

## A Lover-Poet's Voice: The Subjective Mode in Robert Browning's Love Poetry

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### Abstract

The aim of this study is to analyze Browning's love poems "One Word More" and "By the Fireside" from his volume *Men and Women* (1855) for the purpose of illustrating how they reflect Browning's attempt to present the idea of love in a subjective mode in his poetry. In his poetry, Browning does not reckon with the idea of love in abstract terms; rather, he embodies it by referring to the specific details of his love relationship with his wife. In this sense, Browning challenges the reserved, Victorian attitude toward the expression of love in poetry. Such a reserved outlook made it difficult for Browning's contemporaries to externalize their personal feelings of love or to dedicate love poems to loved ones. "One Word More" and "By the Fireside" are the most representative of Browning's subjective love poetry. In "One Word More" Browning addresses his wife in the first person, offering her the whole volume of *Men and Women* as a token of his love. "By the Fireside" reinforces the personal expression of love manifested in "One Word More." The poem explores the intimate atmosphere Browning tries to establish for his wife by describing the places that witnessed the birth of their love and its growth in Italy. Through his use of the first person in the two poems, Browning makes it clear that part of his poetic experience, especially at moments of exalted emotions, has to be expressed in a subjective mode.

**Keywords:** Browning's love poetry, Browning's subjectivity, "By the Fireside", "One Word More", subjective poetry

### A Lover-Poet's Voice: The Subjective Mode in Robert Browning's Love Poetry

Browning's objectivity, especially in his love poetry, has always been a matter of critical debate. Scholars have questioned whether Browning's love poetry is objective or subjective in mode, even if they have not yet come to any definitive conclusions. It is important at this point to consider a suitable definition of subjectivity. William. A. Cohen (2009) attempts a simple definition. He defines subjectivity as "literary writing [that] gives voice to ideas about the correspondence between an interior self and outer form, [and which] describes the internal experience of the self" (p. 6). And he concludes that, "when interiority itself is taken as a subject of cultural studies, it is often treated merely as a synonym for subjectivity" (p. 146). According to Cohen's definition, a subjective writer is mainly concerned with the internal world of his own self rather than the external world of other people; and his writings present an exploration of his personal experience. Browning, too, differentiates between two kinds of poets: the objective and the subjective. In his own words, Jacob Korg (1977) rephrases Browning's comparison:

The objective poet has a superior perception of externals and deals with them ... in a way that is accessible to a broad public, concerning himself with its response rather than with the expression of his own attitudes. His poems say nothing about himself, they are "substantive," separable from his personality, independent creations that speak for themselves. The subjective poet, on the other hand, writes his own thoughts without looking abroad for material; "he digs where he stands," using externals only to the extent that they can embody his ideas. (p. 155)

According to Cohen's definition and Browning's comparison, when a poet deals in his poetry with ideas and situations which correspond to some real incidents in his own life, and when he conveys his personal experience and describes his own feelings, then his poetry is unequivocally interior or subjective.

Some scholars hold the view that Browning's poetry exposes his intense objectivity. Britta Martens (2005), for instance, argues that "Browning assumes that poetry can ... act as a quasi-transparent means of self-expression, while he considers himself as yet unable to reveal his self in his poetry" (p. 76). Thus, Martens concludes that "Browning cannot and will not reveal his private self in public poetry" (p. 94). Similarly, Carol T. Christ (2007) claims that Browning's objectivity allows him to extend the purview and relevance of his poetry:

Modern poetry represented the individual sensibility, a sensibility that had become alienated from society. Browning makes this a dramatic situation; he frees the poet from the burden of alienated subjectivity by attributing it to a specific character and thereby extends poetry's representational range .... [He] transforms the universal subjectivity of Romanticism, in which the 'I' of the poet claims to represent each of us, to a dramatic representation of individual psychology that treats any such claim with irony. (p. 6)

On the other hand, there is a second group of critics who emphasize the subjectivity of Robert Browning. John Bryson (1979), for example, asserts that "we hear Browning's own voice" in the middle of his poems (p. 23). Similarly, Hiram Corson (2013) describes Browning's poetry as "being

the most complexly subjective of all English poetry and, for that reason alone, the most difficult" (p. v). Browning (2013) himself did not deny his subjectivity; rather, in one of his letters to Elizabeth Barrett, he indirectly describes it as self-consciousness:

... the language with which I talk to myself ... is spiritual Attic, and "loves contractions," as grammarians say; but I read it myself, and well know what it means, that's why I told you I was self-conscious – I meant that I never yet mistook my own feelings, one for another. (*Letters I*, p.41)

In his love poetry, as illustrated in "One Word More" and "By the Fireside," Browning makes use of his personal love experience and treats it as the source from which his poetic vision emerges.

