Shakespeare has shown such a varied and subtle insight into the human characters.

Browning's art of character portrayal has often been criticised for its sameness or lack of variety. It is said that his characters are mere shadows of his own personality; they have no individuality or their own identity. They are mere puppets through whose mouths the poet himself speaks. It is true that they speak in the voice of the poet, Robert Browning but to answer the criticism it may be said that Browning's chief interest lay in the depiction of the human soul and the soul has always been very much the same in all the ages and all the countries and the characters. Browning's purpose is the soul detection and the human soul has remained much the same since the days of Adam. Browning is a great poet of the man and in the man he found the poetry in inward life. He interprets human life in the light of the mental process and moral attitudes. In Browning's poetry a reader finds a man to be wonderful, complex and a not easily intelligible creature. It is perhaps for this reason that his poetry could not reach a large number of readers like the poetry of Wordsworth. This can be summarised in his own words:

Our low life was the level's and the night's;
He's for the morning. (Browning, A Grammarian's Funeral)

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