UNIT 13: ROBERT BROWNING: SELECT LETTERS OF BROWNING I

UNIT STRUCTURE

13.1 Learning Objectives
13.2 Introduction
13.3 Letter Writing: An Introduction
13.4 Robert Browning
13.4.1 His Life and Works
13.5 The Letters of Robert Browning
13.5.1 Summary of the Letters
13.6 Let us Sum up
13.7 Further Reading
13.8 Answers to Check Your Progress
13.9 Model Questions

13.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through the unit, the learner will be able to:

- discuss the life and works of Robert Browning
- read through the text of the letters discussed and gain an insight into the intellectual exchange found in the letters of Browning

13.2 INTRODUCTION

The present unit deals with the selected letters of Robert Browning written to Elizabeth Barrett Browning who was also a contemporary poet. Their intimate correspondences reveal interesting aspects of their personality and significant facets of their life. Robert Browning had developed a rapport with Elizabeth Barrett by way of his letters through which their friendship had transformed into love. Elizabeth Barrett as a young lady had suffered from a major accident while riding a horse which had led to serious complications and left her bed-ridden for a long time. Her father Edward

Barrett, a strict disciplinarian in his grief and a protective sense towards herhad confined herto a gloomy life of comfort at home. She had known happier days at their country home but with the turn of events, her life had completely altered things for her.

The Barretts had shifted to a new but a gloomy residence at Wimpole Street. Her father tended to her health and fervently prayed for her but mixed no words about ever allowing her to be courted or married to anyone. Elizabeth Barrett who had been an active young woman was not a complete invalid. Despite her sufferings, she had a cheerful spirit and a creative bent of mind with a gift for writing which she explored and engaged in through her poetry and her letters to Robert Browning. A glance at their correspondences reveal shared interests in poetry, literature and the arts. And thus, it shall not be justified to assume that they were only love letters which contained their emotional outpourings. As you read through his Browning's letters, you will find that they reveal intellectual exchanges and fruitful literary discussions without leaving out on the emotional, spiritual or even the day-to-day aspects of their life.

13.3 LETTER WRITING: AN INTRODUCTION

"Letter writing" is a personal and an intimate form of correspondence and communication which is why the contents of a 'letter' reveals a 'letter writer's' personality, intellect and emotions and often is a window to his or her soul. With the advent of technology, our regular ways of corresponding and communicating has undergone tremendous changes to the point of almost replacing our older ways of keeping in touch with others. Today, various other forms of communication have taken over our daily lives and in this fast pace of life, one hardly finds time to spare or indulge in the exercise of letter writing. A.G. Gardiner's essay "On Letter Writing" discusses how the very art of letter writing is a long lost tradition and the engagement of writing, receiving and reading letters is a joy that is unknown to many. The letter is now considered a 'snail-mail' in comparison to other forms of modern communication.

Ancient history reveals the tradition of 'epistles' (or letters) and the genre of letter-writing which was formal, instructional and informative. The Pauline Epistles in the New Testament were also in the mode of epistles. If you look at our own ancient Indian history, it reveals how the written word of communication was given much value and importance. These were often in the form of hand-written rolled parchments which served the purpose of both a common and an urgent mode of communication. You may know that our own Indian kings and queens had royal messengers to carry and deliver such parchments on horseback on behalf of the royalty. In fact, even birds like pigeons were trained to carry letters and messages in the ancient times. Have you ever wondered how a letter need not travel across places in the globe and can simply be 'written' to your immediate family, your kith and kin, your intimate friend, community elders or next-door neighbours? Or, have you discovered the joy of 'receiving' a letter sitting in an envelope waiting to be revealed?

Just the sight of an envelope containing a letter and bearing ones name and address in a familiar hand-writing feels like an exciting invitation. And to add to it, the arrival of letters also turns into a double joy for those who have the hobby of collecting stamps which is also known as 'philately.' This is often the case for those who have pen-friends across the world. Those who form friendships and become acquainted with each other through letters are known as pen-friends or pen-pals. Also, in addition to letters or mails, there goes a popular belief that seeing a mail-van pass by indicates good luck for the day. Do you take notice of the red letter-boxes and the red mail-vans whizz by in and around your locality? Well at some point in your life, you may have experienced the joy of pouring your thoughts, ideas, reflections and feelings on to the pages of a letter.



