# UNIT 14: ROBERT BROWNING: SELECT LETTERS OF BROWNING II

## UNIT STRUCTURE

14.1 Learning Objectives
14.2 Introduction
14.3 Major Themes
14.4 Style and Language
14.5 Critical Reception
14.6 Let us Sum up
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14.9 Model Questions

## 14.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

- explain the relevant themes pertaining to the letters
- analyse the style and language of Browning in his letters
- appreciate the art and beauty of letter writing

## 14.2 INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit, the learner was introduced to the letter writing as a reflective literary practice, while also unraveling the life and works of Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning along with the text and explanation of selected letters of correspondence between the two writers. The present unit shall take up the aspects of major themes reflected in the text of these prescribed letters, the style and language employed in the letters together with the critical reception of these letters which are considered as timeless literary treasures.

## 14.3 MAJOR THEMES

The following are the important themes available in the letters selected for your study.

**Correspondence Between Two Great Literary Minds:** Letter writing is an intimate form of correspondence. An informal letter in particular, through its detailed mode, allows a letter writer to be more personal and elaborate that goes a long way to bridge any form of communication gap.Both, Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett grew familiar with each other and developed a friendship through their regular correspondence through letter writing. As a whole through his letters to Elizabeth, Browning describes his literary interests and other preoccupations such as the creation of dramatic characters in his work, his critical insights into the literary works of significant writers, his inspiration from classical Greek mythology, his knowledge of a wide-ranging vocabulary, his passionate poetry along with his discussions of the arts in general.

**Confessions of Elizabeth:** The letters to and of Elizabeth Barrett reveal her love for reading, her sensitivity to criticism, her responses to Browning's literary and critical ideas and her opinion of the arts as a laborious process which required patience. In one of her letters dated June 17, 1845, she wrote: "Yes, I quite believe as you do that what is called the 'creative process' in works of Art, is just inspiration and no less."To provide the learner another glimpse of Elizabeth Barrett's writing style, let us take another example of one of her letters to Browning which reads thus: "Headlong I was at first, and headlong I continue—precipitously rushing forward through all manner of nettles and briars instead of keeping the path; guessing at the meaning of unknown words instead of looking into the dictionary—tearing open letters, and never untying a string,—and expecting everything to be done in a minute, and the thunder to be as quick as the lightning." If there was anything that she loved to do, it was as she confesses in her letters to 'write' and to her writing letters were almost like a salvation to her soul.

It was Browning who had mostly initiated their intellectual discussions and opinions. But apart from that, these letters also contained the news of

their regular concerns and their daily lives, the camaraderie that they shared and their feelings towards each other. Thus, the volume of their letters reveal a part of their mind and soul by capturing a promising young man's loving presence and the feminine essence of a tender young soul with a fresh optimism towards life.

**The Significance of the Letters:**The letters exchanged secretly between the two poets Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning reveals the world that they had built for themselves which was enriching and filled with optimism, inspiring and encouraging, cheerful and celebratory. They shared a kind of minds-space through their letters, a place where their minds met despite the distance to engage in intellectual exchanges and inspire in each other spurts of creativity. The letters poured inlike a healing touch to the bed ridden and often unwell Elizabeth who was mostly confined to her room. Her gratitude to Browning also found a reflection in her collection of love sonnets *Sonnets From the Portuguese.* The letters served as the medium through which they grew familiar with each other, developed a strong friendship that lead to their secret marriage and a happy married life of fifteen years.