A third party of critics, however, takes a middle stance between the two opposing points of view, arguing that Browning's poetry is objective at certain times and subjective at others. Both J. M. Cohen (1964) and William Clyde DeVane (1977) adopt this view. Cohen (1964) believes that Browning's characters are "mouthpieces to express various attitudes to life ... all, no doubt, his own at certain times and under certain circumstances" (p. 4). Likewise, DeVane (1977) divides Browning's poetry into two stages of development: the first is the earlier poetry which includes *Pauline* (1833), *Paracelsus* (1835) and *Sordello* (1840); and the second is the later poetry, including *Ferishtah's Fancies* (1884), *Parleyings with Certain People of Importance In Their Day* (1887) and *Asolando* (1889). Based on this division, DeVane finds "the earlier Browning objective and dramatic, and the later speaking in his own voice" (p. xiii). In other words, Browning's poetry shifts from objective to subjective over the course of his career as a poet.

Derek Colville (1970), however, offers an alternative interpretation, one that is at odds with DeVane's. He argues that Browning's early poetry is subjective: "[Browning's] earliest sustained poems ... had not been objective; what is obviously the poet's own feeling shows through action and character" (p. 141). Browning's determination to write from an exclusively objective position corroborates Colville's argument: after the publication of his first subjective work *Pauline: A Fragment of a Confession* in 1833, Browning promised "never to confess his own emotions again in his poetry but to write objectively" (Luebering 2010, p. 168). The diversity of all such views implies the difficulty of a critic's task in determining the objectivity or subjectivity of Browning. Colville (1970) thus concludes:

It is, therefore, perhaps the thorniest general problem in this poet's work to assess how far his characters speak with his very self and voice. Any consideration of Browning which looks towards his cast of mind must face this problem. It is not solved by surveying the assorted reactions of Browning's literary critics, for they show almost every variation possible. (p. 125)

The aim of this study, therefore, is to analyze Browning's love poems "One Word More" and "By the Fireside" from his volume *Men and Women* (1855) for the purpose of illustrating how they reflect Browning's attempt to present the idea of love in a subjective mode in his poetry. Among the poems of *Men and Women* "One Word More" and "By the Fireside" are the major focus of the study as they are the most representative of Browning's subjective poetry. They reveal Browning's view of ideal love within the Victorian poetic context. They also demonstrate how "implicitly (By the Fireside) or explicitly (One Word More) he broke his rule and spoke of himself and of his love for

his wife" (Luebering 2010, p. 170). These two poems are also significant in the sense that they are supposed to be the starting point of Browning's journey into the experience of other people's relationships as explored in the other poems of the same volume. Hence, Stopford A. Brooke (2013) regards both poems as "personal poems on Love" while the other poems in the volume are regarded as "impersonal poems about love" (p. 252). Moreover, both poems have one common element, namely, the voice of Browning himself. Jyoti Sheokand and Sandhya Saxena (2011) make a distinction between the two poems on one side and the other poems of the same volume on the other side:

Browning wrote poetry, broadly speaking, of two kinds of love poems – personal and dramatic. Though his personal poems are very few, yet, he poured out his personal experiences in the form of verse fully. "By the Fireside" and "One Word More" are a few poems that can surpass the passion of love and where the veil of reserve is lifted to reveal the poet's personal feelings for his wife. However, most of the other poems by Browning dealing with love are dramatic in essence. In each, there is a certain situation and revelation of the emotions of a character placed in the situation. (n. p.)

Thus, unlike the other poems in *Men and Women*, in "One Word More" and "By the Fireside" Browning presents a real, rather than dramatic, love experience with himself as lover addressing his beloved wife.

