

PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE IN THE WORKS OF ROBERT BROWNING

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Robert Browning is popular for his philosophy of life and especially for his optimism. He was gifted with an almost unlimited power of imagination which was always exerted upon real things, visible or invisible; that is to say on everything that a human being can think and feel; he is realistic because he is never visionary. He treats of visible realities- the experiences of men and women- and this makes him a philosophic poet. Browning is not a profound thinker in the sense that he takes much on trust, assumes much to be true, and never questions the truth of our basic or innate ideas. He frequently expresses his view on human life. Like Wordsworth and Shelley, he comes to us with a more or less distinct theory of the relation of man to the universe, and exhibits his theory by means of imaginary character and scenes.

In a philosophic poet, we do not expect the rigid consistency or the systematic completeness of the speculative thinker. But we have the right to look for a deeper apprehension of the general truths underlying the visible universe, a greater thoroughness and steadiness of view than that of the plain man. He must go beneath the surface of conventional morality and conventional religion, though he need not provide us with a new system, elaborated in all its details. He was not a profound philosopher. But he had more of the air of a profound philosopher than a poet ought to wear. His occasionally makes uncouth attempts to speak out what he has to say, impress us with the notion that he is striving to utter some truth too deep for ordinary language.

Browning had a strong faith in the immortality of the soul. And he wrote a number of poems on this. *Evelyn Hope* is one of them which show Browning's faith in the power of live and in the immortality of the soul. He represents his firm belief in this poem that no wish remains unfulfilled in heaven. God, the all loving and all rewarding benevolent father of the universe, sees that no dream of a sincere and devoted person should remain unfulfilled. Through a middle aged lover Browning expressed his own philosophy.

The lover in the poem loves a young girl of sixteen years and her name was Evelyn Hope. But she died at the tender age of sixteen. The lover comes in her room. Like a typical hero, he begins to meditate upon the philosophy of human life and death. The fall of the rays of light through the clinks of the shutters is the symbol of the lover's hope for his union with his beloved in the life to come. And this is also the philosophy of Browning:

**Little has yet been changed, I think-
The shutters are shut, no light may pass
Save two long rays through the binge's chink."**

The central interest of the poem lies in the optimism of Browning. Browning was never feared by adversities, misfortune or death. To him failure is the pillar leading to the pinnacle of success. He believes that if he fails on earth. God will surely reward him for his noble deeds in Heaven. These lines show Browning's optimistic view and faith in God:

**"For God above
Is great to grant, as mighty to make,
And creates the love to reward the love."**

Browning wrote some religious poems also in which he expressed his own philosophy of life '*Rabbi Ben Ezra*' is one of them. This poem is rightly considered one of the greatest philosophic poems in English poetry, and is certainly a gem of philosophic wisdom is Browning's poetic output. The poem embodies Browning's philosophy of life and his general attitude towards, youth and old age. It is the manure expression of the poet about man's actual mission in life, and the purpose of man's existence on the earth. It is a poem that can give right guidance to man in the wise conduct of his life, and can help him to attain salvation in his life. It is one of those rare poems that awaken us from our passivity and indifference to spiritual values, and exhort us to devote our time to the strengthening of the soul, rather than wasting our time in the gratification of our bodily and sensual needs. In this poem Browning advises people that they should welcome each misfortune. For it will encourage them to a greater effort. Man should work hard to achieve some moments of joy even at the cost of the pains three times their value. Says Rabbi Ben Ezra:

**"The welcome each rebuff,
That turns earth's smoothness rough**

**Each sting that bids nor sit nor stand but go,
Be our joys three parts pain!"**

So rabbi Ben Ezra advices us as follows:

**"Strive, and hold cheep the strain;
Learn, nor account the pang;
Dare never grudge the thore."**

This poem also shows Browning philosophy on the immortality of the soul. Browning could never belief that death brings the end of the divine spark irradiating human life. God is the potter and the soul is the clay. Both of them endure forever. He says:

**"Fool! all that is at all,
Lasts ever, past recall;
Earth changes; but they soul and God and stand sure.
Time's wheel runs back or stops potter and clay endure."**

