

VIRTUES AND VICES IN ROBERT BROWNING'S SELECTED POEMS: AN EXPLORATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT:

Optimist, realist and mystic Robert Browning is a great poet of Victorian England. Appeal of his poetic world goes beyond his age. His poetry is pregnant with various types of themes which relate to human mind and behavior. Virtues and vices both play a strenuous role in his poetry. The speakers and the passive listeners of his dramatic monologues expose human virtues and vices very convincingly. Virtues are qualities that are universally considered to be good and desirable in individuals and virtues have high moral values. Honesty, love, forgiveness, compassion, mercy are the great virtues of humans. On the other hand vice is completely the opposite of virtue. Violence, arrogance, excessive pride, dishonesty, sycophancy, deception, cruelty are considered as heinous vices which are very often found in individuals. Browning's poetry deals with human mind and behavior. Browning possesses a keen interest in the presentation of virtues and vices in the characters he created in his poetry. He is dedicated to portray the inner side of human beings, their moral and mental qualities. This article attempts to examine some selected poems of Browning to explore virtues and vices inherent in the character portrayals sketched in his poetry.

Key words: Mystic, virtue, vice, strenuous, pregnant, sycophancy, heinous.

INTRODUCTION:

Robert Browning is a master artist of human mind and soul. Intellectual analysis of human mind and behavior is the theme of the bulk of his poetry. He focuses on the inward thoughts and motives of his characters. He gave less importance to outward conduct and actions of his characters. It is Browning who depicted very beautifully the virtues and vices in the characters he created in his poems. As the greatest love poet of the world he has showcased human virtues and human vices through the characters of his lovers and the beloved. In one hand we find the great virtues like optimism, mercy, compassion, dedication, sacrifice, forgiveness in his love poems. Side by side the vices like cruelty, murder, jealousy, narrow-mindedness, selfishness are also exposed in his love poems. Most of his love poem deals with unhappy and unsuccessful love. Love itself is a virtue in human life but in Browning's love poem it is found that love as a great virtue gives heavenly happiness to the lovers but love brings about untimely death to many beloved in his poetry. In the poem "My Last Duchess" the poet persona has killed his first wife because of jealousy in "Porphyria's Lover" the lover murders the beloved out of sexual jealousy. Loving someone, giving pleasure to someone, having belief in immortality of love- all these are human virtues but murdering someone out of jealousy with a belief to meet after life is a heinous vice.

As a religious poet he has aptly showed both good and evil of human thought and action in his poetries. His place is permanent in the hearts of the readers and a moralist and a religious teacher. Browning propagates that existence of both good and evil survive side by side in human life. He thinks that if man can love, he can also hate. If man can believe, man can also doubt. Man can sacrifice and side by side man can become selfish in individual life and or in social life. However this present paper deals with the virtues and the vices in the characters portrait in five selected poems in Robert Browning they are as follows: "My Last Duchess", "The Last Ride Together", "Evelyn Hope", "Fra Lippo Lippi", "Porphyria's Lover".

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

- 1) This article attempts to examine five selected poems of Robert Browning.

- 2) The article aims to explore the virtues and vices in the characters portrayed in the five poems.

METHODOLOGY:

This article is a qualitative research work. The article follows explorative and analytical method to meet the objectives. The research work is based on primary and secondary data. The texts of the poems have been used for collecting primary data and secondary data has been collected from research journals, edited books and books.

DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS:

This article deals with an exploration of virtues and vices in five selected poems of Browning. The research work is based on primary and secondary data. The researcher has examined all these five poems with an explorative and analytical approach. *“My Last Duchess”* published in 1842 in Browning’s ‘Dramatic Romances’ is a wonderful dramatic monologue in which the Duke is the speaker who tells the readers that he is entertaining and emissary. The Duke is a jealous husband who did not allow his former wife to give any kind of priority to others. Even he expects his wife to show special smile to him. Jealousy, actually, is a common human vice with some exceptions. Out of excessive jealousy he killed his wife with the purpose to stop smiling of his wife at others. The Duke speaks:

*“This grew; I gave commands;
Then all smiles stop together.”¹*

Killing is a criminal offence and the Duke appears as a criminal in the poem. It is a dangerous vice very often found in anti-socials, criminals, terrorists and all kinds of evils. The Duke is an arrogant man and he shows excessive pride about his personality and family status.