In the note to the *Letters* (1845-1846) the only son of the Brownings, Robert Wiedermann Barrett Browning (also known as Penini) wrote thus:

"*In considering the question of publishing these letters, which are all that ever passed between my father and mother, for after their marriage they were never separated, it seemed to me that my only alternatives were to allow them to be published or to destroy them. I might, indeed, have left the matter to the decision of others after my death, but that would be evading a responsibility which I feel that I ought to accept. Ever since my mother's death these letters were kept by my father in a certain inlaid box, into which they exactly fitted, and where they have always rested, letter beside letter, each in its consecutive order and numbered on the envelope by his own hand. My father destroyed all the rest of his correspondence, and not long before his death he said, referring to these letters: 'There they are, do with them as you please when I am dead and gone!'*

*A few of the letters are of little or no interest, but their omission would have saved only a few pages, and I think it well that the correspondence should be given in its entirety. I wish to express my gratitude to my father's friend and mine, Mrs. Miller Morison, for her unfailing sympathy and assistance in deciphering some words which had become scarcely legible owing to faded ink.*

*R.B.B.*

1898.

The above letter reveals how Browning after the demise of his wife Elizabeth had meticulously arranged and kept these letters in an inlaid box like memorable keep-sakes without any objective of publishing them. But they eventually found their way to publication in the hands of their young son Robert Barrett Browning. These letters would have been lost if they were not given the importance that they more than deserved. The volume of their letters is a timeless treasure because they contain the significant correspondences of two prominent and talented poets and provide us with a detailed glimpse of not only their daily lives and struggles but also their gifted intellect and unconditional love for each other. Therefore, the volume of their letters issignificant for study as they reveal the minds of two gifted individuals together with their inspiring lives.



**LET US KNOW**

To provide the learner with a glimpse of Elizabeth Barrett's life, here is what she had written to Robert Browning in one of her letters dated March 20, 1845:

*"And what you say of society draws me on to many comparative thoughts of your life and mine. You seem to have drunken of the cup of life full, with the sun shining on it. I have lived only inwardly; or with sorrow, for a strong emotion. Before this seclusion of my illness, I was secluded still, and there are few of the youngest women in the world who have not seen more, heard more, known more, of society, than I, who am scarcely to be called young now. I grew up in the country—had no social*

*opportunities, had my heart in books and poetry, and my experience in reveries. My sympathies drooped towards the ground like an untrained honeysuckle—and but for one, in my own house—but of this I cannot speak. It was a lonely life, growing green like the grass around it. Books and dreams were what I lived in—and domestic life only seemed to buzz gently around, like the bees about the grass. And so time passed, and passed—and afterwards, when my illness came and I seemed to stand at the edge of the world with all done, and no prospect (as appeared at one time) of ever passing the threshold of one room again"*



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q 1.** Discuss the significance of the letters the Brownings had written for each other.

## 14.4 STYLE AND LANGUAGE

As a gifted poet, Browning is remembered for his wide use of the dramatic monologue in his verses. *The Browning Cyclopaedia* (1989) contains an entry on his use of the dramatic monologue which states that "Mr. Browning has so excelled in this particular kind of poetry that it may be fitly called a novelty of his invention" (141). In his writings, he often provided a psychological insight into his characters. It took a long time in his career, for him to be recognised as a great poet because the subjects that he explored hardly found an interest in the readers of his time. Often, they could not relate to his treatment of themes that were complex and obscure. The psychological play that shaped his verses often required him to break the continuity or flow of sentences in order to bring an intensity of emotion. His verses were mostly written on subjects of love, power, intrigue, psychology, class and society.

His musical abilities found a lyrical expression through his poetry, music poems and song compositions. A lyrical element is often present in the monologues and they mostly tend to be narrative or analytical in form.

Browning had employed the dramatic monologue in a variety of forms, be it in the form of letters or written records like *The Ring and the Book* which consisted of twelve books(published in four volumes between 1868-1869).

