

Birth, Parentage and Education

Robert Browning was the son of a scholarly father and non-conformist mother. He was born at Camberwell, a suburb of London, on May 7, 1812. His father, a clerk of the Bank of England, had a library of about six thousands books. His mother was a woman of mixed German and Scotch descent. She loved music and art. So our poet Robert Browning inherited from his parents great love for literature, philosophy, music, and arts. His early education took place at home. At the age of fourteen, he was admitted to a school for young gentlemen at Peckham. Then he was placed under the care of a private tutor. It is said that he had read the great Elizabethan writers, Byron, and Shelley, by the time he was fourteen. Within the next six months, he had also read Keats.

A Budding Poet

At the age of seventeen, he was admitted to University College, Gower Street. There he studied Greek for a term or so. Then he was directed to prepare himself for medical profession. He was also made an apprentice to a doctor of Guy's Hospital, London. But this profession was not to Browning's liking. So he gave it up soon, and decided to read more poetry, and become a poet. His love for poetry and music was so strong that soon he began to compose his own poems. As a boy, he was precocious and intelligent to a high degree. He also loved psycho-analysis of his own soul. Soon he was writing a long, autobiographical poem.

Pauline (1833)

The poem is entitled Pauline. It is written in blank verse. Its diction and constructions are simple and clear. It was published in 1833, as Pauline : A Fragment of A Confession. The poem was admired. But it was criticised for its clear autobiography. So the poet made a vow to write only impersonal poems in the future. The poem also reflected Shelley's influence on the poet's mind. The chief interest of the work lies in its monodramatic style. The poet delights in psycho-analysis. Later it became the chief method of the poet's style, and remained one of his points throughout.

His Travels

In order to widen and mature his vision, Browning then decided to travel widely. In the winter of 1833, he journeyed to Russia in the company of the Consul-General of Russia. He stayed in Russia for about three months, and

then came back to London. Then he began to contribute short poems to The Monthly Repository, a literary magazine of London.

Paracelsus (1835)

In Russia, Browning had made acquaintance with a Frenchman. Browning made him the subject of his next poem in dramatic form. It is entitled Paracelsus. It represents a psychological study of the development of some characters. The poem was published in 1835. The form is openly dramatic. The personae speak personally. The metre is blank verse. It is vigorous and peculiar. Observes Saintsbury : "The blank verse is still more breathless and peculiar; there are lyrics showing some beauty and promising much, and the characters are projected in an entirely novel fashion."

Strafford (1837)

The poet then attempted to write drama. And he wrote a historical play entitled Strafford, at the request of a popular actor, Macready. The play is a tragedy. It was performed at Covent Garden Theatre, in May 1837. It was staged for a few nights and then withdrawn after five nights. It failed to impress the audience because of its little action and much psycho-analysis. About its failure, a critic observes : "Browning's plays are without the particular qualities which make for success on the boards. The tragedy (i.e. Strafford) was withdrawn after five nights." (Ryland)

Sordello (1840)

During the spring of 1838, Browning made a sojourn at Venice. From London to Italy, he journeyed by water, in a ship. During the voyage he also made two beautiful lyrics : Home Thoughts from the Sea, and How They Brought The Good News. Then he got busy with the composition of an important long poem of 6000 lines. It is entitled Sordello. It consists of three thousand heroic couplets. But the poem has been written in a new style. The poet has implied, alluded to, or left to the reader's understanding so much that the poetic thought has become completely obscure. According to one critic, Tennyson said that he could understand only two lines of the poem. Many other poets and writers of Browning's day also found it difficult to understand. Louis Cazamian remarks : "This work cannot be called a poem; rather it is a confused series of invitations to probe and penetrate the subtleties of the writer's mind. A thesis is unfolded by means of a symbolical tale, which, under the mesh-work of so many abstract relations, comes to be almost lost to view."

