

## PAPER 3, MODULE 9: TEXT

### ROBERT BROWNING

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#### (B) Description of Module

Item	Description of module
Subject Name	English literature
Paper name	Nineteenth Century English Literature
Module title	ROBERT BROWNING
Module ID	MODULE O9
Pre-requisites	The reader is expected to have familiarity with the trends of the romantic age and major poets.
Objectives	To familiarize the reader with the poems and

	persona of ROBERT BROWNING as a poet.
Key words	Robert Browning, Monologue, Limitations, FraLippoLippi, Caliban upon Setebos, Bishop Orders, obscurity

## 9.0 Learning Outcomes

### 9.1 Introduction

### 9.2 Tennyson and Browning – A comparison

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- B. Excerpts
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- A. A critique
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### 9.9 The Bishop Orders His Tomb At Saint Praxed's Church

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**A. A critique**

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**C. Development of thought**

#### **9.11 Self-assessment: Multiple Choice Questions**

#### **9.12 Self-assessment: Long Answer questions.**

#### **9.13 Know More: Bibliography for Further Reading**

### **9.0 Learning Outcomes**

The reader will go through the content on Robert Browning and his four poems. A general introduction will help him in knowing about the dramatic monologue and obscurity. As the reader goes through the content, he will come to know about Browning and his attitude towards society.

Exercises in the form of MCQs and long answer questions will help them in assessing their knowledge. Significant lines from the poems will give them a feel of the text of the four poems.

Bibliography for further reading will motivate them to know more about Browning in detail.

## 9.1 Introduction

Literature enriches, enlightens, elevates and ennobles human life. It is a substitute for religion. The greatness of a writer lies in his powerful and beautiful application of ideas to life – to the question – How to live? English poetry fulfills the cherished vision. English poetry begins with Chaucer. His ‘Prologue to the Canterbury Tales’ is a picture gallery of 14<sup>th</sup> century England. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the poetry was not rich in quality but it was rich in ballads. The 16<sup>th</sup> century was very rich in literary education. The Renaissance movement enriched English poetry as well as English drama. Wyatt and Surrey, Sir Philip Sydney, Daniel, Drayton, Spenser and William Shakespeare were the great poets of this period. This age is also known as Elizabethan age and is particularly famous for the development of drama and poetry.

The 17<sup>th</sup> century is also a leading century regarding the development of English poetry. In the beginning of this century, John Donne and Milton contributed wonderfully to the development of English poetry. Some other metaphysical poets like George Herbert, Richard Crashaw, Henry Vaughan, Thomas Carew, Abraham Cowley and some poets known as Cavalier poets like Robert Herrick, Richard Lovelace and Sir John Suckling also contributed to the outstanding poetry of this age. After the last half of this age was John Dryden whose satiric power and craftsmanship influenced the vast area of English poetry.

The poetry of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, which is also known as ‘Augustan age’, is the product of intelligence, good sense and reason. The most remarkable poet of this age was Alexander Pope who acknowledged Dryden as his master and who was influenced by Boileau, the French poet.

In the second half of this century, there came a new kind of poetry, known as Transitional poetry. James Thomson, Oliver Goldsmith, Thomas Gray, William Collins, William Cowper are some of the transitional poets of this age. William Blake, Burns and Goldsmith laid emphasis on the nature poetry, which paved the way for the romantic poets of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is the most distinguished period in the development of English poetry. This is also known as Romantic age. The chief features of the Romantic poetry were – mystery, interest in past, love of nature, interest in humanity, love for simple and natural life, emphasis in sentiments, emotions and imagination. The chief Romantic poets are William Wordsworth, S.T. Coleridge, P.B. Shelley and John Keats. These were deeply influenced by French Revolution, Hellenism and Medievalism. The last half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is known as the Victorian age.

The Victorian Era (1850 – 1900) witnessed an unprecedented change and progress in all spheres of life. This age was remarkable for material affluence, political awakening, democratic reforms, industrial progress, scientific and mechanical advancement, social unrest, educational expansion, idealism and pessimism. The literature of this period is wonderfully rich and varied in personal quality. Actually, it was an era of turbulent social changes. Man was caught between two worlds – the one dead and the other not yet formed. The new scientific and democratic forces tended towards breaking down the traditional existing order. So, an effort was sought to reconcile the old and the new, to bring about a compromise between science and religion, between the demand for progress and the need of stability, democracy and aristocracy. This happy compromise is

known as 'Victorian Compromise'. This Victorians had resource to a compromise in life and thought. They were not willing to be dominated by one extreme viewpoint.