LET US KNOW

The unit will unravel the kind of correspondences that the poet Robert Browning shared with his beloved Elizabeth Barrett Browning. They shared a common intellectual wavelength, had a deep understanding

of each other and were very much in love. Also, they discussed each other's literary interests and provided constructive criticism to each other by way of these letters. Their letters were often sent or exchanged in secret and sometimes Browning also sent flowers inside the envelopes, simply to express his love for her and to cheer her up, in the confined existence of her room. As Elizabeth suffered from a delicate health condition, his letters often came to her as a source of encouragement, strength and moral support and needless to say, much happiness. Their personal correspondences were both inspiring and enriching to each other as they grew familiar to each other's persona through the very means of these treasured letters.

13.4 ROBERT BROWNING

The following subsections will introduce you to the life and works of Robert Browning before we move on to discuss the texts of the selected letters.

13.4.1 His Life and Works

Robert Browning (7 May1812 - 12 December 1889) was born to Sarah Anna Wiedermann and Robert Browning. His father was a well-paid clerk who worked for the bank of England and their family was well off. Even as his paternal grandfather, Margaret Tittle was a wealthy slave owner in the West Indies, his own father was an Abolitionist in supporting the end of slavery. Browning's father had been sent to the West Indies to work on a sugar plantation but soon returned to England, appalled by the widespread slavery that he saw. According to an anecdotal family story, his paternal grandfather was rumoured within the family to have had some Jamaican mixed race ancestry but there was also little evidence for the same. Browning's mother, who was a talented musician, was the daughter of a German ship-owner, who had settled with his Scottish wife at Dundee.He

had a younger sister named Sarianna, who was very gifted.Browning's father had amassed an extensive library of around six thousand books, in several languages and many of these were rare. These were the chief literary resources that gave him an easy access, to develop his literary interests. His father encouraged his children's interests in literature and the arts. He was very close to his mother and it was his sister, who had become his close companion in his later years.

Browning wrote a book of poetry at the age of twelve, which he later destroyed when no publisher could be found. He was a very sensitive child and showed a dislike towards school life. After attending one or two private schools, he was educated by a home tutor with the help of the literary resources in his father's library. Thus, by the age of fourteen he was fluent in French, Latin, Italian and Greek and this was the time when he became a great admirer of the Romantic poets, especially Shelley. In his admiration and influence of Shelley, he too became vegetarian and an atheist, both of which he gave up later. At the age of sixteen, he studied Greek at University College London but left after his first year. He did opt to study ateither Oxford University or at Cambridge University as they were both open to the members of the Church of England. Also, his mother's evangelical Protestant faith and her devout non-conformism, in not following the beliefs of the established Church of England were the major reasons of altering his options.

He composed arrangements of various songs and had inherited musical abilities from his mother. He chose to stay at home, financially dependent on his parents, until the age of 34, after which he had married. Until then he had even refused to a formal career, ignoring his parents' critical protests to his serious inclination to poetry. In 1845, he married Elizabeth Barrett, who was elder to him by six years and a semi-invalid in her father's house at Wimpole Street, London. Their regular correspondence slowly developed into a romance and finally they eloped on 12 September 1846. Initially

their marriage was a secret because Elizabeth had a dominating father who disapproved marriage for any of his children and he even disinherited Elizabeth like each of his children who had married. Elizabeth Barrett was a sweet and innocent young woman who suffered her father's endless tyranny and cruelties for the sake of discipline.



LET US KNOW

Elizabeth Barrett (1806-1861) was a well received poet of her time, began writing poetry when she was barely eleven years old. She was an intelligent and well read young woman who knew Greek, Latin and Hebrew. It was her fellow poet and friend Robert Browning who through his optimism and loving support, brought out the best in her and much against her father's wishes they were both secretly married in the year 1845. Her *Sonnets From the Portuguese*(1850) written just before her marriage contain a collection of her intense poetry and forty four sonnets on the theme of love. Some of her other known works are *Casa Guidi Windows* (1851) and *Aurora Leigh* (1857). She was very much a Victorian poet but had also strains of romanticism in her poetry.

The Brownings lived in Italy, residing first in Pisa for a year and then an apartment in Florence (now a museum to their memory). Their only son Robert Wiedermann Barrett Browning nicknamed "Penini" or "Pen" was born in 1849. During the years they lived there, his fascination led him to learn much about Italian art and culture. In his later life, he also described Italy as his University. Later, he brought a home in Asolo, outside Venice. In their home in Italy the couple was very comfortable and their relationship together was happy.