Dramatist and Poet (1840-46)

During the years 1840-46, Browning wrote a lot of poetic drama and poetry. Under the criticism of being obscure, he wrote a series of clear and delightful poetic plays. Most well-known of them are :

- (a) Pippa Passes (1841)
- (b) King Victor and King Charles (1842)
- (c) The Return of the Druses (1843)
- (d) A Blot in the Scutcheon (1843)

Life and Poetic Career of Robert Browning (1812-1889)

(a) Colombe's Birthday

(1844)

(b) A Soul's Tragedy

(1846)

(c) Luria

(1846)

All of them are remarkable plays with a lot of inner conflict and little action. Critics consider Pippa Passes the best of them. Its special qualities are lyric beauty, insight and passion. "The Song of Pippa", observes Compton-Rickett, "permeates the play; it runs through the drama like a rift of sunshine through a storm-cloud; across the hot and turbid passion of Ottima and Sebald; across the idle chatter of the market-place; across the musings of Lingi, rift between love and patriotism; across the meditation and temptation of the ecclesiastic. Every life is touched by the song, thrilled by the singer. And the crowning charm of the play is that the little factory girl never knows her influence, nor how she has shaped their lives."

During the seven years 1840-46, Browning also composed lyrics of the first water. They appeared together with his plays in eight numbers of the title Bells and Pomegranates (1841-46). Some of them had already been well-known numbers, viz., Dramatic Lyrics (1842), and Dramatic Romances (1845). The two great poems of this period, which caused a lot of discussion among lovers of poetry are My Last Duchess and Porphyria's Lover. They were published in Dramatic Lyrics (1842). Both of them were looked upon as fine dramatic monologues.

Marriage and Migration to Italy

In 1845, Browning met Elizabeth Moulton Barrett. She was a good poet and had already published two works : The Seraphim (1838), and Poems (1844). Her reputation as a poet then stood higher than his own. The two fell in love with each other. She was a very delicate woman. So her father was convinced that she would die soon, if she married any one. But the two young lovers married each other secretly at Marylebone Parish Church, on September 12, 1846. A few days later they left for Italy. There they settled at Florence. In 1849, Browning begot a son who later rose to be a famous painter, Robert Barrett Browning. The poet's marriage proved to be a happy one.

Great Poet : Men and Women (1855)

Browning continued writing poems and dramatic lyrics. In 1850, his two long poems were published. They were : Christmas Eve and Easter Day. They treat of the judgement, the resurrection, and several other Christian beliefs. In 1853, some short dramatic lyrics and a dramatic poem, In A Balcony, came out. But Browning was seriously working to produce a great poetic work. It was entitled Men and Women. It was published in two volumes, in 1855. Its poems brought him great name and fame. It made him one of the two central figures of the Victorian poetry, the other figure being Tennyson. He rose as the more original of the two. His subject was the whole province of the soul. His function as a poet was to investigate this spiritual province. His poems show that his main function is to throw light on the realm of his poetic

Introduction

The term "dramatic monologue" is a kind of poem. It is a poetic form in whose centre there stands a person. He talks to the listener or to himself about something which occupies his mind at the time. The poem consists of his talk. Thus "dramatic monologue" is a poetic composition put into the mouth of a central speaker. This poem consists of the feelings, experiences, and views of that speaker in relation to a particular situation. His utterances are reflective of some spiritual conflict. They also have the vividness of drama. The poetic form is, therefore, called "dramatic monologue." For example, Browning's poem *Porphyria's Lover* is a dramatic monologue. It is a poem complete in itself. The poem consists of the utterance of an imaginary lover standing invisibly in the centre of the poem. So the pronoun "I" in it does not refer to the poet. On the other hand, it refers to the central poetic character. Further, his talking to himself has the force of drama in it. The dramatic element is the spiritual conflict, emotional pressure, etc. It forces him to empty his heart of the emotion weighing it down. Literally, "mono" means "one", and "logue" means "conversation", so that "monologue" means the conversation of one character with a listener or with himself. When it originates from, or is related to some dramatic inner conflict, it is called "dramatic monologue."

Definition

Thus Browning's *dramatic monologue* is a poetic composition which has the force and vividness of drama. It is either spoken by the poet himself as the central speaker of the poem or put into the mouth of one, imaginary, poetic character. A critic has defined it as follows :

"This is a kind of comprehensive soliloquy, absorbing into its substance by the speaker's keenly observant glance, the surrounding scenery and audience, bringing all that is pertinent to the chosen moment by the channels of memory, argument, curiosity and association; adding through the deep-graven lines which habit has incised upon character much of which the soul would feign conceal, or is even more unconscious of the necessity for concealing; and enriching the current of self-revealing speech with the product of any other emotion which may have been powerful enough to share in the fashioning of the critical moment." (W. T. Young)

It is a long definition. Yet it applies only to one kind of Browning's dramatic monologues. It applies to those in which the speaker is only an imaginary character. But in Browning there are also many in which the speaker is the poet himself, as a dramatic singer.