"One Word More" is a personal poem that is representative of all the love experiences expressed in the volume. According to John Trivett Nettleship (2013), "every artist who lives and loves a woman, desires to honor her by employing some highest attribute of his nature ... in order to produce a work which shall give her delight" (p. 36). Accordingly, Browning speaks in first person, addressing his wife and offering her the whole volume of *Men and Women* as an expression of his love. This is exactly what Korg (1977) emphasizes in his comment on the poem:

In "One Word More" Browning comes out on the stage after the curtain has been brought down on the prevailing dramatic poems of *Men and Women* to say a personal word; it is addressed to Elizabeth, dated and signed with his initials, and we may be sure that ... Browning is describing an actual situation, not an imagined one. (p. 157)

"By the Fireside," on the other hand, explores the intimate atmosphere Browning tries to establish for his wife by describing the places that witnessed the birth of their love and its growth in Italy. According to Charles Harold Herford (2009), the poem is "memorable as portraying ... the Italian home-life of the poet and his wife" (p. 136). Furthermore, the poem focuses on a significant moment of union during which the two lovers remember their past, contemplate their present, and hope the best for the future of their married life.

Browning's subjectivity finds its relevant context in the poems of his volume *Men and Women*. Here Browning is obviously inspired by his own love affair, one from which he selects certain experiences as well as feelings in order to externalize them in his poetry. "*Men and Women*," as Stefan Hawlin (2005) rightly remarks, "is striking for the way it explores a subjective, literary, inner world, focused on the intimacies of love" (p. 81). Browning renders himself a poet of intense emotion. He also presents himself as a poet who is primarily concerned with probing the self and approaching the reality of life through an exploration of life's experiences on a personal level. What is particularly significant about Browning's expression of the passion of love in his poetry is what G.

K. Chesterton (2012) describes as "Browning's astonishing realism in love poetry" (p. 48). Chesterton argues that in Browning's poetry "there is nothing so fiercely realistic as sentiment and emotion" (p. 48). Here lies the importance of the poet's subjectivity in communicating his real emotions: the poet's personal experience of love determines the realistic quality of his love poetry. Chesterton (2012) writes:

... sentiment must have reality; emotion demands the real fields, the real widows' homes, the real corpse, and the real woman. And therefore Browning's love poetry is the finest love poetry in the world, because it does not talk about raptures and ideals and gates of heaven, but about window-panes and gloves and garden walls. It does not deal much with abstractions; it is the truest of all love poetry, because it does not speak much about love. (p. 49)

Chesterton's argument is plausible because Browning's love poetry does not treat love in abstract terms. Rather, Browning embodies the emotion of love through specific details of a personal love relationship between himself as lover-poet and his beloved wife. This makes us aware of the sincerity of his sentiment and it adds vividness, charm, and realism to the poetry.

Browning's subjective mode is particularly evident in his identification with the lovers in *Men and Women*. Referring to the effect of Browning's married life on writing this volume, Elizabeth Luther Cary (2010) comments:

To the singular perfection of his married life we must also credit much of Browning's wisdom concerning "the institution of the dear love of comrades." He was qualified, certainly, to understand the comradeship possible between a man and a woman where the two natures are fundamentally alike, and mutual respect and comprehension can join forces with depth of feeling. (p. 113)

Here, Cary attributes mutual understanding and the intimacy of the love relationships that Browning explores in detail in *Men and Women* to what she describes as "the singular perfection of his married life" (p. 113). In this sense, Browning's perfection on the personal level enables him to have a perfect delineation of the lovers in *Men and Women*.

Furthermore, *Men and Women* reflects Browning's endeavor to challenge the reserved Victorian attitude toward the direct expression of love in poetry. Victorian poetry consistently treats love as a highly dignified emotion, even if Victorian poets themselves were somewhat reserved in their treatment of personal love in their poetry. In other words, Victorian poets never externalized the personal feelings of love in any explicit way. They neither addressed their readers directly nor dedicated love poems to their loved ones. Bernard Arthur Richards (2001) attempts to justify these authorial choices:

Victorian poets were living in a time when political and philosophical emphasis was increasingly being placed on individualism. The individual 'taste' of a human being ... was to be cherished and revered. Individual liberties were to flourish – so long as they did not grossly interfere with the lives of others. The impact of this on the love relationship was to emphasize the preciousness of signal identities. The rhetoric of

complete fusion and merging survives, but the style of loving we find most amenable respects distinctness and even opposition. (p. 110)