He returned to England only after the death of his wife in1861 and became a part of the London literary scene, even as he kept visiting Italy frequently. Gradually, he received recognition for his works and it brought him the literary success that he had sought for nearly forty years. The Robert

Browning Society was formed in 1851and his work was recognized as belonging within the British literary canon. The last years of his life saw him travel widely and he even joined a British diplomatic mission to Russia in 1834.In 1878, for the first time in seventeen years since his wife's death, he returned there on several occasions. Browning breathed his last at his son's home in Venice on 12 December 1889. He was buried in Poet's corner in Westminster Abbey, where his grave lay adjacent to that of poet Alfred Tennyson.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: How did Robert Browning develop a rapport with Elizabeth Barrett?

Q 2: Why misfortune did Elizabeth Barrett suffer as a young woman?

Q 3: What do the letters between Robert Browning and Elizabeth reveal?

Q 4: What were the chief literary resources that the Browning accessed as a young boy?

Q 5: Why did Browning not attend both Oxford and Cambridge University?

Q 6: What did their regular correspondences eventually lead to?

Q 7: Briefly describe the experiences of the Brownings in Italy.

Browning's writing career began with the publication of the anonymous poem "Pauline". His long poem "Paracelsus" based on the renowned doctor and alchemist, received the notice of Thomas Carlyle, Wordsworth and other men of letters. This gave him the reputation of being a promising poet in the London literary scene. During this time, he came to be acquainted with Charles Dickens, John Forster, Harriet Martineau, Thomas Carlyle and Charles Macready too.

He was encouraged to write the play *Strafford* performed in 1837 by Charles Macready and Helen Faust and even as it was no great success, he was encouraged to try again. He went on to write eight plays in all, which included *Pippa Passes* (1841), *A Blot on the Scutcheon* (1843) and *A Soul's Tragedy* (1846). A troubled production of *A Blot on the Scutcheon*, followed by the publication of the experimental and politically radical poem "Sordello"

(1840) were both met with widespread dislike. And this caused him such a setback that his reputation would not rise again for 25 years. “Sordello” was a complex psychological poem about a 13th century troubadour or a travelling poet.

Further, Browning was critically dismissed by patrician or Aristocratic writers such as Charles Kingsley for his leaving the shores of England to live in Italy. It was in Florence from early 1853 that Browning worked on the poems that eventually comprised his two volume *Men and Women* (1855) and these works increased his reputation only after he returned to England. In 1868, after five years of work, he completed and published the long poem *The Ring and the Book* in blank-verse, which was based on an extremely complex murder case from the Rome of the1960s.The poem is composed of twelve books, with an introduction and conclusion by him and ten lengthy dramatic poems narrated by the various characters in the story, reflecting their responses to the events. It was long even by his own standards, being over twenty thousand lines and this has been his most ambitious project and praised as an accomplished achievement in poetry. This was published separately in four volumes from November 1868 to February 1869 and this poem was a success both critically and commercially, bringing him the recognition that he had sought for nearly forty years.

After a series of long poems published in the early 1870s, the poems “Fifine at the Fair” and “Red Cotton Night Cap” were well received. The volume *Pacchiarotto and How He Worked in Distemper* included an attack against Browning’s critics and in particular the Poet Laureate Alfred Austin. In 1887, Browning produced the major work of his later years *Parleyings With Certain People of Importance in Their Day*. It presents the poet speaking in his own voice, engaging in a series of dialogues with long-forgotten figures of literary, artistic and philosophic history and this collection baffled the Victorian public.

Browning then returned to writing short, concise lyric for his last volume *Asolondo* (1869) which was published on the day of his death. He had a rewarding writing career and he was awarded many distinctions. He was made L.L.D of Edinburgh, a life Governor of London University and had

also the offer of the Lord Rectorship of Glasgow. Browning's fame today rests mainly on his dramatic monologues in which the dialogic voice conveys not only the setting and action but also reveal the speaker's character. This was the form that he was known to have significantly mastered and innovated in his works.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 8: Name a few of the early plays by Robert Browning.

Q 9: What is the poem "Sordello" about?

Q10: Briefly describe the content of *The Ring and the Book.* When was it published?

Q 11: Mention how many books is *The Ring and the Book* divided into?

Q 12: What is the literary form or device for which Browning is known for today?

13.5 THE LETTERS OF ROBERT BROWNING

In this unit, the three selected letters of Robert Browning is taken from the first of the two volumes titled *The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning1845-1846*.The volume contains the correspondences between Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning during this period and is arranged in a chronological order for the ease of reference. The selected letters were written by Robert Browning to his beloved in the year of 1845. It captures the essence of their flowering friendship, their growing love and their intellectual development. While Robert Browning was struggling hard to establish himself as a writer and a poet during this time, Elizabeth Barrett struggled and suffered a frail health in the confines of her room. Both of them found solace and hope in the other through the medium of these letters. As the letters reveal, Robert Browning played a positive role in her life as a tender and kind friend who brought out the best in her as a gifted poet and an intellectual in her own right. The text of the letters is provided below for your reference.