The Victorian age was essentially the age for Novel just as Elizabethan age was essentially the age of Drama. This Victorian poetry is marked with abundance of output. But there is decline in standards. Tennyson and Browning were the only two great poets who consistently made gigantic efforts to raise the public taste and impart dignity and respectability to the profession of a poet.

### **9.2 Tennyson and Browning – A comparison**

Tennyson and Browning differed from each other as poets. However, combined together, they reflected the entire poetry of the Victorian age. Tennyson exhibited the social, political and religious disturbances of the age in his poetry. Browning maintained complete aloofness from the social, political and religious problems of this age. Tennyson was an Englishman out and out. Patriotism and parochialism were the chief features of his poetry. Browning was a cosmopolitan poet. He was more interested in Italy than in England. Tennyson was a greater artist and craftsman than Browning, while Browning was greater thinker than Tennyson.

Tennyson's poetry is marked with lucidity and clarity of expression, while Browning's poetry with obscurity. Browning stood for the victory of the individual will, while Tennyson held the view that individual will must be suppressed. Tennyson is a poet of Victorian compromise and Browning strikes a note of ardent hope and optimism in the midst of despair, skepticism, doubt

and pessimism. Pessimism became a strong force in English literature of Victorian age. Faith in religion was shaken. There was a total breakdown of values and ideals and poets and writers found themselves caught and confused “Between two worlds, one dead. The other powerless to be born.”

In the given circumstances Browning’s optimism was certainly alien to Victorian spirit and he was dubbed as a blind optimist by a number of contemporaries. Tennyson’s treatment of love was from the same standpoint of spiritualism. He glorified marital love. Browning wrote both on married and unmarried love. They differed in their treatment of Nature. In Tennyson’s poetry, the landscape is more important than man, while in Browning’s world, the individual will is more important than Nature.

### **9.3 Robert Browning: A Biographical sketch**

R. Browning was born on May 7, 1812 at Camberwell. He was educated semi-privately and from an early age, he had an aptitude for studying unusual subjects. Browning was influenced and fascinated by Shelley and his love for liberty and revolt against convention and oppression. It was the example of Shelley that inspired him to dedicate his life to poetry, in the hope of making some striking contribution to the progress of intellectual freedom and the perfection of man. Byron and his comic style also influenced him.

In 1834, Browning for a short period travelled to Russia, then lived in London, where he became acquainted with the leaders of literary and theatrical worlds. During his first visit to Italy (1838),

he came under the influence of Venice, an influence that proved permanent. An interest in the poems of Elizabeth Barrett ripened into love and as her father refused consent to their marriage, they married secretly in September 1846. The remainder of his life was occupied with journeys between England, France and Italy.

Mrs. Browning was six years older than her husband. The period following their marriage was the happiest and most fruitful from the point of view of poetry in Browning's life. Their happy love and the climate and culture and art of Italy blossomed his genius. They stayed on in Italy till Mrs. Browning's death in 1861. Her death was a great loss to him. He came back to England and devoted himself to the education of his son. With time, his grief was softened and he became a constant figure in London society.

#### **9.4 Browning's contribution**

Public recognition came rather late to Browning. His main works may be enlisted as follows:

Pauline (1833) – an experimental introspective poem which shows the influence of Shelley

Paracelsus (1835) – deals with the development of a soul thirsting for knowledge. Dramatic in form and lyric in spirit.

Stafford (1837) – a play



Sordello (1840) – an obscure work on the relationship between art and life.

Bells and Pomegranates (1846) – a collection of dramatic and miscellaneous poems.

Pippa Passes (1841)

King Victor and King Charles (1842)

Dramatic Lyrics (1846) covering a period of 10 years (1836 – 1846)

Dramatic Romances and Lyrics (1845)

Men and Women (1855) – one of his finest works. Consists entirely of dramatic monologues.

The memorable monologues, which appeared in this volume, are: Fra Lippo Lippi, Andrea Del Sarto, Clean, One Word More, Bishop Blonygram's Apology, etc.

