# UNIT 13: ROBERT BROWNING: LIFE AND WORKS

## UNIT STRUCTURE:


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## 13.1 EARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- identify Robert Browning as a significant Victorian poet along with Tennyson
- discuss the life and works of Robert Browning
- assess how Browning had been received as a Victorian poet

## 13.2 INTRODUCTION

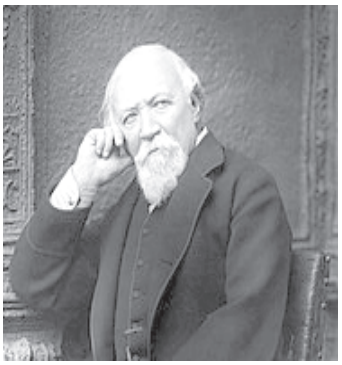
This unit deals with the life and works of Robert Browning who is considered one of the greatest Victorian poets. Popular for his poetry collection *Men and Women* (1855), Browning's poems show his interest in a wide range of themes and subjects. His philosophy of life and art is loosely interwoven in his extremely condensed and rugged expression, which often make his poetry difficult for the readers. However, his poetry is marked by his acute sense of lyric intensity and the subtle grasp of the human character. However, he is chiefly remembered for his mastery of the dramatic monologue and the range of his works. The dramatic monologues show his capacity to represent the meanderings of the individual mind through soliloquies. This unit shall help you to place Browning in the history of Victorian literature.

## 13.3 ROBERT BROWNING: THE POET

Robert Browning is considered one of the greatest poets of the Victorian England. His fame is spread as an erudite scholar and as one of the most prolific writers of his time. As a man of unchallengeable genius, he had tremendous hope and faith in the ability of man. His works are reflective of his philosophy of optimism, which marks the poet's worldview and aesthetics. In the following two sub sections, you will get to learn about the poet's life and his works.

### 13.3.1 His Life

Robert Browning was born on 7 May 1812 at the suburb of Camberwell, a district in South London, in a cultured middle class family. During his formative years of childhood, Browning received certain major influences from his parents. His father, who worked as a bank clerk, was highly interested in art. He was also an erudite reader and possessed a huge collection of rare books of varied interests. Both Browning and his father had a passion for tales of intrigues, crimes and violence, old and new, and they used to read a lot about them in the newspapers. This interest later influenced some of his famous poetic characters. Browning did not go to a formal school after the age of fourteen and it was his father's library that helped him develop himself with the required knowledge and intellect to get a seat in the University College of London. Before going to the University, he studied European history, the Classics and painting at home apart from books on various other disciplines. His mother had an important role in developing his taste in music, love for the natural world, and the deep sense of religiosity.



**Source:** https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Browning

While he was a teenager, he dreamt of writing poetry, plays and novels. By the age of twelve, Browning had written a book of

poetry. He later destroyed this collection when he found no publisher eager to publish it. By the age of 14, he had acquired a formidable knowledge of French, Greek, Italian and Latin. He developed a deep interest in Romantic poetry and P. B. Shelley had been one of his early inspirations to start his poetic ventures. Influenced by Shelley, he became an atheist and vegetarian, but could not stick to this resolution for a long time. When he was sixteen, he joined University College of London to study Greek, but did not continue his studies after the first year.

In the year of 1844, Elizabeth Barret, an emerging poet, six years his elder, published her poetry collection *Poems*. In one of the poems of this collection, Browning found an appraisal of him. This appraisal acted as a catalyst in the development of romance between the two poets. Browning eloped with Elizabeth Barrett in September 1846, and started their conjugal life in Italy. From the time of their marriage and until Elizabeth's death, they lived in Italy, residing a few months in Pisa, and then, within a year, shifting to Florence. Elizabeth Barrett was interested in writing poetry and with her *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850); she acclaimed some fame for herself. After her death in 1861, Browning found it difficult to live in Italy. He left the city for good and came back to London to live with his son.

The death of his wife affected his creative mind; but he continued writing poetry until his death in 1889. In London, he spent the rest of his life, besides extensively travelling to France, Scotland, Italy and Switzerland. During this period, he wrote a number of dramatic poems, two series of Dramatic Idylls and a few poems like "Balaustion's Adventure" (1871) and "Aristophone's Apology" (1875) primarily on classical subjects.

He died at his son's home in Venice on 12 December 1889. He was buried in Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey, immediately next to the grave of Alfred Tennyson. In his lifetime, Browning received many honoured distinctions. He was made L.L.D. of Edinburgh as well as a life Governor of London University.