Here, the phrase "individual liberties" refers to the Victorian social norms people followed in their life. The most distinctive of these norms is the absence of dating as well as keeping each unmarried young woman in the company of a social chaperone to "make sure that men treated her young charge with respect [and to] take her out in society so that she would make adult friends and be introduced to appropriate men" (Mitchell 1996, p. 155). Such norms made it difficult for writers to express their personal feelings of love in public. The poets' reticence in expressing their love openly is due to their fear of being rejected or their fear of imposing their personal feelings on the public. One more example of such social norms is manifested in Stephen Kern's (1998) description of how people confessed love to the Victorian community:

[People] observed distinctively male and female rhetorical formalities, delayed use of familiar pronouns until protocol allowed, followed the proper sequence for avowals with the man's coming first, relied on mediators and written communication (even for marriage proposals), veiled powerful feelings with euphemism and cliché, and avoided talking about sex. (p.118)

Nevertheless, Browning, both as lover and a poet, was able to break away from these social norms. This is clearly demonstrated in his ability to express his love for his wife openly in *Men and Women*. Hawlin (2005) points out the difference between the way love is treated in Browning's lyrics and literary works by other Victorian writers:

[Browning's] lyrics are largely unconcerned with marriage or relationships as a public or social fact. They do not look outwards to the social or communitarian implications of marriage, nor even to the liberal view of marriage as 'a building block of society'. To put it baldly, the way in which relationships feature here is very different from the way in which they generally feature in nineteenth-century novels, where, of necessity, they are treated within a wider social context. These poems are focused on the inside of relationships, their privacy. At times, there is an anti-social pull implicit in them because of the way in which they focus in on the details of intimacy .... There can be no doubt that the intimacy and isolation of the Brownings' own marriage as it worked itself out in Italy – far from family and English society – contributed to this aspect of the love lyrics. (p. 96)

The uniqueness of Browning's love lyrics is due to his personal belief in the transformative power of love as well as his belief in a love of a loftier type. This is partly what distinguishes him among his contemporaries. James Fotheringham (2013) confirms Browning's uniqueness:

On the face of matters, it may seem as if he stood alone, with an energy that required no outside influences, and an individuality that resisted them; so bent on speaking his own mind in his own way, that he has stood apart from his contemporaries in their interests and forms of art. It seems impossible to place him among them, or to classify his work with theirs. (p. 57)

Thus, it is important for such a poet to seek the type of love he always dreamed of and idealized, finding it in the sacred bond of marriage that lasts forever. This idea of permanent, transcendental love is based on Browning's own love for his wife.

In "One Word More" Browning presents love as an emotional power that is capable of revealing one's true devotion and constancy. In this sense, he explores love in order to discover the best in it. Through his love for his wife, he manifests this type of ideal love that draws lovers closer to each other. It is significant to note that the Brownings were first attached to each other by their mutual interest in each other's poetry. This is evident in one of Browning's letters to his wife, immediately written after their first meeting. In this letter Browning (2013) asserts: "I love your work with all my heart and I love you too" (Letters I, pp. 1-2). The Brownings' admiration for each other's verse represents the unifying element that brings them together. Luebering (2010) explains how they started their relationship and how it developed until they got married in 1846:

In 1845 (Browning) met Elizabeth Barrett. In her *Poems* (1844) Barrett had included lines praising Browning, who wrote to thank her (January 1845). In May they met and soon discovered their love for each other. Barrett had, however, been for many years an invalid, confined to her room and thought incurable. Her father, moreover, was a dominant and selfish man, jealously fond of his daughter, who in turn had come to depend on his love. When her doctors ordered her to Italy for her health and her father refused to allow her to go, the lovers, who had been corresponding and meeting regularly, were forced to act. They were married secretly in September 1846; a week later they left for Pisa. (p. 170)

What makes the personal aspect evident in "One Word More" is the fact that Browning himself speaks in the first person addressing his beloved wife: "Let me speak this once in my true person" (XIV. 137). Personal love is also apparent in various places and images throughout the poem, which provides us with enough evidence of Browning's presence in the poem. Furthermore, Browning dedicates the poem to his wife, making it a public declaration of his love. Martens (2005) asserts:

"One Word More" is generally considered to be the one indisputable instance of Browning's disclosure of his private self. The immediate paratext surrounding the poem furnishes ample evidence of its personal nature: the dedication "To E. B. B." after the title, the date "1855" – a unique case among the shorter poems – and the addition of the signature "R. B." in the editions after E. B. B.'s death. (p. 89)