Letter 1:

New Cross, Hatcham, Surrey.

[Post-mark, January 10, 1845.]

I love your verses with all my heart, dear Miss Barrett,—and this is no off-hand complimentary letter that I shall write,—whatever else, no prompt matter-of-course recognition of your genius, and there a graceful and natural end of the thing. Since the day last week when I first read your poems, I quite laugh to remember how I have been turning and turning again in my mind what I should be able to tell you of their effect upon me, for in the first **flush** of delight I thought I would this once get out of my habit of purely **passive** enjoyment, when I do really enjoy, and thoroughly justify my admiration—perhaps even, as a loyal fellow-craftsman should, try and find fault and do you some little good to be proud of hereafter!—but nothing comes of it all—so into me has it gone, and part of me has it become, this great living poetry of yours, not a flower of which but took root and grew—Oh, how different that is from lying to be dried and pressed flat, and **prized** highly, and put in a book with a proper account at top and bottom, and shut up and put away ... and the book called a '**Flora**,' besides! After all, I need not give up the thought of doing that, too, in time; because even now, talking with whoever is worthy, I can give a reason for my faith in one and another excellence, the fresh strange music, the affluent language, the exquisite pathos and true new brave thought; but in this addressing myself to you—your own self, and for the first time, my feeling rises altogether. I do, as I say, love these books with all my heart—and I love you too. Do you know I was once not very far from seeing—really seeing you? Mr. Kenyon said to me one morning 'Would you like to see Miss Barrett?' then he went to announce me,—then he returned ... you were too unwell, and now it is years ago, and I feel as at some **untoward** passage in my travels, as if I had been close, so close, to some world's-wonder in **chapel** or **crypt**, only a screen to push and I might have entered, but there was some **slight**, so it now seems, slight and just sufficient **bar** to admission, and the half-opened door shut, and I went home my thousands of miles, and the sight was never to be?



Flush: a glow on ones face when pleased

Passive: accepting and allowing without opposing

Thoroughly: completely

Prized: something of great value

Flora: the plants of a particular area or period of time

Untoward: unexpected or unusual

Chapel: a part of a large church with its own altar

Crypt: an underground room (vault) beneath a church used either as a chapel or as a burial place

Slight: just a little

Bar: something that stops or delays

Well, these Poems were to be, and this true thankful joy and pride with which I feel myself.

Yours ever faithfully,

Robert Browning.

Letter 2:

New Cross, Hatcham, Monday Night.

[Post-mark, January 28, 1845.]

Dear Miss Barrett,—Your books lie on my table here, at arm's length from me, in this old room where I sit all day: and when my head aches or **wanders** or strikes work, as it now or then will, I take my chance for either green-covered volume, as if it were so much fresh **trefoil** to feel in one's hands this winter-time,—and round I turn, and, putting a **decisive** elbow on three or four half-done-with 'Bells' of mine, read, read, read, and just as I have shut up the book and walked to the window, I recollect that you wanted me to find faults there, and that, in an unwise hour, I engaged to do so. Meantime, the days go by (the **whitethroat** is come and sings now) and as I would not have you 'look down on me from your white heights' as promise breaker, evader, or forgetter, if I could help: and as, if I am very **candid** and **contrite**, you may find it in your heart to write to me again—who knows?—I shall say at once that the said faults cannot be lost, must be somewhere, and shall be faithfully brought you back whenever they turn up,—as people tell one of missing matters. I am rather **exacting**, myself, with my own gentle audience, and get to say spiteful things about them when they are backward in their dues of appreciation—but really, really—could I be quite sure that anybody as good as—I must go on, I suppose, and say—as myself, even, were honestly to feel towards me as I do, towards the writer of 'Bertha,' and the 'Drama,' and the 'Duchess,' and the 'Page' and—the whole two volumes, I should be paid after a fashion, I know.



Wanders: walk or move about casually

Trefoil: a small plant with yellow flowers

Decisive: settling an issue quickly

Candid: truthful and straightforward

Contrite: sorryor regretful for having done wrong

Exacting: making great demands on one's endurance or skill

Annotate: add explanatory notes

Dissertate: extended discussion

One thing I can do—pencil, if you like, and **annotate**, and **dissertate** upon that I love most and least—I think I can do it, that is.