### 13.3.2 His Poetic Works

Robert Browning engaged his creative ventures as both a poet and a playwright. As a poet, he started his career at a very early age. His first book of verse *Incondita* was published in 1824. The influence of Lord Byron is clearly visible in this work. Besides *Incondita,* Byron's influence can also be traced in his other early works like the autobiographical poem *Pauline* (1833) and *Paracelsus* (1834). After Byron, it was the poems and aesthetics of Shelley that continued to rule Browning's poetic worlds for several years.

The publication of "Pippa Passes" in 1841 and *Dramatic Lyrics* in 1842, were two important events in his poetic career. These two works were part of his eight pamphlets published under the general title *Bells and Pomegranates.* The other pamphlets in this series include *King Victor and King Charles* (1842)*, The Return of the Druses* (1843)*, Colombe's Birthday* (1844)*, Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* (1845)*, Luria* and *A Soul's Tragedy* (1846). Poems like "My Last Duchess", "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister", and "Incident of the French Camp"; "Porphyria's Lover" in *Dramatic Lyrics* established his mastery over this newly developing technique of dramatic monologue. His *Sordello* (1840), based on the historical setting of the conflict between the Guelphs and the Ghibellines in the 13$^{th}$ century Italy, had to receive severe criticism on account of the charges of obscurity of allusion and style. Arthur Symons has marked the poem as a 'psychological epic' where the chief focus lies on the developing of conflicts between art and society, egoism and sympathy, action and contemplation.

Browning was a great admirer of the then popular actor Edmund Kean, whose compelling influence encouraged the poet to try his hands with plays. He composed a few plays like *Colombe's Birthday*, *Strafford*, *A Bolt on a Scutcheon* etc. It would be wrong to say that he was utterly unsuccessful as a playwright; in fact, most of these plays did a moderate business. However, Browning soon understood that playwriting was not the best option for him to cultivate his creative possibilities. His creative genius was much interested

in exploring the struggles, tensions and conflicts within the individual's mind; and he could not appropriate the form of a theatrical production to do justice to what he wanted to express. His gradual departure from the stage was followed by a few new experimentations with the form of poetic expression. It was his inclination towards the theatre that led him to juxtapose the dramatic with the lyric. These experimentations resulted in the development of a new mode of poetic expression, popularly known as the 'dramatic monologue', which has given Browning an identity of his own in the field of English literature.



## LET US KNOW

**Dramatic Monologue:**

It is important for you to note that though the words in the phrase 'dramatic monologue' may refer to some forms of expression related to theatre, actually it is not so. 'Dramatic monologue' is a particular type of lyric poem. A monologue is a long speech by a single speaker or character through which an expression of the private thoughts is given. Perhaps you know that in plays, such monologues are called soliloquies. While discussing Browning's construction of dramatic monologues, M. H. Abrams observes that a dramatic monologue is basically characterised by three main features.

**a.** The entire poem is made up of the speech, made in a specific situation at a critical moment, by a person or a character who is not the poet.

**b.** The speech of the speaker is made to one or more persons who converse with the speaker. The readers know about the presence of the author of the poem and other characters and their discussions only through the hints provided by the single speaker through his/her speech.

**c.** he motif behind the poet's formulation of the single speaker's speech is to reveal to the readers the temperament and

character of the speaker. Rather than thinking aloud, the speaker composes a self-defence, which the reader is challenged to see through.

Browning came to his eminence as a great master of dramatic monologue through the publication of *Men and Women* (1855). This collection showed Browning dealing with a wide range of themes and subjects with subtle and intense presentation of the individual's mind through soliloquies weaved in beautiful lyrics. This collection contained some of Browning's highly rated poems like "Love among the Ruins", "Child Roland to the Dark Tower Came", "A Toccata of Galuppi's". Besides these poems, the dramatic monologues like "Fra Lippo Lippi", "Andrea Del Sarto" and "Bishop Blougram's Apology" are also published in this collection. It is to be noted that for his dramatic monologues, Browning chose some of the most debased, extreme and even criminally infamous characters, where the challenge for him was that of building a sympathetic case for a character that does not deserve one. This technique of poetic expression allowed the poet to raise serious questions over the intellectual and social atmosphere of the Victorian world without getting involved with them directly. The apparent dialogues in his monologues are reflective of the conflicts, tensions and contradictions of his age. Many of his poems were set against the backdrop of Italian Renaissance and depicted some of its major personalities. The context of Renaissance helped him to raise questions about his own times. This practice allowed the readers to posit themselves at a moral and historical position different from their times and look into the issues with the freedom to enter into the psychological realm of the characters. It also helped him to maintain an objective distance from the characters he created. Browning draws on different traditions, which includes the soliloquies of Shakespeare, the poetry of John Donne, and, later in the Victorian period, the sonnets of Gerard Manley Hopkins. Such poets used language that is more colloquial, drew on the more discordant sounds of spoken language, and employed contrasting stylistic tones, which