Moreover, Frank Walters (2011) explains how Browning himself intends to offer the poem as a personal expression of his own love:

In "One Word More", [Browning] longs to give his wife some proof of his love which shall be unique, a sacred gift quite different from the things which the world reviews and criticizes, the painter, Rafael, made "a century of sonnets" when he learnt to love a woman; the poet Dante, urged by his passion for Beatrice, painted the picture of an angel; and Browning thinks that there is a sacredness about those sonnets and beauty of all the productions which they bequeathed to the world. He, the dramatic poet, cannot do anything more than dedicate his verse to his beloved; but, for her sake, he will, for a

moment, drop the mask of dramatic utterance, and attune his lines to a sweeter tone, as he speaks to her directly of his pure devotion. (pp. 19-20)

In this sense, "One Word More" is regarded as a token of love; indeed, it reveals the intensity of Browning's love for his wife. He asks his wife to read about the gifts offered by Rafael and Dante to their beloved women and to compare those gifts with his own:

Take them, Love, the book and me together;  
Where the heart lies, let the brain lie also. (I. 3-4)

Browning is a poet. Therefore, one of the best gifts he can offer his wife is a poem. Rafael and Dante produce gifts for their beloved ones by using their skills in other fields. In other words, Rafael, the painter, wrote his Madonna sonnets while Dante, the poet, made a painting for Beatrice. It is the transformative power of love that enabled the two artists to excel in trades different from their own. As for Rafael, his love for Madonna made a poet of him. Thus, he:

... made a century of sonnets,  
Made and wrote them in a certain volume (II. 5-6)

It is significant to notice that Browning's wife is asked to read about Rafael's sonnets addressed to his beloved Madonna rather than to look upon his famous paintings. Elizabeth Barrett is supposed to appreciate Rafael's sonnets because a man, who fell deeply in love and, in his attempt to please his beloved, offered her something unique writes them. since they are written by a man who fell deeply in love and in his attempt to please his beloved offered her something unique. It is an expression of love made through the effect of Madonna's love on him.

On the other hand, the power of love gives Dante, who is a poet by profession, the ability to excel in painting:

Dante once prepared to paint an angel:  
Whom to please? You whisper "Beatrice." (V. 32 – 33)

Dante's determination to express his love turns him into a painter. The metamorphic power of love combined with the lover's willingness to please his beloved produces a remarkable piece of art. Nonetheless, Browning and his wife "would rather see the angel" that Dante painted than read "a fresh Inferno":

You and I would rather see that angel,  
Painted by the tenderness of Dante,  
Would we not? - than read a fresh Inferno. (VI. 50-52)

Comparing himself to Dante, Rafael and other great lovers, Browning, by writing his poem, shows his ability to express his love for his wife. Like them, he proves to be sincere and unique in his expression of love. Further, he promises to be constant in his love throughout his life and to dedicate the best of his verses to his wife:

I shall never, in the years remaining,  
Paint you pictures, no, nor carve you statues.

.....  
This of verse alone, one life allows me;  
Verse and nothing else have I to give you; (XII, 109-114)

Throughout the poem Browning uses a personal, unique language that helps him address his beloved in a more intimate way. One example is when he addresses his wife as his "moon of poets" (XVIII. 188). Browning uses the symbol of the moon repeatedly in three consecutive stanzas (XVI, XVII, XVIII) to express his love for his wife. Part of this symbolic use of the moon is Browning's description of how the moon embodies his inner self. This is clear when he describes himself as "the moon's self" (XV. 144). Lee Erickson (1984) explains the significance of this symbolic description of the moon:

The moon (which) is usually an image of otherness, becomes an image of the self. Browning supposes he is 'the moon's self', not only in the sense of being 'thrice transfigured' and waxing and waning according to his poetic inspiration by borrowing from another (l. 144-56) but also in the sense of remaining unknown to others, just as the moon never revealed her other side to Zoroaster, Galileo, Homer, or Keats (l. 161-65). And he imagines that seeing the other side of the moon would be equivalent to seeing God in the way that Moses, Aaron, Nadab and Abihu did (l. 174-79). The other side of the moon, then, ... symbolizes the artist's private self. The moon's other side, its hidden self, cannot be seen by the public or Elizabeth unless ... the moon falls in love and turns "a new side to her mortal" (l. 161). (p. 164)

The image of the moon, as Erickson's argument suggests, is significant in the sense that it shows the effect of Elizabeth Barrett's love on the poet. She represents the source of the poet's life. To him, she represents a moon with two sides: one is public reflected in her poetry while the other is private manifested in their relationship.