Dramatic Personae (1864) – again a collection of dramatic monologues. Famous among them are Caliban upon Setebos, A Death in the Desert, Rabbi Ben Ezra and Abt Vogler.

The Ring and the Book (1869)

Certain people of importance in their Day (1887)

Asolando (1889) – Browning’s last volume. The same year he died and was buried in Westminster Abbey.

### 9.5 Characteristics of Browning’s Poetry

1. **Browning’s optimism** – Browning’s strong message is the triumph of the individual-will over all obstacles. His entire poetry is charged with moral purpose. His is the voice declaring confidently to the world, “I can and I will”. His optimism was a result of experience. His faith was founded on joyful experience, not in the sense that he selected the joyful experiences and ignored the painful ones but in the sense that his joyful experiences selected themselves and stayed in his memory by virtue of their intensity of colour.
2. **Browning, the singer of love** – Browning is an adventurer in the infinite realm of spirit that always kindles with sparks of divine fire, but he does not deny the importance of the senses. He is an ardent singer of the joys of life and also the glory of love. The love he writes of is love between man and woman. The natural end of such love is marriage. He is the poet of wedded love. All love poems of Browning whether dealing with cases of successful love or failure in love end on a note of optimism and triumph. Browning’s attitude towards love is happier and healthier.
3. **Browning as the writer of Dramatic monologues** – Browning’s genius was essentially dramatic. He attempted the monologue form which enabled him enough scope for

representing the inner side of human beings, their mental and moral qualities with great artistic excellence.

What is dramatic monologue?

The dramatic monologue is a miniature drama, a single comprehensive speech of a character.

It is essentially a study of character, of mental states, moral crises, made from the inside psyche. Its mode is predominantly psychological or analytical, meditative or argumentative. A dramatic monologue is very much like a soliloquy – one man's speech – but there is a difference between the two. In a soliloquy, the speaker delivers his own thoughts, without being interrupted or disturbed by objections or propositions of other persons. While in the dramatic monologue, there is the presence of a second person to whom the thought of the speaker are presented, though the second person may not interrupt the speaker. Most of the monologues are of conversational nature.

Browning is not the inventor of the dramatic monologue but he made it specially his own. No one else has ever put such rich and varied material into it. He takes some striking individual, generally at a critical moment and instead of dissecting him from outside, penetrates to the depth of his nature. He compels his character to reveal the innermost secrets of his life through the utterances. His characters do not express themselves in action but are always pre-occupied with introspecting and analyzing themselves. Thus,

psychological insight, analytical subtlety and power of dramatic interpretation are among the main features of Browning's dramatic monologues.

Browning's dramatic monologues portray a wide variety of characters – crooks, cowards, scholars, poets, musicians, dukes, murderers, cheats, etc. The more tangled the character, the more passionate and stormy the experience, the more complicated the story. Browning was more interested in the complexities of motive and unexpectedness of the human behaviour.

4. **Browning's craftsmanship** – Browning is a gifted poetic craftsman. He is matchless in writing dramatic monologues. His artistic principle is that a poet should under no circumstances, sacrifice sense to sound. Hence, he often seems to be careless about music and melody. But when sense and sound combine, as they often do in his poetry, he is able to achieve music more melodious and sweet, than can even be possible for those, who care for sound alone.

Browning uses highly condensed and abbreviated style which often leads to obscurity. His use of the grotesque is usually artificially justified. There is much in the world of nature as well as in the world of man, which is grotesque, fantastic and absurd. Such was Browning's genius that was in harmony with the grotesque and the odd and so he is the greatest poet of the grotesque in English poetry.

## 9.6 Browning's limitations

Browning certainly is a very difficult poet. In his own age, Browning was considered very difficult and obscure and hence could not achieve popularity and recognition like his contemporary Tennyson. Obscurity in Browning's poetry results from a number of reasons. It arises to some extent from his preoccupation with soul dissection or psychological analysis. Extreme compression and condensation of style also contribute to his obscurity. His style is often, telegraphic. His stupendous learning and fondness for Latin quotations and expressions further complicate matters for his readers. In fact, Browning wrote with great rapidity and rush but the language at his command was not in coherence with the same speed of thought and ideas. This condensation of thought is extremely baffling to readers.