Arrogance and excessive pride both are derogatory vices in human life. His arrogance and excessive pride are exposed in the following lines:

*“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.”²*

The Duke conceives a good number of vices. He possesses vices more, virtues less. The poem mainly focuses character and role of the Duke who possesses a good number of vices and virtues and does not have good luck to be found in him.

“The Last Ride Together” is Browning’s wonderful poem. It is a famous dramatic monologue. Here in this poem a rejected lover is found to pray to her beloved to grant his two requests. His first request is that the beloved should remember his love for her and secondly she should approve his aspiration for a last ride together with her. The lady love consented his appeal to his great joy at this achievement the lover thinks that his achievement is superior to that of the poets, soldiers, painters, singers and sculptors. The beloved is found to proud to his achievement. He consoles his shocked heart by considering his last ride together with his beloved as a better one. The lover says:

*“My whole heart rises up to bless
Your name in pride and thankfulness!
Take back the hope you gave,—I claim
Only a memory of the same,*

¹ F. Loucks James and M. Stauffer Andrew, ‘Robert Browning’s Poetry’. 2nd edition, A Norton Critical Edition, London, ISBN- 13: 978-0-393-92600-2. P-84.

² F. Loucks, James and M. Stauffer, Andrew “Robert Browning’s Poetry”. 2nd edition, A Norton Critical Edition, London, ISBN- 13: 978-0-393-92600-2, P-83, 84.

—And this beside, if you will not blame;
Your leave for one more last ride with me.”³

The lover and the beloved ride sitting side by side and the lover experiences a heavenly bliss. His soul is now rejuvenated with joy and happiness though his hopes of success in love are now dead and gone. The lover acknowledges that failure in this world is essential for ultimate success and glorious achievement in the life to come. The lover speaker is robust optimist. He does not lose hope in hopelessness he says:

“Fail I alone, in words and deeds?
Why, all men strive and who succeeds?
We rode; it seem'd my spirit flew,
Saw other regions, cities new,
As the world rush'd by on either side.
I thought,—All labour, yet no less
Bear up beneath their unsuccess.
Look at the end of work, contrast
The petty done, the undone vast,
This present of theirs with the hopeful past!
I hoped she would love me; here we ride.”⁴

Here in this stanza of the poem the lover shares the poet's cheerful optimism, his faith in the immortality of the soul. The intellectual analysis of the stanza makes it clear that the poet speaker is very much realist. He knows that man dreams many but the very few come true. However the researcher finds the great virtues of human life like optimism, honesty, mercy, forgiveness, believe in god, believe in immortality of soul in the poem “*The Last Ride Together*”. The poem also illustrates the human vices such as deception in love, selfishness, failure. Selfishness is vibrant in the following lines:

“I and my mistress, side by side
Shall be together, breathe and ride,
So, one day more am I deified.
Who knows but the world may end to-night?”⁵

Only for making his blissful moment of life and immortal one, the lover craves for sudden end of the world. Really it is nefarious selfishness. Here the lover appears as a self centric one. Deception is found in the prevailing in the first stanza of the poem. The beloved hoaxes the lover and the lover is jilted in his long cherish desire for love.