Browning's healthy optimism is also exhibited in the poem. Rabbi says:

**"What I aspired to be,
And was not comforts me."**

Browning believes that a man who had failed in a noble struggle was likely to be placed on a higher pedestal in the kingdom of God as compared to the little man who aspired to gain little and succeeded in achieving that little in his life and this faith of Browning was voiced fervently in Rabbi Ben Ezra:

**"Not an the vulgar mass
Called 'work' must sentence pass
Things done, that tool the eye and had price
But all, the world's coarse thumb
And finger failed to plump
So passed in making up the main account,
All instincts immature
All purposes unsure
That weighed not as his work, yet swelled the man's accounts."**

This poem is meant for those persons who consider that the aim of life is merely to live for the gratification of bodily needs. Browning gives a jolt to such thorough going worshippers of the body, and awakens them from their mistaken

conception of life. Browning belief that man is a higher creature than brutes and animals. Man has a soul which is far more elevated than the soul of animal creation. It is necessary for human beings not only to care for their body but also for the elevation of their soul. If a man spends his life in mere eating and drinking and has no consideration for the betterment of his spirit, he is not better than a brute:

**"Poor vaunt of life indeed
Were man but formed to fee
Enjoy, to solely seek and find and feast
As sure an end to men;
Irks care the crop-full bird? Frests doubt the
Maw-crammed beast?"**

Man should not choose to be brutish for he has a divine spark irradiating his being. He should develop his spiritual power and work for his salvation.

'*Andrea Del Sarto*' is another philosophical poem of Browning. It shows Browning's philosophy about the human relationship in the material world. Like Fra Lippo Lippi, it represents another study of the mind of an artist. In this poem Browning represents his philosophy through Andrea Del Sarto. He was a famous artist and he married with Lucrezia. But she married Andrea Del Sarto only for money. The poem represents the relationship between husband and wife in the material world. The poem brings out Browning's optimism, his faith in God, and in the immortality of the human soul. He believes that man can enjoy the good things of life only by believing that they have been created for his enjoyment by God himself. There is also consolation for the erring man that all his mistakes would be rectified in heaven. Andrea Del Sarto hopes to be rewarded in heaven, for being underrated on earth:

**'Tis safer for me, if the award be strict,
That I am something underrated here,
Poor this long while, despired, to speak the truth."**

He emphasized the necessity of keeping high ideals in one's life:

**Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his group,
Or what's heaven for?"**

The poem also throws light on his theory of art. He believes that artistic greatness is not merely a matter of technical perfection; it must also be expressive of

the urge within the artist's soul for the ideal and the unattainable. A great artist must pitch his ideals high, and the ideal must always elude his grasp. Attainment and satisfaction result in complacency; then there is no longer that "Ceaseless Striving" which is the secret of all great art, with a result that a placid grayness overtakes the work of such artists. This was the tragedy of Andrea. He achieved technical perfection and so lacked the inner urge for great achievement. His art lacked 'soul' the fire and glow of passion and inspiration, and so much be ranked inferior to the art of Rafael and Angelo, painters who were for his inferiors in technical excellence.

'*Fra Lippo Lippi*' is the other philosophical poem of Browning which expresses his philosophy on man's acute consciousness of the flesh and blood. The main character of the poem is Fra Lippo Lippi who was much conscious of bodily sex and attraction. But through this painter Fra Lippo Lippi, Browning represents the reality of life. In the following lines Browning preaches Fra Lippo Lippi but indirectly to preach all the painters. He advice painters to paint the inner beauty of man which is called soul not only the outer beauty:

**"Your business is not to catch men with show,
With homage to the perishable clay,
But lift them over it, ignore it all,
Make them forget there's such a thing as flesh,
Your business is to paint the souls of men."**

Here brother Lippo expresses Browning's philosophy that God has made wonderful and beautiful things for the admiration of men. He says:

**... You've seen the field
The beauty and the wonder and the power,
The shapes of things, their colours, lights and shades,
Changes surprises, - God made it all!
For what? Do you feel thankful, ay or no,
For this fair town's face, yonder rivers line,
The mountain round it and the sky above,
Much more the figures of man, women, child,
These are the Frame to? What's it all about?**