## **9.7 My Last Duchess**

### **A. A critique**

'My Last Duchess' is one of the most famous monologues of Browning. It reveals his philosophy and poetic craftsmanship. It is regarded as one of the finest dramatic monologues not only of Browning but in the whole range of English Literature. The poem was included in Dramatic Lyrics (1842) and later in Dramatic Romances (1863).

The speaker is an Italian nobleman coming from a great family famous as the Duke of Ferrara. The Duke of Ferrara is a widower, his last Duchess has died recently and he intends to remarry. The messenger of a neighbouring Count has come to the Duke with the marriage proposal of

Count's daughter. In all possibility, the speaker was Alfonso II, fifth Duke of Ferrara, born in 1553. His young wife Lucrezia di Medici died at the young age of seventeen. It was believed that she was poisoned. Later, he had an Austrian bride, niece of the Count of Tyrol. Innsbruck was the home of the second wife. John Dryden remarks, "The outstanding quality of this short monologue is the terseness and economy with which the dramatic situation is handled. It displays Browning's mastery of irony and understatement. It also demonstrates his remarkable historical imagination, his power of projecting himself into the mood and characters of a past age."

The poem is rich in characterization. It is a kind of character study of the Duke and his Duchess. The tyranny, the pride and self-conceit, the hard-heartedness, the dictatorial attitude and greed of the Duke has been thrown into sharp contrast to the genial and good nature of the Duchess. The poem is written in Heroic couplets. The style is dense and epigrammatic but the poem is lucid and clear.

### **B. Excerpts from the poem**

(1)

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,

Looking as if she were alive. I call

That piece a wonder, now; Fra Pandolf's hands

Worked busily a day, and there she stands.

Will't please you sit and look at her? I said

“Fra Pandolf” by design, for never read  
Strangers like you that pictured countenance,  
The depth and passion of its earnest glance,  
But to myself they turned (since none puts by  
The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)  
And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,  
How such a glance came there; so, not the first  
Are you to turn and ask thus.

(2)

She had  
A heart—how shall I say? — Too soon made glad,  
Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er  
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.  
Sir, 'twas all one! My favour at her breast,  
The dropping of the daylight in the West,  
The bough of cherries some officious fool  
Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule  
She rode with round the terrace—all and each  
Would draw from her alike the approving speech,  
Or blush, at least. She thanked men—good! but thanked  
Somehow—I know not how—as if she ranked  
My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name  
With anybody's gift.

### **C. Development of thought:**

The Duke of Ferrara is a powerful, proud and hard-hearted Italian Duke. He is a widower and intends to marry a second time. The messenger of a neighbouring Count has come to his palace to negotiate with him the marriage of the Count's daughter. The Duke takes him round his picture-gallery and shows to him the portrait of his last Duchess. The portrait is life-like and realistic and the Duke, who is a great lover of arts, is justly proud of it.

The Duke points to particular portrait to the messenger and tells him that only he, the Duke himself, can uncover the picture. Nobody else is allowed to do so. The Duke notices an inquiring look in the eyes of the messenger and at once understands that he wants to know the cause of the deep, passionate look in the eyes of the Duchess. The Duke explains that the deep passion exhibited in the eyes of the Duchess is not the result of any sex-intrigue or guilty love. He did not give her any occasion to be unfaithful to him. Even the portrait on the wall was done not by an ordinary person, but by a monk. Even he was allowed to do it in one single day. The Duke did not want to provide them any chance for intimacy. This indicates that the Duke is a jealous and hot headed tyrant. The poor Duchess could not have enjoyed any freedom of movement, action or speech being the wife of such a man.

The Duke further tells the messenger that his last Duchess was very childish by nature. She was very easily pleased even with trifles. She thanked others even at the slightest service and had no sense of dignity and decorum. For example, the faint blush of joy on her cheek and neck was not



caused by the presence of her husband alone. If the painter happened to mention ordinary things like the cloak covered her waist too much, she would take such remarks as compliments and blush with the pleasure. She had no discrimination. She was the wife of a Duke who belonged to an ancient family, with the hierarchy of nine hundred years. But she considered his costly gifts at par with the trivial gifts by others such as a branch laden with cherries. She smiled and greeted everybody in the same way. He expected better sense from his wife quite reasonably. He did not try to correct her because this would have meant loss of dignity on his part and he could not bear it. Besides, she would have argued and discussed with him. Her habit of smiling continued to grow till it became intolerable to him. At last, he gave orders that her smiles be stopped and, “Then all smiles stopped together”.

