

# Robert Browning, Victorian Literature and The Seeds of Feminism

By Coach Peralta

# Robert Browning

Robert Browning is known as one of the great Victorian poets and perhaps the greatest practitioner ever of the dramatic monologue form.

His personal life can be divided into roughly three distinct phases—child/young bachelor, husband, and widower.

\*\*A **dramatic monologue** (q.v.) is any speech of some duration addressed by a character to a second person.

## Robert Browning

Born into a devout family in Camberwell (a southern suburb of London), he was the precocious son of a clerk in the Bank of England, who had given up lucrative employment managing the family sugar plantations in St. Kitts because of his objections to slavery. Browning attended boarding school near Camberwell, then the University of London for a brief period. But he much preferred to pursue his education at home, where he could learn Greek, Latin, and other languages from his bibliophile father and piety, music, and a love of nature from his much-loved Nonconformist mother.

## Robert Browning

In 1845, Browning fell deeply in love with Elizabeth Barrett, who was six years his senior and a semi-invalid, although she was already a renowned poet whose reputation was for many years far greater than Robert's. After an ardent epistolary courtship, Robert and Elizabeth found their commitment to each other thwarted by Elizabeth's jealous and highly possessive father, who came to serve as something of a template for the dominating tyrants that later show up in so many of Robert's poems.

## Robert Browning

The two lovers secretly eloped in 1846, following a daring escape through an upper-story window, and moved to Italy, where they established residence in Florence, beginning one of the most celebrated and devoted marriages in English letters. Elizabeth enjoyed good health and a full life in the warm Mediterranean climate, and Robert also thrived, more at ease among the picturesque landscapes, vivacious street life, and powerful echoes of the Italian Renaissance.

## Robert Browning

After Elizabeth's death in 1861, a distraught Robert quit his beloved Florence and settled in London with his son, who had been born in 1849 and who would become a painter. There he continued his highly prolific poetic output, to much greater fame, but he could never again bring himself to go back to Florence. Robert Browning eventually died in Venice and, after drawing one of the largest funeral crowds of the age, was buried in Westminster Abbey, whereupon an admiring Henry James declared that "none of the great had ever been so strange, none of the strange so great."

## Robert Browning

His volume of poetry, *Men and Women* (1855) garnered hostile notices despite containing some of his greatest poems. Its fifty speaking portraits reveal defective lovers, Renaissance artists, musicians, and religious thinkers, all of whom invite the reader to share and appreciate their worlds and moral crises, even as the reader is obliged to judge their immoral behavior.

## Robert Browning

Drawn to themes both prosaic and violent, Browning had a gift for lyric narrative, as well as for love poetry of great sensuality, all the while experimenting with grotesque rhymes, jaw-breaking diction, and complicated syntax that mimic the incongruous and imperfect world they depict. His dramatic monologues present sensational incidents in sharp detail, with smoldering passions straining just beneath the surface of everyday (and not-so-everyday) reality, constantly unveiling the devious ways of the human mind and the complexity of human motives.



## Victorian Literature

Emerged in England during the reign of Queen Victoria (1837–1901) was diverse in many ways, and defined to a large extent by the historical era rather than any characteristic. More than any characteristic, the reading audience changed during this time as literacy rates rose and the reading of novels for pleasure increased. The popularity of novels created a large market that, in turn, offered more opportunities for authors. Best known for the works of the Brontë sisters and Dickens, Victorian literature goes beyond the moralizing so often associated with it, in many cases combining both imagination and emotion, as well as an effort to reach the newly literate readership.

# The Seeds of Feminism

European and American women in the nineteenth century lived in an age characterized by gender inequality. At the beginning of the century, women enjoyed few of the legal, social, or political rights that are now taken for granted in western countries: they could not vote, could not sue or be sued, could not testify in court, had extremely limited control over personal property after marriage, were rarely granted legal custody of their children in cases of divorce, and were barred from institutions of higher education.

# The Seeds of Feminism

With the rapid growth of business, and migration to cities in the mid 1800's, the family home as the center of economic production was gradually replaced w/workers who earned their living outside the home. In most instances, men were the primary "breadwinners" and women were expected to stay at home to raise children, to clean, to cook, and to provide a haven. Thus the Victorian Age was a time of escalating gender polarization as women were expected to adhere to a rigidly defined sphere of domestic and moral duties, restrictions that women increasingly resisted in the last two-thirds of the

# The Seeds of Feminism

The same societal transformations that were largely responsible for women's status being defined in terms of domesticity and morality also worked to provoke gender consciousness and reform as the roles assigned women became increasingly at odds with social reality. Women on both sides of the Atlantic, including Angelina and Sarah Grimké, Sarah Josepha Hale, Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Frances Power Cobbe, both expressed and influenced the age's expectations for women.