In "One Word More" Browning invites his wife to read the fifty poems of *Men and Women* and explains how she should read the poetry:

Pray you, look on these my men and women,  
Take and keep my fifty poems finished;  
Where my heart lies, let my brain lie also! (XIV. 140–142)

The first suggestion is that his wife should take the poem as a sign of his love. Furthermore, Browning assures her: "He who writes, may write for one as I do" (XIII. 128). She, for her part, should regard the poems as fifty lovers whose relationships may succeed or fail. In this sense, she is invited to "enter" (XIV. 131) into the experiences of all of subjects in the poems:

Love, you saw me gather men and women,  
Live or dead or fashioned by my fancy,  
Enter each and all, and use their service (XIV. 129 – 31)

In the poems of *Men and Women*, Browning never personalizes his expression of the passion of love. The feelings, actions and speech are not his own. "One Word More" and "By the Fireside" are the only exceptions. According to Franklin T. Baker (2011), what characterizes "One Word More" is the fact that "the poet speaks for himself in the first person, and not, as usual, dramatically in the third person" (p. 268). The poem, therefore, reveals Browning's subjective mode at its best. It is personal, addressed in his own voice, directly dedicated to his wife and is full of situations and experiences that are significant to the two lovers.

"By the Fireside" reinforces the personal expression of love manifested in "One Word More" by creating an intimate atmosphere for Browning's love for his wife. The poem, in a semi-autobiographical fashion, describes a mountain journey the Brownings made in Italy. Their journey reaches its highest emotional intensity the moment they reach a ruined chapel on top of the mountain. This is the when they move from an earthly level of existence to a spiritual level of sublimity, a level achieved by the union of their souls. The poem conveys a sense of intimacy between the two lovers and their world, and, consequently, turns out to be personal, true and subjective. Richard S. Kennedy and Donald S. Hair (2007) confirm these characteristics in their comment on the poem:

[It] is a major love poem ... that has many personal associations for Robert Browning. The poem begins and ends with a scene in which a husband sitting by the fireside meditates on the occasion that led to his marriage, while his wife, Leonor, sits quietly reading by his side, with "that great brow / And the spirit-small hand propping it" (113-14; a clear picture of Elizabeth Barrett Browning). The poem took its rise from the serene winter period of closeness that the Brownings experienced after the two years of intense literary and social activity in Paris and London. The principal action in the poem draws upon scenes reminiscent of the area around Bagni di Lucca, which the speaker describes from memory. (p. 235)

Kennedy and Hair's argument highlights the intimacy and the personal note that characterizes the poem. The poet asks his wife to remember the place and the affections associated with it:

Look at the ruined chapel again  
Half-way up in the Alpine gorge! (VII. 31 -32)

He brings the full details of the scene, including the lake and the woods, to her attention:

The woods are round us, heaped and dim;  
From slab to slab how it slips and springs,  
The thread of water single and slim,  
Through the ravage some torrent brings! (VIII. 37 – 40 )

In addressing his wife, Browning uses affectionate language, suggesting a sense of devotion:

Oh heart, my own, oh eyes, mine too,  
Whom else could I dare look backward for,  
With whom beside should I dare pursue  
The path grey heads abhor? (XXI. 102–105)

The poet enjoys comfort and safety in the company of his wife to the extent that he is fearless of old age. This is why he is ready to take the "path" that his wife has chosen for him.

While contemplating the path he followed in life, the lover-poet recollects the history of their loving relationship. Here lies the significance of time in the poem:

My own, confirm me! If I tread  
This path back, is it not in pride  
To think how little I dreamed it led  
To an age so blest... (XXV. 121–24)

The word "age" in these lines refers to a significant moment in the lovers' life. The contemplation of this moment immediately takes Browning and his wife into the future of their relationship. Then the poet moves back to contemplate the initial moment that represents the beginning of their relationship and expresses admiration for this moment, since the experience of his old age have enriched it. In his comment on the poem, Edward Dowden (2013) stresses the significance of time. For him, the poem represents "the love which completes the individual life and at the same time incorporates it with the life of humanity, which unites as one the past and the present, and which ... becomes a pledge for futurity" (p. 183). According to Dowden, the power of love unifies the different aspects of time into one whole to intensify the lovers' sense of joy. The movement of time in the poem assumes a circular shape starting from home and coming back to home. Browning explores their whole past, present and future. The past is "the waste" (XXV. 125) while the present is associated with the act of remembering. The future, for the poet, is brighter because his life will be blessed by his wife's presence with her "pleasant hue" (I. 3).