Robert Browning advocates that human life is far away from being perfect in spite of God pouring his benevolence and benedictions on man. Virtues and vices are the permanent traits of human life. Browning's poem “*Evelyn Hope*” is replete with vice and virtues. In the poem there is an old man who is around forty eight years of age. That old man is deeply I love with a sixteen years old girl. Making a love relation with a girl of incongruous age difference is an offence in the eye of the society and sin in the eye of religion. But it is interesting to learn that there is no transparent lawful tradition and provision regarding age difference between a lover and a beloved. So in normal sense the old lover in this poem commits a wrong in making love with a girl who is one third of his age. It

³ F. Loucks, James and M. Stauffer, Andrew. “Robert Browning's Poetry”. 2nd edition, A Norton Critical Edition, London, ISBN- 13: 978-0-393-92600-2, P-201.

⁴ F. Loucks, James and M. Stauffer, Andrew, ‘Robert Browning's Poetry’. 2nd edition, A Norton Critical Edition, London, ISBN- 13: 978-0-393-92600-2, P-202.

⁵ F. Loucks, James and M. Stauffer, Andrew, ‘Robert Browning's Poetry’. 2nd edition, A Norton Critical Edition, London, ISBN- 13: 978-0-393-92600-2, P-202.

looks really absurd that an old man is in love with a teen girl. The old man believes in divinity and expects that his unflinching faith in his love will be rewarded in the generation to come. His approach to the girl is vice, not a virtue. To love someone is a virtue and the middle aged lover in this poem loves Evelyn passionately and devotedly. There is no vice in the lover in his love for the time. It is very interesting that the aged lover did not tell her of his love for her. Up to this point, the lover seems to be virtuous. It would be a vice if he would make a deep love relation. Evelyn Hope at the tender age of sixteen and the middle aged man comes to her room and pours out his heart in this poignant and moving lyric. Evelyn is dead and old man sits and watches by her bedside for an hour it is his virtue. That he never spoke out his love for the tender girl as she was a mere child. It would have been an injustice and indecent to have done so. The old man's love is true and sincere and his heart is over whelming with love for Evelyn Hope. This aged lover is highly optimistic it is a great virtue of life. He believes that true love can never be futile and vain. He advocates that the true lover on earth are sure to meet, if not in this life at least in the life's to come. He has trust on the mercy of the God:

*"...For God above
Is great to grant, as mighty to make,
And creates the love to reward the love"⁶*

"Evelyn Hope" is a poem of mourning wherein the death of a child of a tender years and the aged lover's expression of grieve at her death touch the hearts of millions and lead them to pity and sympathy. The aged lover places a petal of geranium flower on Evelyn's hand as the symbol of their love. Devotion and sweetness of the aged lover are the great virtues of human life. Apparently the lovers seems to be wrong but at the end it becomes clear that he has virtues more and vices less.

"Fra Lippo Lippi" by Robert Browning is a famous dramatic monologue wherein the speaker is a painter who speaks and analyzes his ideas and thoughts. The speaker is monk who lost his parents when he was a child. He was brought up in a monastery as a monk who later on exposed his talent as a painter. The Prior of the monastery noticed that Lippo might become a great painter and he expects him decorate their church. It is very important to note that the Prior asked him to stop drawing human bodies and advised him to paints the soul of men. The Prior said, "Paint the soul, never mind the legs and arms". Lippo's life itself is a difficult fight which he fought and won the challenge. It is a great human virtue which is conspicuously marked in Lippo's challenging course of life. Lippo was one of the first painters to break with formal traditions of ecclesiastical painting which Fra Angelico and Lorenzo Monaco followed. He was considered the first naturalist and realist in painting. Browning thought that Lippo occupied a prestigious position in the history of art as the harbinger of the new manner of painters. Browning's own philosophy of life has been exposed through Lippo's speech:

*"This world's no bolt for us,
Nor blank, it means intensely, and means good."⁷ (Line 313-314)*

Lippo takes great interest in painting the portraits of contemporaries in his work. The poem is amusing and entertaining one in which Lippo remains cheerful and throughout the poem he speaks in a carefree and almost gay vein. He loves art, painting, man, cheerfulness, joy and entertainment. All these are the great virtues of human life.