Here an odd memory comes—of a friend who,—**volunteering** such a service to a sonnet-writing somebody, gave him a taste of his quality in a side-column of short criticisms on sonnet the First, and starting off the

beginning three lines with, of course, 'bad, worse, worst'—made by a generous mintage of words to meet the sudden run of his **epithets**, 'worser, worserer, worserest' pay off the second **terzet** in full—no 'badder, badderer, badderest' fell to the Second's allowance, and 'worser' &c. answered the demands of the Third; 'worster, worsterer, worsterest' supplied the emergency of the Fourth; and, **bestowing** his last 'worserestest and worstestest' on lines 13 and 14, my friend (slapping his forehead like an emptied strong-box) frankly declared himself **bankrupt**, and honourably **incompetent**, to satisfy the reasonable expectations of the rest of the series!

What an **illustration** of the law by which opposite ideas suggest opposite, and contrary images come together!

See now, how, of that 'Friendship' you offer me (and here Juliet's word rises to my lips)—I feel sure once and for ever. I have got already, I see, into this little pet-handwriting of mine (not anyone else's) which scratches on as if theatrical **copyists** (ah me!) and Bradbury and Evans' Reader were not! But you shall get something better than this nonsense one day, if you will have patience with me—hardly better, though, because this does me real good, gives real relief, to write. After all, you know nothing, next to nothing of me, and that stops me. Spring is to come, however!

If you hate writing to me as I hate writing to nearly everybody, I pray you never write—if you do, as you say, care for anything I have done. I will simply assure you, that meaning to begin work in deep **earnest**, begin without **affectation**, God knows,—I do not know what will help me more than hearing from you,—and therefore, if you do not so very much hate it, I know I shall hear from you—and very little more about your 'tiring me.'

Ever yours faithfully,

Robert Browning.

Letter 3:

[Post-mark, June 14, 1845.]

When I ask my wise self what I really do remember of the Prize poem, the answer is—both of Chapman's lines a-top, quite worth any prize for their quotes—then, the good epithet of 'Green Europe' contrasting with



Volunteering: a person who freely offers to do something

Epithets: a word or phrase used to describe the most important thing or quality of a person

Terzet: a composition in three voice parts

Bestowing: award or give something (an honour, a right or gift)

Bankrupt: declared in law as not having money to pay one's debts

Incompetent: not successful enough to do something successfully

Illustration: make clear and help in explaining something

Copyists: those who make copies by profession

Earnest: very seriously and sincerely

Affectation: putting up a false pretense of speaking or writing



Vestal: pure

Vault: a chamber in a church or in a graveyard used for burials

Ominous: suggesting that something bad is about to happen

Incidence: an occurrence, rate or frequency of something

Ungenial: someone who is not friendly or cheerful

Timorous: lacking in courage or confidence

Transcribed: make a copy of something in another language or alphabet

Endeavours: try hard to do or achieve something

Respite: a short period of relief

Africa—then, deep in the piece, a picture of a **Vestal** in a **vault**, where I see a dipping and winking lamp plainest, and last of all the **ominous** 'all was dark' that dismisses you. I read the poem many years ago, and never since, though I have an impression that the versification is good, yet from your commentary I see I must have said a good deal more in its praise than that. But have you not discovered by this time that I go on talking with my thoughts away?

I know, I have always been jealous of my own musical faculty (I can write music).—Now that I see the uselessness of such jealousy, and am for loosing and letting it go, it may be cramped possibly. Your music is more various and exquisite than any modern writer's to my ear. One should study the mechanical part of the art, as nearly all that there is to be studied—for the more one sits and thinks over the creative process, the more it confirms itself as 'inspiration,' nothing more nor less. Or, at worst, you write down old inspirations, what you remember of them ... but with that it begins. 'Reflection' is exactly what it names itself—a re-presentation, in scattered rays from every angle of **incidence**, of what first of all became present in a great light, a whole one. So tell me how these lights are born, if you can! But I can tell anybody how to make melodious verses—let him do it therefore—it should be exacted of all writers.

You do not understand what a new feeling it is for me to have someone who is to like my verses or I shall not ever like them after! So far differently was I circumstanced of old, that I used rather to go about for a subject of offence to people; writing ugly things in order to warn the **ungenial** and **timorous** off my grounds at once. I shall never do so again at least! As it is, I will bring all I dare, in as great quantities as I can—if not next time, after then—certainly. I must make an end, print this Autumn my last four 'Bells,' Lyrics, Romances, 'The Tragedy,' and 'Luna,' and then go on with a whole heart to my own Poem—indeed, I have just resolved not to begin any new song, even, till this grand clearance is made—I will get the Tragedy **transcribed** to bring—

'To bring!' Next Wednesday—if you know how happy you make me may I not say that, my dear friend, when I feel it from my soul?