Most probably the Duchess was murdered at the command of her brutal husband.

The Duke now changes the subject and talks about his intended marriage with the daughter of the Count, the master of the messenger. Very cunningly he adds that his primary interest is in the fair daughter of the Count but a suitable dowry will not be denied to him.

## **9.8 Fra Lippo Lippi**

### **A. A critique**

‘Fra Lippo Lippi’ is one of the most successful, lively and characteristic of the dramatic monologues of Browning. The poem was first published in the volume called ‘Men and Women’ (1855). It has 392 lines, all blank-verse. The poem might have been inspired by the poet’s visit to

Florence where he saw 'The Coronation of the Virgin', a picture which, in the poem, Fra Lippo promises to paint in six months. The poem is a dramatic presentation of the life and doings of Fra Lippo, the great Italian painter who broke away from the moral and religious tradition in painting and ushered in a more realistic, warm and life-like artistic manner. The poem is admirable for its undercurrent humour, impressionistic descriptions and its imaginative insight into the complex character of the artist. This is Browning's most forceful statement upon the relation of art to life.

### **B. Excerpts from the poem**

(1)

I am poor brother Lippo, by your leave!

You need not clap your torches to my face.

Zooks, what's to blame? You think you see a monk!

What, 'tis past midnight, and you go the rounds,

And here you catch me at an alley's end

Where sportive ladies leave their doors ajar?

The Carmine's my cloister: hunt it up,

Do, — harry out, if you must show your zeal,

Whatever rat, there, haps on his wrong hole,

And nip each softling of a wee white mouse,

Weke, weke, that's crept to keep him company!

Aha, you know your betters! Then, you'll take

Your hand away that's fiddling on my throat,  
And please to know me likewise. Who am I?

(2)

A fine way to paint soul, by painting body  
So ill, the eye can't stop there, must go further  
And can't fare worse! Thus, yellow does for white  
When what you put for yellow's simply black,  
And any sort of meaning looks intense  
When all beside itself means and looks naught.  
Why can't a painter lift each foot in turn,  
Left foot and right foot, go a double step,  
Make his flesh liker and his soul more like,  
Both in their order? Take the prettiest face,  
The Prior's niece ... patron-saint — is it so pretty  
You can't discover if it means hope, fear,  
Sorrow or joy? Won't beauty go with these?

**C. Development of thought:**

The poem dramatically opens in the characteristic manner of Browning's dramatic monologues and the attention of the readers is at once captured. Brother Lippo is arrested by a group of watchmen at mid-night in a lane of ill-repute, frequented by the prostitutes. He is a monk and it is disgraceful enough for him to be caught in this manner. But Lippo has a zest for life and narrates the watchman the story and purpose of his life. He tells the watchman that he is a monk belonging to the Carmine's cloister. He is staying nearby in the palace of Cosimo of the Medici. He feels annoyed at the rude manner of the watchman and asks the leader to teach some manners to his man. He goes on to tell that at night, while he was busy painting as usual, he looked out of the window for fresh air and happened to hear a group of gay young man and woman singing and laughing. As they disappeared round the corner, he came out to have some fun. On his way back to the house of master, they pounced upon him and caught hold of him.

When he was a little child his parents died. He was admitted to a convent to be brought up as a monk. While roaming about in the streets, he began to draw people's faces in his notebooks, on the wall, the bench, the door. Other monks were angry and requested the Friar to expel Lippo from the monastery. But the Friar behaved differently. The learned priest said that he should change his attitude towards painting. The function of the artist is not to pay homage to the human body which is perishable. His function was not to paint the flesh, but the souls of men. The human soul should be the theme of his drawings. Fra Lippo Lippi did not agree with this approach to art and told his listeners (the watch) that the function of the artist was not to ignore the importance of the body and the soul that they deserved.

Fra Lippo further tells that he was now his own master and painted just as he pleased. Even now the words of the priest keep occurring to him and urging him not to dwell too much on the human body. He could not accept the view that the world and life were just a dream, and that the reality lay beyond the physical world. It was for this reason that he sometimes indulged in wild pranks and fooleries of the kind he had played that night in slipping out of the house. He simply could not understand how could any artist ignore the look of the town, the flow of the river, the mountain round it and the sky above, and more than that the figures of men, women and children. He as an artist felt a compulsion to paint all these just as they were, being the works of God.