are often shocking and unpredictable, but served to shock the readers with an awareness of a world of everyday realities.



## CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Q 1:** Why did Browning shift his interests from drama to dramatic lyrics?

**Q 2:** What do you think about the characteristics of a dramatic monologue, which make it 'dramatic'?

**Q 3:** What purpose do the dramatic monologues serve for Browning?

**Q 4:** In what way, did the contexts of the Renaissance help Browning to write his monologues?

Browning published his *Dramatis Personae* in the year of 1864. This volume included some of his most celebrated poems like "Rabbi Ben Ezra", "Caliban upon Setebos", "A Death in the Desert", "Mr. Sludge", "Prospice", "Abt Vogler", "The Medium" etc. "Caliban upon Setebos", which can be demanded as the most discussed poem in this collection, makes some important comments on the debates surrounding the relationship between God and man. Several critics have opined that Browning tries to satirise orthodox **Calvinism**, which holds man basically as corrupt, and God as the unquestionable and supreme power. Browning takes up man's attempt to construct God in his own image as the central theme of the poem. His other well-acclaimed poem "Rabbi Ben Ezra" is an imaginative exercise to express the ideal through the dramatic representation of a man. This poem repeatedly tries to assert the superiority and nobility of man. His *The Ring and the Book,* the poem of epic length in twelve books, was published in 1868-69 in four instalments. Based on an infamous triple murder that took place in Rome in the year of 1698, the poem takes up a long forgotten moment in Roman history and enlivens it through the portrayal of different characters. The poem marks Browning's ability to look at

the same incident through different distinct points of view, as we find his characters elaborating, emphasizing, and suppressing various elements of the same incident in accordance with their interests.

The achievement of Robert Browning lies in his breaking away from the post-Keatsian influence of handling sensory images and bringing back colloquial vigour to English poetry. He is renowned for his ability to build and explore complex character argumentatively that gave his verse robust individuality. Here, it has to be accepted that the personalities and attitudes that Browning projects in his dramatic monologues are not necessarily always accurate. Browning constructs the historical characters in order to present an area of his own thought and feeling, and as such, it does not make much difference for him in constructing the characters as imaginatively as he could. However, it does not mean that Browning never tried to realistically construct a historical moment; he is often seen at pains to capture the essence of a historical period in a particular character.

Throughout his poetic career, Browning appears before his readers in various avatars. Sometimes, he is a passionate singer of love, youth and the world of senses, sometimes a serious and curious investigator of human experiences and sometimes a valiant believer in the imperishable greatness of the soul of man. Moreover, he was one of the greatest humanists of his times. Out of all these avatars, Browning as a singer of love, youth and sensuousness is often seen as superior in his artistic and humanistic appeal. Browning's indulgence with his psychological power leads his poems into subtleties and complexities that strip them off from their poetic sensibility. The same is true when we find him dealing with religious and philosophical issues; in such cases he behaves like a theologian and a philosopher without any displaying of his poetic imagination. However, all his great poems show an acute juxtaposition of the poet in all his poetic characteristics as a singer, lover, thinker, fighter etc.

The poetic value of Browning's monologues lies in the violence and vividness with which the poet renders his characters and their personality. Browning tries to construct a confessional moment and crisis for the characters, which forces them to give vent to the truth of life and the world as they observe. It is often seen that, as in his collection *Men and Women,* Browning intertwines his personal experiences and intuitions with historical facts and moments. The dramatic mode was, for Browning, a way of qualifying his own emotional experiences and imaginative endeavours to poetic temperament. Browning's dramatic monologues enable him to explore extreme and usually extremely morbid states of mind. However, his use of different characters and a range of different voices does not allow the reader to identify the speaker with Browning the author. The dramatic monologues, which Browning developed after his experience of writing for the London theatre, act as a kind of mask. They anticipate the monologues of Modernist poets such as Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot (for example, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*). The 'mask' allows the writer to explore the human soul without the soul-searching being too directly personal.



### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Q 5:** Name some of the important poetry collections of Robert Browning.

**Q 6:** Explain the causes of Browning's great poetic achievements.

**Q 7:** What usually contribute to the poetic value of Browning's monologues?

## 13.4 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF BROWNING AS A VICTORIAN POET

Although Robert Browning's work consistently attracted critical attention, it was not always positive. The critical history of Browning's works initially shows a pattern of slow recognition followed by enormous popularity

and even adulation in the two decades prior to his death. His reputation subsequently declined, but gradually recovered with the appearance of important biographical and critical studies by William C. DeVane and other scholars in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. Browning's early reviewers often complained about the obscurity, incomprehensibility, and awkward language of his works, an impression largely arising from Sordello. When Browning did achieve fame with *Dramatis Personae* and *The Ring and the Book*, the Victorian audience considered him a profound philosophical thinker and teacher who had chosen poetry as his medium of instruction. Critics often cite the influence of Browning's diction on the poetic language of modern poets like Ezra Pound, and the effect of his dramatic monologues on the pivotal works of T. S. Eliot. In addition to its considerable influence, the value of his works continue to be reassessed, with commentators focusing less on the philosophical aspects of his writings and more on his strengths as a genuinely original artist. Although his early poems were not successes, they are important for understanding his poetic aspirations and for the opportunity; they provide the reader to trace his developing philosophy and developing poetic techniques.

Browning's combination of dramatic and lyric expression gradually took the form of dramatic monologue. The scholars who have carried out extensive studies on Dramatic Monologue agree that Browning's place in English literature is based largely on his contribution to the poetic genre of the dramatic monologue, the form he adopted for a large number of his works. His diverse topics, striking use of language, and stylistic creativity, his accomplishments in this genre etc. constitute the basis of his reputation. Literary historians define the dramatic monologue as a poem in which the speaker's character is gradually disclosed in a dramatic situation through his or her own words. In "Fra Lippo Lippi," for example, the hypocritical nature of the narrator becomes increasingly apparent to the reader as the poem progresses. As the monk speaks, he reveals aspects of his personality of which even he is unaware; the voice of the poet is absent from the poem altogether. Whether Browning chose a historical or an imaginary figure, a reliable or an unreliable narrator, Browning evolved the techniques of

exposing a character's personality to an unprecedented degree of subtlety and psychological depth. As a few previous poets had done, he explored the makeup of the mind, scrutinizing the interior lives of his characters. His protagonists vary from sophisticated theologians and artists to simple peasant children, spanning a range of personalities from the pure and innocent to the borderline psychotic. A considerable number of Browning's men and women, however, exemplify his overriding interest in thwarted or twisted personalities whose lives are scarred by jealousy, lust, or avarice.

In addition to its psychological depth, critics agree that one of the main strengths of Browning's work is its sheer abundance and variety in terms of subject matter, time, place, and character. His difficult subjects demand serious intellectual efforts from the reader, and they reflect the enormous breadth of his interests in science, history, art, and music. His primary source of inspiration was Renaissance Italy; its unsurpassed artistic accomplishments and rich religious and political history provided him with many of his themes and characters. Nevertheless, his settings range from the Middle Ages to his own era, reflecting a diverse assortment of cultures.



### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Q 8:** How is Browning different from the previous English poets?

**Q 9:** Which are the main strengths of Robert Browning as a poet?



## 13.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, you have read about the Victorian poet Robert Browning who is chiefly remembered for his mastery of the dramatic monologue and for the remarkable diversity and range of his works. By vividly portraying a central character against a social background, his poems probe complex human motives in a variety of historical periods. As a highly individual force in the history of English poetry, Browning made significant innovations in language and versification and had a profound influence on numerous 20th century poets, including such key figures as Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot.



## 13.6 FURTHER READING

Abrams, M. H. (2000). *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 7th Edition. New Delhi: Harcourt India Private Limited.

Brooke, Stopford A. (2007). *The Poetry of Robert Browning*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors (P) Ltd.

Browning, Robert. (1956). *Poems of Robert Browning*. Boston: The Riverside Press.

Carter, Ronald. (2001). *Routledge History of Literature in English: Britain and Ireland*. London: Routledge.

Drabble, Margaret. (ed). (2000). *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*. (6th edition). Oxford University Press.