I thank God that you are better: do pray make fresh **endeavours** to profit by this partial **respite** of the weather! All about you must urge that: but even from my distance some effect might come of such wishes. But you are better—look so and speak so! God bless you.

R.B.

You let 'flowers be sent you in a letter,' everyone knows, and this hot day draws out our very first yellow rose.

13.5.1 Summary of the Letters

The following is an attempt at understanding the gist of the letters Browning wrote to Elizabeth.

Letter I

In the first letter of this unit dated 10 January, 1845 (which is also the second letter in the first volume of the letters), Browning reveals a love for the verses of Elizabeth Barrett who was a poet herself. Through this letter, he sincerely compliments her and acknowledges her genius. He expresses the thoughts he had been carrying for the entire week before he had begun reading her poems, wondering how best to express the powerful effect of her work on him and laughing all by himself at the very thought. In his first rush of delight, he thinks that he would for once step out of his tendency to purely enjoy poetry passively and instead read actively (be involved) into them as he truly enjoys their essence. He also thinks of providing her constructive criticism and to justify his admiration of her work, like a truly loyal fellow-craftsman (fellow-because he is also a fellow contemporary poet). Hence, he expresses his eagerness to find any kind of shortcomings in her work in order to help her better herself and guide her so that she can enrich her creative work and be proud of them later.

But, he is unable to pin down any shortcoming as such and is infactdeeply absorbed to the point offeeling her 'living poetry' flow into his being and grow as a flower. He likens or compares this

enriching experience to a living plant that takes root, grows and flowers. He also contrastsit to that of a dried and pressed flower. The joy of a real living flower is quite different from that of the prized and pressed flower kept between books and volumes, shut and stacked away in the old dusty shelves. Although, the beauty of a real flower is short lived, its natural existence is cherished forever. In a lighter vein, he asks her to imagine the irony of a 'dried and pressed flower' in a book titled 'flora' (a term of general classification used for 'natural' plants and trees). The irony is that dried flowers which areoften kept in remembrance are soon forgotten with time.The word flora evokes a visual sense of living plants and flowers as contrasted to the keep-sakes of dried flowers.

With the passing of time, he does not give up the idea of assuring his faith in a worthy talent (Elizabeth) and the recognition of excellence, through what he calls the characteristics of "fresh strange music," "affluent language," "exquisite pathos" and brave new thought. Through this letter, he confesses how for the first time, he experiences a rush of feelings effecting his sense of 'reasoning'. And he is rather overwhelmed in addressing the value of her work, as well as, his love for her. He reveals how he had almost been close to seeing her in person when Mr. Kenyon had asked him one morning if he would like to see Miss Barrett. But having gone inside to inform her of Browning's visit, the man returned with news that she was unwell which is why he had lost the opportunity of meeting her.

This he discloses had been several years ago and he 'compares' this experience to "some untoward passage" during a travel or journey. To him this experience felt as if he had been very close or almost on the verge of seeing some kind of a 'wonder of the world' such as a chapel or a crypt with a dividing/ pasting screen which he just had to draw to enter but almost missed out on.

There was some kind of a hindrance or hesitation as he introspects from the present point-of-view, just a slight restriction from entry.Thus, he compares this opportunity to a half-opened door

which he was unable to enter to returns home through thousands of miles without the privilege of so much as a glimpse or a glance even. Then he ends the letter with a compliment on the Poems which almost personifies its living quality and thanks her for the joy and pride which he feels.

Letter 2:

The second letter in this unit is dated 28 January, 1845. He opens the letter with a description of her books lying on his table, just kept at an arm's length, within his reach in his old room, where he almost spends his entire day. And whenever he suffers a headache or his mind wanders off, as it often does, he reaches out for any of those green-covered volumes which feel like a fresh trefoil flower during wintertime. And then, he turns around and takes to reading the half done drafts of *Bell Poems*, concentrating and reading them intensely at his study. And when he shuts the book to walk to the window, he remembers herearlier request for him to point out any faults or shortcomings in her work. Browning expresses how difficult it is to engage in such a taskand to position himself as the critic of her works. Although he has a knack for criticism which came naturally to him, in case of her works, yet he felt that he required an effort to engage in the same. He also describes how a 'whitethroat' bird visits his window-sill to sing to him every now and then, and how his days passed by in general.