Browning's another famous love poem "Porphyria's Lover" illustrates some virtue and some vices. Porphyria is a beautiful young girl who fell in love with a young man. In one stormy night Porphyria came to the lover and gave herself up to him. Really it was a wonderful night which was replete with

⁶ Browning, Robert. "Men and Women and Sordello". Forgotten Books, ISBN- 978-1-331-16369-5. P-14.

⁷ F. Loucks, James and M. Stauffer, Andrew, 'Robert Browning's Poetry'. 2nd edition, A Norton Critical Edition, London, ISBN- 13: 978-0-393-92600-2, P-155.

pleasant experiences. But out of sudden madness with the fringy of love the lover entwined the long yellow hair of the love-smitten girl round her fragile neck. The tragic seen appears the lover strangled her to death. At the time of her murder beautiful Porphyria did not protest. It is evident that the lover loved Porphyria very much he loves her with heart and soul. It is his virtue. He gives heavenly happiness and blissful pleasure to the beloved. It is dedication and devotion in love this is a human virtue the lover shows here. But the murder case is a heinous human vice. The researcher does not accept the murder case as a virtue though there is a supportive logic behind the murder. The researcher thinks that under any situation a lover cannot kill his beloved. It is vice which harms humanity. It is unethical. Complete full dedication in love from the side of the girl is found in the poem. Dedication is great human virtue. Her complete surrender to her lover is sounded in the following lines:

*“No pain felt she;
I am quite sure she felt no pain.
As a shut bud that holds a bee,
I warily oped her lids: again
Laughed the blue eyes without a stain.”⁸*

The speaker in the poem is a lover who has an abnormal mind with the abnormal mind the lover murders his mistress. Whatever logic behind the murder is given by the lover cannot be justified. The lover seems to have religiously legitimate logic behind the murder. He murders his beloved when she (Porphyria) was at the height of luxurious enjoyment of love in his company. This idiosyncrasy of the lover cannot be interpreted and considered as a virtue. Actually it is an obsessive love disorder. It is sexual jealousy in love. The lover suffers from a critical personality disorder which leads him to doubt about the safeguard and purity of her love and sexuality. He thinks that if he kills her there will be no chance for her in being sexually touched by other. The lover apprehends her mistress may lose purity of body and goodness of mind. The poet has offered a chance for the readers to peep into the human soul. The murder proves that the lover is an abnormal one. An authoritative personality disorder is found in the lover. The lover thinks that the God has approved his murder but it is wrong because God loves all equally.

CONCLUSION:

As a poet of human mind Robert Browning showcases virtues and vices in almost all his poems. It has been found in the study that the five poems selected abound in vices like jealousy, arrogance, cruelty, excessive pride, madness, selfishness etc. and virtues like optimism, mercy, compassion, dedication, sacrifice, forgiveness. Browning's poetry approves permission for the readers to penetrate into the minds of various characters and the readers come across some important human virtues and some human vices. His poetry shows the readers that the nature of truth and love of truth, and beauty. The characters in Browning's poetry are of various professions and of various natures having human virtues and vices. In one hand the lovers in Browning's poetry love their beloveds passionately but on the other hand many of them kills their beloveds. Love is a great virtue in human life but hatred and killing of someone are lethal vices which make human life a hell. The Duke in "My Last Duchess" in one hand very sincere in love but he kills his beloved. It is his vice like the Duke the lover in the Evelyn Hope, the lover in 'My Last Duchess', the lover in the 'Porphyria's Lover' and the lover Lippo in 'Fra Lippo Lippi' conceive virtues and vices. The article deals with virtues and vices in five selected poems of Browning. Browning has skillfully exposed human virtues and vices in his poetry. This article needs the objectives of the study.

⁸ F. Loucks, James and M. Stauffer, Andrew, 'Robert Browning's Poetry'. 2nd edition, A Norton Critical Edition, London, ISBN- 13: 978-0-393-92600-2, P-102.

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