Entry on Browning in *Gale Contextual Encyclopaedia of World Literature*. Vol 1.

Loucks, James F. (ed). (1979). *Robert Browning's Poetry: A Norton Critical Edition*. London & New York. WW Norton & Company.

Symons, Arthur. (2006). *An Introduction to the Study of Browning*. New Delhi: A.B.S. Publishers and Distributors.

**Web Resources:**

www.wikipaedia.org

http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/rb/lippi/text.html



## 13.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

**Ans to Q No 1:** Browning understood that playwriting could not cultivate his creative possibilities… …he was much interested in exploring the struggles, tensions and conflicts within the individual's mind… …his gradual departure from the stage was followed by a few new experimentations with the form of poetic expression… …it was his inclination towards the theatre that led him to juxtapose the dramatic with the lyric.

**Ans to Q No 2:** Similarity with soliloquy… …single character and assumed audience… …narrative in the form of speech… ... self expression of character… …apparent dialogue.

**Ans to Q No 3:** Through his monologues, Browning chose some of the most debased, extreme and even criminally infamous characters… …his tried to build a sympathetic case for a character that does not deserve one… …this technique helped him to raise serious questions over the intellectual and social atmosphere of the Victorian world without getting involved with them directly… …the dialogues in his monologues are reflective of the conflicts, tensions and contradictions of his age.

**Ans to Q No 4:** The context of Renaissance helped him to raise questions about his own times. This practice allowed the readers to posit themselves at a moral and historical position different from their times and look into the issues with the freedom to enter into the psychological realm of the characters. It also helped him to maintain an objective distance from the characters he created.

**Ans to Q No 5:** *Dramatic Lyrics* (1842) that includes poems like "My Last Duchess", "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister", "Incident of the French Camp"; "Porphyria's Lover"… …*Men and Women* (1855) that includes poems like "Love among the Ruins", "Child Roland to the Dark Tower Came", "A Toccata of Galuppi's", "Fra Lippo Lippi", "Andrea Del Sarto" etc.… …*Dramatis Personae* in the year of 1864 which includes poems like poems like "Rabbi Ben Ezra", "Caliban upon Setebos", "A Death in the Desert", "Mr. Sludge", Prospice", "Abt Vogler", "The Medium", "Caliban upon Setebos" etc.… … *The Ring and the Book* in 1868-69 that includes poems like

**Ans to Q No 6:** Browning broke away from the post-Keatsian influence of handling sensory images and brought back colloquial vigour to English poetry… …his ability to build and explore complex characters argumentatively gave his verse robust individuality… …he constructed historical characters in order to present an area of his own thought and feeling.

**Ans to Q No 7:** The poetic value of Browning's monologues lies in the violence and vividness with which the poet renders his characters and their personality. Browning tries to construct a confessional moment and crisis for the characters, which forces them to give vent to the truth of life and the world as they observe.

**Ans to Q No 8:** Browning explored the makeup of the mind, scrutinizing the interior lives of his characters… …his protagonists vary from sophisticated theologians and artists to simple peasant children, spanning a range of personalities from the pure and innocent to the borderline psychotic… …Browning's men and women, exemplify his overriding interest in thwarted or twisted personalities whose lives are scarred by jealousy, lust, or avarice.

**Ans to Q No 9:** Besides the psychological depths, critics agree that one of the main strengths of Browning's work is its sheer abundance and variety in terms of subject matter, time, place, and character… …his difficult subjects demand serious intellectual efforts from the reader and they reflect the enormous breadth of his interests in science, history, art, and music… … his unsurpassed artistic accomplishments and rich religious and political history provided him with many of his themes and characters… …his settings range from the Middle Ages to his own era, reflecting a diverse assortment of cultures.



## 13.8 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

**Q 1:** How could dramatic monologue be a useful tool for Browning in depicting the different tensions within a character and within its historical period?

**Q 2:** Describe the importance of Robert Browning as a poet in the context of Victorian poetry.

**Q 3:** Discuss the main causes behind the great poetic achievements of Browning as a Victorian poet.

**Q 4:** Provide a critical appreciation of Robert Browning as a poet of the Victorian era with special reference to his unique characteristics as a poet.

**Q 5:** Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the form of the dramatic monologue. What kinds of subject matter does dramatic monologue best address in Browning's poetry?

**Q 6:** Why does Browning so often choose painters as the speakers for his monologues? Discuss with reference to his Fra Lippo Lippi.

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