Fra Lippo Lippi then begs the watchman not to report his escapade. He says that he would make amends for the offence of his misdemeanor in slipping out of the house at night to chase girls. He will require 6 months to complete a painting for Saint Ambrose's church at Florence. In this painting, he will depict God, Virgin Mary, and the child Jesus and some saints. Now he bids goodbye to the watchman and tells them that he does not need any light from their torches as he can find his way back to the house in the darkness.

Thus, the poem is one of the happiest expressions of Browning's belief in art and the joy of living.

## **9.9 The Bishop Orders His Tomb At Saint Praxed's Church**

### **A. A critique**

The poem is one of the finest dramatic monologues of Browning. This was included in the Dramatic Romances and Lyrics (1845). In 1863, it appeared in Men and Women. Saint Praxed's church is an old church in Rome and the poem was inspired by Browning's visit to this church early in October, 1844. Saint Praxed was the daughter of a Roman Senator in the reign of Emperor Antonius Plus in the second century A.D. The poem has a renaissance setting and the dying Bishop, who is the central personage in it, is an imaginary Bishop. At every step, it reveals Browning's knowledge of Renaissance art and history, both secular and religious. Besides being a penetrating character-study of the Bishop, the poem is also remarkable for having captured the very spirit of the Renaissance – the love of colour, pomp and show, love of horses, Greek manuscripts and beautiful women, greed and sensuality.

John Ruskin has remarked about this poem "I know no other piece of modern English prose or poetry in which there is so much told, as in these lines of the Renaissance spirit – its worldliness, inconsistency, pride, hypocrisy, ignorance of itself, a love of art, of luxury and of Good Latin. It is all that I said of the central Renaissance in thirty pages of the Stones of Venice put into as many lines, Browning's being also antecedent work."

### **B. Excerpts from the poem**

(1)

Vanity, saith the preacher, vanity!  
Draw round my bed: is Anselm keeping back?  
Nephews -sons mine ... ah God, I know not! Well —  
She, men would have to be your mother once,  
Old Gandolf envied me, so fair she was!  
What's done is done, and she is dead beside,  
Dead long ago, and I am Bishop since;  
And as she died so must we die ourselves,  
And thence ye may perceive the world's a dream.  
Life, how and what is it? As here I lie  
In this state-chamber, dying by degrees,  
Hours and long hours in the dead night, I ask  
“Do I live, am I dead?” Peace, peace seems all.  
St Praxed's ever was the church for peace;  
And so, about this tomb of mine.

(2)

There, leave me, there!  
For ye have stabbed me with ingratitude  
To death -ye wish it -God, ye wish it! Stone -  
Gritsone, a-crumble! Clammy squares which sweat  
As if the corpse they keep were oozing through -

And no more lapis to delight the world!  
Well, go! I bless ye. Fewer tapers there,  
But in a row: and, going, turn your backs  
- Ay, like departing altar-ministrants,  
And leave me in my church, the church for peace,  
That I may watch at leisure if he leers -  
Old Gandolf, at me, from his onion-stone,  
As still he envied me, so fair she was!

### **C. Development of thought:**

The poem opens with the dying Bishop calling his sons and nephews round his bed to tell them of his last wish. First, he moralizes about the vanity of human life. All human aspirations are vain and they come to nothing. His wife, their mother, was a beautiful woman and Bishop Gandolf, his rival, envied him for having won her love and having married her. But now she was dead and he himself lay dying at the moment. This shows that life on this earth is unreal and unsubstantial like a dream. Next, the Bishop refers to the peaceful atmosphere of the church of Saint Praxed's and then comes to the question of a suitable tomb for himself. There his body would be buried in a tomb made of basalt and over it there would be a decorated canopy made of rare, costly marble. He is happy in the thought that he would have a tomb of the costliest stone, while his rival has a tomb only of a white and yellow stone of cheap variety. The Bishop imagines himself standing on his grave and hearing the sound of St. Praxed preaching on the



mount. But the next moment he notices the look of ingratitude in their eyes, which causes him great pain and he angrily asks them to leave him alone.