In a light vein, he writes that he can never even dream, to have her look down upon him,from her white heights (her room was housed upstairs at her Wimpole residence) as though he were a 'stranger' and she a 'heart breaker' or some kind of an 'evader' who ignored him to the point of forgetting him. And again imagines that in the case of such an event, she would consider writing to him again to only find him frank and apologetic. But once again you are to note that this is only his imagination at work and he only imagines such an unlikely situation (which is why he says "who knows?")

Coming back to her creative works, he assures her that if there were any faults they could never be lost, and would only be hiding somewhere which he would surely and faithfully bring to her notice, as and when they appear. He even compares these hidden shortcomings to 'missing cases' which people came up with. He jokingly says that unlike her, he would rather judge his own work in relation to his own readers and say unpleasant things about those readers who do not display a standard sense of critical appreciation. But on a more serious note, he also wonders on his own ability to honestly examine andcritically analyse his own works himself. He had done this as in the case of 'Bertha', the 'Drama', the 'Duchess' and the 'Page' along with the entire two volumes and feels that he had done justice to them.

He goes on to suggest that if she would allow him, he would rather underline her texts with a pencil and 'annotate' as well as 'dissertate' upon the parts he loved most and the parts he loved the least. At this, he cites an odd and funny memory of his friend who had volunteered such a service (i.e., to critique or edit) to help an acquaintance who wrote sonnets. In this one incident, Browning's critic friend in his concise criticism gave an idea of the quality of the work in a side column of the first sonnet.His comments on the first three lines of the starting sonnet began with the use of 'epithets' (a descriptive word or phrase): 'worser, worserer, worserest!'And in the second terzethewas compelled to write in full- 'no badder, badderer, badderest.' By the time he reached the third his comments changed into –'worster, worsterer, worseterest.' And finally, the last part ended with an exhausted set of comment: 'worserestest and worsetester!' Thus, by the end of the poem, his critic-friend had ended up slapping his forehead like an emptied box and finally declaring himself bankrupt to mean his loss of words and almost incompetence to satisfy any kind of expectation inthe remaining series of sonnets! Browning exclaims at the way contrary images came together and the way opposite ideas functioned!

He talks of their Friendship (alluding to Romeo and Juliet) which makes him feel much secured. Thus, he takes to his habit of writing in his own handwriting. He requests her patience to read him, as it does him real good and provides him true relief to express and pour his thoughts through his writing. As they are new acquaintances and she is yet to understand him, to get to know him, he expresses his optimism saying "spring is to come however!" He further says that in case she disliked writing to him in anyway, as he himself did to nearly everyone else he knew, he would respect her decision not to write to him. Because, he feels that if she did write to him then he would rather want it to be out of her genuine concern for anything he might have ever done for her.

He assures her that he intends to begin work sincerely without pretending to try too hard.Also he expresses his faith that God alone knew how nothing else would help him more than hearing from her again. And if she did not have any problem of writing to him, he believes that he would hear from her yet again and also hear less of her telling him that she might be 'tiring' him. By the end of the two letters you will notice how the letters opens without any formal greetings. This is precisely because they wrote and responded to each other very frequently which also explains the familiarity that they shared.

Letter 3:

The next letter is dated 14 June, 1845 in which Browning starts off by referring to all that he remembers of Chapman's lines, much valuable for their quotes and variousstriking epithetsthat he recalls like that of the 'Green Europe' (contrasted with Africa) and images like the Vestal in a vault described in the middle of the piece in which he sees a 'dipping and flickering lamp' and not to forget the foreboding dark that envelopes the reader.

He says that he had read the referred poem several years before and since then had an impression that the versification was good. But from her response feels that Browning may have also overestimated or praised it more than required. And then he poses

the question whether she has discovered or noticed how his continuous stream of thoughts find a flow of expression through his letters. This indicates his growing comfort levels and ease of sharing his thoughts and feelings with Elizabeth Barrett with the passing of time. Then, he jots downhis thoughts regarding his musical abilities, telling her that earlier he had also 'written' music. But his inherent musical talents had gradually begun to slacken over the years remaining bottled up in him perhaps, due to a lack of practice. He then takes to praising the musicality of Elizabeth's poetic verses which is pleasing to his ears than any other modern writer. He expresses his belief that one should study the theory of art in its entirety because according to him, the more one sits to ponder about the 'creative'process; the more it gets rooted as an inspiration.