**To be passed over, despised; or dwelt upon,
Wondered at?**

Browning believes that awareness of beauty in this world makes us give thanks to God who is responsible for it; beauty is one of God's finest gifts. And in any case, this world is not to be despised; it is a world full of wonder and delight, and all the things we love in it help to draw us to the God who made them. The particular function of art, too, is an important one. Art does not improve on God's creation; what it does is to draw our attention to important things that we might otherwise have missed:

**"For don't you mark, we're made so that we love
First when we see them painted, things we have passed
Perhaps a hundred times nor cared to see."**

He believes that it is right to enjoy this world. It is right to love God because he created it. Religion and morality are well served by a right appreciation of the things in the world:

**... This world's no blot for us,
Nor blank - it means intensely, and means good
To find its meaning is my meat and drink.**

'*Abt Vogler*' is a poem which is based upon music but it also shows Browning's philosophy of life. Browning believes that nothing that is good is ever lost. In the poem *Abt Vogler* is a musician who wishes that his architecture of sound could remain, as remained the magical place that Solomon made the spirits build to please Queen Balkis. But the poet says that the musician need not regret that the music composed in a moment of divine inspiration cannot be remembered; he need not regret that it has been forgotten. Forgotten it is by the man who made it; forgotten it is by the people who heard it; forgotten it is therefore by all mankind. Nevertheless, it is eternal, because the Universal Soul that inspired it never forgets it. The starting of tears on the part of the musician as his palace of sound vanishes is immediately followed by the faith that there shall never be one lost good: what is lost in time will be found again in eternity:

**"All we have willed and hoped or dreamed of good shall exist;
Not its semblance, but itself; no beauty, nor good, nor power
Whose voice has gone forth, but each survives for the melodist**

When eternity affirms the conception of an hour.

The high that proved too high, the heroic for earth too hard,

The passion that left the ground to lose itself in the sky,

Are music sent up to God by the lover and the bard;

Though that he heard it once; we shall hear it by and by."

Browning, dealt with the problem of Evil vis-a-vis human life in which he was intensely interested. Browning was never disheartened by the presence and power of evil, but considered it necessary for the progress of man in his life. He believes that evil checked man from attaining perfection and kept him perfect. It was better that man, struggled to achieve perfection but could not attain it, for perfection is stagnation and 'what is' come to perfect perishes'. Hence Evil provided the necessary balancing force in life and saved from reaching perfection. Evil was no doubt men's foe, but it was a foe without which progress could not have been possible. Evil was therefore a condition of man's moral life, and his moral progress. Evil was a permanent as good and it was man's duty to fight and struggle against the forces of evil believing like Abt Vogler that:

There shall never be one lost good

What was will live as before,

The evil is null, is nought, is silence implying sound

What was good shall be good, with evil so much good more.

De Vane (A Browning Handbook) praises Browning and said:

"It is possibly the poet's highest achievement in metaphysical verse ..." and suggest; **"Perhaps the philosophy of the poem may be said to be Christian Platonic ..."** The philosophy of this poem may be summed up thus: "Beauty and goodness are eternal; each good thing has a place in the unchanging other world and cannot be lost. Evil is a mere negation, and has no objective reality, any more than a shadow between lights or a silence between sounds. This theory of the non-existence of evil has formed the basis of various ethical systems, both ancient and modern. Nothing really great can be achieved in this world. But imperfection here simply means perfection in the other world.

Browning is a poet with a message. However, Browning has no formal message. 'No church, no philosophy', in the technical sense' But he had definite and firm views on human life and human nature, and of the relation of both to God. He

did not belong to any school of philosophy nor was he the disciple of any philosophy. He was immensely interested in life. He had thought deeply and calmly on the problems of life, and had come to certain conclusions about the values of philosophical and spiritual life. His conclusions about life have a philosophical touch and high intellectual approach. He was not moved by the aesthetic movement of his age which believes in art for art's sake. For him art is for life's sake. He was interested in the study of human personality. He suggests his readers to accept life boldly and enjoy it to the brim.

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