The speaker throughout is the dying Bishop and his sons and nephews constitute the group of listeners. The poem is a penetrating psychological study of the emotions that pulsate in the mind and soul of the dying Bishop. Every line which he utters reveals his spiritual bankruptcy. He does not think of salvation of his soul and the next life or of immortality or of God or of heaven as any religious man normally does when faced with death.

### **9.10 Caliban upon Setebos**

#### **A. A critique**

‘Caliban upon Setebos’ is a poem of 295 lines in blank verse, and was first published in ‘Dramatic Personae’ in 1864. The event that inspired Browning to write this poem was certainly his perusal of Darwin’s famous book ‘The Origin of Species’. This set him thinking of the primitive man. Fired by the conception of half-man, half-beast, Browning’s imagination gave shape to the literary anticipation of strange creature – the figure of Caliban in Shakespeare’s well-known tragi-comedy “The Tempest”. In the words of Dr. Vane “Being Browning, he gave Caliban an interest in theology, which Shakespeare’s monster certainly does not have and again, being Browning, he made the poem a timely satire upon all those people, who having no revelation of God, save that afforded by reason, insist upon creating Him in their own human

image without admitting the limitations of their conceptions.” The poem is a masterpiece in the grotesque and certainly one of the most successful attempts of Browning at dramatic poetry.

### **B. Excerpts from the poem**

(1)

Setebos, Setebos, and Setebos!

’Thinketh, He dwellethi’ the cold o’ the moon.

’Thinketh He made it, with the sun to match,

But not the stars; the stars came otherwise;

Only made clouds, winds, meteors, such as that:

Also this isle, what lives and grows thereon,

And snaky sea which rounds and ends the same.

’Thinketh, it came of being ill at ease:

He hated that He cannot change His cold,

Nor cure its ache.

(2)

But wherefore rough, why cold and ill at ease?  
Aha, that is a question! Ask, for that,  
What knows,—the something over Setebos  
That made Him, or He, may be, found and fought;  
Worsted, drove off and did to nothing, perchance.  
There may be something quiet o'er His head,  
Out of His reach, that feels nor joy nor grief,  
Since both derive from weakness in some way.  
I joy because the quails come; would not joy  
Could I bring quails here when I have a mind:  
This Quiet, all it hath a mind to, doth.  
'Esteemeth stars the outposts of its couch,  
But never spends much thought nor care that way.

(3)

'Believeth with the life, the pain shall stop.  
His dam held different, that after death  
He both plagued enemies and feasted friends:  
Idly! He doth His worst in this our life,  
Giving just respite lest we die through pain,  
Saving last pain for the worst, —with which, an end.

Meanwhile, the best way to escape His ire  
Is, not to seem too happy.

### **C. Development of thought:**

The poem is a dramatic monologue in which the speaker throughout is Caliban and through the monologue, he expresses his conception of the God he worships and of whom he lives in constant fear. The poem opens with Caliban talking to himself in the third person, while he sprawls lazily in the mire and thus cheats Prospero and Miranda. He begins to speculate on the Supreme Being – Setebos. He thinks his dwelling place is the cold moon, and that he made the sun and moon, the clouds and the island on which he dwells. He thinks creation was the result of Setebos being ill at ease.

Both the figure and the characteristics of Caliban are vividly portrayed. Caliban is a savage and deformed creature who is well aware of the traits of his own character. He is cruel and likes to exercise whatever power he has in an arbitrary manner. He is averse to work. He is full of spite for Prospero as for almost all creatures who live on the island. He even hates Setebos and wishes the God to meet some evil fate. At the same time, he is terribly afraid of Setebos and falls flat on the ground to worship the God in order to appease his wrath. He believes that only Prospero has the power to please God. So he would like to imitate the actions of Prospero's powers. In the light of these characteristics of Caliban, it is easy to understand the God, Setebos as conceived by the savage creature. Setebos is conceived as being purely arbitrary and capricious. He has no

sense of right and wrong. The only hope for Caliban is that Setebos may change or perhaps grow into that higher power which Caliban calls 'The Quiet'.

There is an undercurrent of grotesque humour in the poem. The very thought of a deformed sub-human creature like Caliban, speculating upon the nature of his deity and conceiving of a supreme power is so amusing. To make Caliban talk of religion and theology is a stroke of genius, possibly only for a poet like Browning. The poem is written in a forceful, lucid style, entirely free from Browning's usual obscurity.