Browning poured his mind and soul through his letters to Elizabeth Barrett and she too found solace and optimism through his letters. The letters that were exchanged between them were at times, the length of a paragraph and sometimes even ran into several pages containing a flow of their thoughts. These letters reflect the continuity in their conversations through regular letter-writing.Browning often opened his letters with a reference to the previous letter and always ended with a good word, a note of encouragement, appreciation or a simple blessing such as: “I am proud and happy in your friendship—now and ever. May God bless you!”,”Know me for yours” or “Vivifelice—my dear friend, God bless you!” He always assured her of his consistent love and support for her and to quote you a simple example, in one of his letters he writes thus: “For me, going out does me good—reading, writing, and, what is odd,—infinitely most of all, sleeping do me the harm,—never any very great harm. And all the while I am yours.” There is always an easy familiarity in his style of writing to her and with a treasure of his creative expressions such as: “Pomegranates you may cut deep down the middle and see into, but not hearts,—so why should I try and speak?” Although, it must be noted that, it is not as easy to decipher the meaning of each and every letter in the volume without first grasping the context or the subject of discussion as both of them were well read poets. Infact, in one of her letters to Browning, Elizabeth had herself noted: “People say of you and of me, dear Mr. Browning that we love the darkness and use a sphinxine idiom in our talk.”



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q 2.**Why did Browning’s works take time to get recognized?

**Q 3.**For which type of poetry is Browning so famous today?

## 14.5 CRITICAL RECEPTION

Robert Browning is held as the most influential poet of the 19th century although he was more admired than read in his own time. Hugh Walker's influential survey of Victorian literature called *The Age of Tennyson* (1897) had considerably influenced the opinion of literary historians. During his time true appreciation lay with poets such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Algernon Charles Swinburne who had also argued against the common charge of Browning's poetry being too obscure. According to Swinburne, Browning's characteristic work was the purest and highest form of the lyric or dramatic art. And indeed with the passing of time when everything that was 'Victorian' suffered attacks of criticism or rather came under the scanner, the poetical verses of Browning continued to live on among all other poets. A prominent historian and critic, John Forster evaluated Browning's early literary development by emphasising that he had only partially realised his potential.

In 1880s, Samuel Clemens known better as Mark Twain was intensely passionate with the subtle style in Browning's verses. Browning was greatly admired by the modern writers. William Butler Yeats in the final part of his last volume traced his own descent from William Blake, followed by P.B. Shelley and Robert Browning. Ezra Pound had famously acknowledged Browning as his 'poetic father'. And Robert Lowell found Browning's verses as fluid as prose, while he was also one of the favourite poets of Robert Frost. Moreover, Oscar Wilde analysed the narrative and the psychological aspects of Browning's poetry, which had distinguished his verses from other contemporary poets. The letters were very much personal and only published posthumously and although, these are much less a subject of critical discussion in comparison to his poetry, they contain serious critical insights into the intelligent mind of a self-styled poet, Robert Browning.



## 14.6 LET US SUM UP

After a detailed reading of the unit, the learner will be able to explain the themes pertaining to the letters and together with the critical reception be

able to analyse the style and language employed by Browning. Also a study of the letters will enable you to gain an insight on how a wonderful friendship and nurturing relationship had developed between the two poets through the very mode of personal letters and thereby, encourage your appreciation of the beauty in the lost art of letter writing.



## 14.7 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

## 14.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS



**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.

**Ans to Q No 13:** The letters exchanged secretly between the two poets Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning reveals the world that they had built for themselves. They shared a kind of minds-space through their letters, a place where their minds met despite the distance to engage in intellectual exchanges and inspire in each other spurts of creativity.

**Ans to Q No 14:** In his writings, he often provided a psychological insight into his characters. It took a long time in his career, for him to be recognised as a great poet because the subjects that he explored hardly found an interest in the readers of his time.

**Ans to Q No 15:** Dramatic Monologue.



## 14.9 MODEL QUESTIONS

**Q 1.** Explain some of the major themes in the selected letters of Browning.

**Q 2.** Analyse the style and language employed by Robert Browning both in his poems and letters.

**Q 3.** Discuss the critical reception of the works of Robert Browning.

**Q 4.** Briefly describe the developing familiarity and friendship through the correspondence between the two poets Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning.

**Q 5.** How, according to you, the letters of the Brownings throw light on the literary geniuses of each other?

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