Sometimes, when suffering a writer's (mental) block, one tends to recall and write down whatever little he remembers through memory or recollection. Reflection he says is always a form of're-presentation', fragmented and scattered like rays at varied angles presenting itself in a new light. He is curious to know how she creates her musical verses that contain her reflections saying that in return he will tell her what goes into his melodies. Thus, in this context of appreciating her writing he asks her "so tell me how these lights are born, if you can!"

To him it is a new feeling to have someone like her who appreciates his verses which he would never be able to like himself. He admits that circumstances were such that he happened to approach others for criticism and at times had to even write some ugly things to warn critics who were too harsh or too uncritical in their criticism of his works. He expresses his desire to quickly complete and send the works of the 'Lyrics', the last four 'Bells', 'Romances', the 'Tragedy' and 'Luna' the following Autumn and that he would go back to his own Poem only after that. In fact, he even decides not to start any new song until he makes a clearance of

these works. Further, he proposes to have his Tragedy transcribed the following mid-week itself.

At the end of the letter, he expresses the happiness he feels from the depth of his soul at the simple thought of her and also thanks God for improving her health. He requests her to atleast gain a partial relief from the improving weather. Although everyone around her would certainly encourage the same, Browning on being her true friendand well-wisher despite the distance,encourages her to feel better as well saying: “But you are better-look so and speak so!” And thus, he closes the letter with a blessing and also jots down a footnote at the end of the letter to tell her that everyone knew quietly that she let him send her flowers along with the letters. And so he sends her their first yellow rose as a symbol of his loving care and their friendship.



13.6 LET US SUM UP

After going through this unit,you must be familiar with the life and works of both Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning who were the leading poets of the Victorian age. Although the unit focuses on the selected letters written by Robert Browning to Elizabeth Barrett, both of them consistently wrote to each other through the years and shared a steady correspondence with each other. The texts of the selected and dated letters reveal their intellectual as well as, emotional side and have been annotated for the ease of your reference.



13.7 FURTHER READING

1) Berdoe, Edward. (1989).*The Browning Cyclopaedia.* New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers.

2) The Project Gutenberg EBook of *The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Barrett*, Vol. 1 (of 2) 1845-1846, Release Date: July 2, 2005 [EBook #16182] eBook or online at www.gutenberg.net

13.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: Robert Browning had developed a rapport with Elizabeth Barrett by way of his 'letters' through which their friendship had transformed into love.

Ans to Q No 2: Elizabeth Barrett as a young lady had suffered from a major accident while riding a horse which had led to serious complications and left her bed-ridden for a long time.

Ans to Q No 3: Their letters reveal intellectual exchanges without leaving out on the emotional, spiritual or even the day-to-day aspects of their life.

Ans to Q No 4: Browning's father had amassed an extensive library of around six thousand books, in several languages and many of these were rare. These were the chief literary resources that gave him an easy access, to develop his literary interests. His father encouraged his children's interests in literature and the arts.

Ans to Q No 5: Both the universities were open to members of the Church of England but his mother's evangelical Protestant faith who did not follow the beliefs of the established Church of England.

Ans to Q No 6: Their regular correspondence slowly developed into a romance and finally they eloped on 12 September 1846.

Ans to Q No 7: The Brownings lived in Italy, residing first in Pisa for a year and then an apartment in Florence (now a museum to their memory). Their only son Robert Wiedermann Barrett Browning nicknamed "Penini" or "Pen" was born in 1849. During the years they lived there, his fascination led him to learn much about Italian art and culture. In his later life he also described Italy as his University. Later, he brought a home in Asolo, outside Venice. While in their Italy home the couple was very comfortable and their relationship together was happy.

Ans to Q No 8: *Pippa Passes* (1841), *A Blot on the Scutcheon* (1843) and *A Soul's Tragedy* (1846).

Ans to Q No 9: "Sordello" is a complex psychological poem about a 13th century troubadour or a travelling poet.

Ans to Q No 10: In 1868, after five years of work, he completed and published the long poem *The Ring and the Book* in blank-verse, which was based on an extremely complex murder case from the Rome of the 1960s.

Ans to Q No 11: The poem is composed of twelve books, with an introduction and conclusion by him and ten lengthy dramatic poems narrated by the various characters in the story, reflecting their responses to the events.

Ans to Q No 12: Browning's fame today, rests mainly on his dramatic monologues in which the dialogic voice conveys not only the setting and action but also reveals the speaker's character. This was the form that he was known to have significantly mastered and innovated in his works.



13.9 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q 1. What is the importance of letter writing as a literary genre? Discuss.

Q 2. Discuss the life and works of Robert Browning with particular reference to some of his letters.

Q 3. Summarise the content of any two letters written by Robert Browning to Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

****