A Silent Listener

Edward Berdoo observes that Browning's dramatic monologue takes for granted the presence of a silent listener. To quote him : "In the dramatic monologue, the presence of a silent second person is supposed, to whom the arguments of the speaker are addressed." W. L. Phelps is also of the same view. So we can presume that the fourth essential of Browning's dramatic monologue is *a silent listener* or *a group of silent listeners*. In some cases, the listener may be the speaker's own questioning self. For example, the poem, *Porphyria's Lover*, stands as an answer to a question of his own gloomy soul. How is it that your own beloved lies dead in your own embrace ? The dramatic monologue consists of the lover's reply to himself. It can be summed up as follows : It was a stormy night. Yet Porphyria came to his room to meet him, against the restraints of society. Immediately she went into his embrace. He was much too happy. But he strangled her to death to keep her his own for ever. Is it not a sin ? In reply to this question, his answer is that God has not said a word as yet, although she was killed hours ago.

Thus, the listener is addressed in an implied form in the text

Browning's Contribution to Dramatic Monologue

The prototype of the dramatic monologue originated in ancient Greek tragedy. It appeared as an emotional reaction to a dramatic situation of a tragic character. The listeners were often fates and gods to whom the speaker's words were addressed to. In England, it appeared as a long soliloquy in Elizabethan drama during the Renaissance. Browning adopted the dramatic monologue in late 1830's. At the initial stage, he experimented with his poetic form, as if it were a soliloquy. Its supreme example is **Porphyria's Lover** (1836). But soon he also introduced into his monologue the concept of a listener. Its supreme example is *My Last Duchess* which appeared in his **Dramatic Lyrics** (1842). Thence his main endeavour was to refine the concept of the listener, and perfect the art-form. In **The Lost Leader** (1845) the concept of the listener appears in a very refined form. It is suggested by "we" at two or three places. Browning has also matured his

antithetic, parenthetic, elliptical, style by the time of the publication of **Dramatic Romances and Lyrics** (1845).

From 1845 to 1854, Browning acquired the poetic skill of constructing the inner structure of his dramatic monologue. He also learnt strokes of artistic style. The dramatic monologues of his **Men and Women** (1855) are supreme examples of this art-form developed and perfected by him. A more polished form of this perfected poetic form appeared in his volume **Dramatic Personae** (1864). The supreme example is afforded by *Rabbi Ben Ezra*. Later he employed the technique of the dramatic monologue in his very long poem **The Ring and The Book** (1869). But, according to critics, the art-form suffered degeneration in that poetic work.

Soliloquy and Conversational

Allen Brockington divides Browning's dramatic monologues into two classes :

"Some of the dramatic monologues are in the form of soliloquy (i.e. talking with oneself), but the majority are conversational—that is to say, there are listeners, and the presence of the listeners affects the talk. Often the remarks of the listeners are indicated by the speaker's answer."

The critic also remarks that Browning's perfecting the dramatic monologue is his original contribution to English poetry : "**Browning did not invent the Monologue, but he perfected it.**" And **Hugh Walker** observes :

"These collections of Monologues form together one of the most precious and profoundly original contributions to the poetic literature of the nineteenth century."

Conclusion

To conclude, Browning's dramatic monologue is a poetic composition put into the mouth of one person and intended to be spoken by him or her alone. The person may be a dramatic apologist—an imaginary character. He may also be the poet himself as a dramatic singer. The essentials of his dramatic monologue are *a central speaker, a critical moment of a dramatic situation, fervent spiritual experience, a silent listener, lyricism, images from Nature and realism, and sparse rugged diction and obscurities*. According to **Hugh Walker**, "Browning did not invent the dramatic monologue, but he made it specially his own, and no one else has ever put such rich and varied material into it." **Walker** also adds that his monologues form together "one of the most precious and profoundly original contributions to the poetic literature of the nineteenth century." According to **Hudson**, the dramatic monologue is "his characteristic art form." To **Cazamian**, "there properly resides the newness of his art."