In addition to time, another significant element in the poem is place. Browning invokes two types of places: the house representing the inside location and the woods representing the outside landscape. Eleanor Cook (1974) explains the significance of place arguing that "everything radiates out from the central circle of household, wife and hearth-fire; and this outward movement is the mark of the favorable love affair in Browning" (p. 133). The use of this harmonious, romantic setting serves to reinforce Browning's description of their mutual understanding:

At first, 'twas something our two souls  
Should mix as mists do; each is sucked  
In each now... (XXVI. 127–29)

At the moment of their union, the lovers' physical world changes into a spiritual realm of fulfillment in which their two loving souls are "mixed at last" (XLVII. 234) and "each is sucked / In each" (XXVI. 128-29). This is exactly what the lovers long for. It is their highest emotional fulfillment in love or what Kennedy and Hair (2007) describe as Browning's "concept of the 'infinite moment,' a phrase he would continue to employ in later poems to describe the heightened sense of mutual discovery in love" (p. 235). The moment of their union is described here as 'infinite' since it has no relation to a specific period of time; rather, it unifies the elements of time (past, present and future) into one permanent whole in the same manner that the lover's souls are unified into one entity.

The scene the poem describes is symbolic. This scene indicates that the most important moment in a couple's life is the moment of union, a moment that is distinguished by mutual

understanding between the two lovers. The speaker, now middle-aged, is reading Greek near the fireside. It is true that he is restricted by the narrow space of the room, but his mind is free to meander through various times and places. Thus, he lives on the memory of the happy life he has enjoyed in his youth. The description of this symbolic scene is introduced in an intimate atmosphere because it mentions names of real places that the Brownings have visited or planned to visit earlier in their life. The places, in this sense, are familiar to the two lovers. The names of these places range from Pella to Alp and Alpine gorge. This suggests, according to Herford (2009, p. 136), that the title of the poem refers to the fireside of the Brownings' house in Italy. The poet, therefore, intends to create a sense of intimacy and familiarity by invoking familiar scenes that prepare the lovers for an agreeable understanding of a significant moment.

The poet makes an immediate shift from the description of these familiar scenes to the description of the real context of their love relationship:

With me, youth led... I will speak now,  
No longer watch you as you sit  
Reading by fire-light, that great brow  
And the spirit-small hand propping it (XXIII. 111–14)

The two lovers travel in time from the wood back to their home near the fireside. It is here that their life begins to flash in front of the speaker's eyes as he visualizes the past, the present and the future of his relationship with his beloved wife. He wanders through the places of his former years especially in Italy where he lived with her. This demonstrates that Browning's memory plays an active role in the poem. Corson (2013), however, argues that the poet is daydreaming, rather than remembering:

In his "waking dreams" [Browning] will "live o'er again" the happy life he has spent with his loved and loving companion. Passing out where the backward vista ends, he will survey, with her, the pleasant wood through which they have journeyed together. To the hazel-trees of England, where their childhood passed, succeeds a rarer sort, till, by green degrees, they at last slope to Italy. (p. 101)

According to Corson, the poem describes the whole journey in terms of a daydreaming survey of pleasant scenes from familiar English and Italian places. The description of trees, in Corson's view, is particularly important because they remind Browning of his own childhood in England and also of his first meeting with Elizabeth Barrett.

Moreover, Browning's focus on the house in his description is revealing, as it represents the peaceful dwelling of love and intimacy for the Brownings. Here, the wife's presence is deeply felt since the husband's happiness comes from living with her in that domestic atmosphere:

And to watch you sink by the fire-side now  
Back again, as you mutely sit  
Musing by fire-light... (LII. 256–58)

In contrast to the present domestic scene of the house, Browning associates his past with an outdoor scene of the woods. He gives a detailed description of "rarer" trees (V. 23), their

appearances and the effect they leave on him and his beloved wife at different times of the day. Browning, for instance, elaborates on the description of some flowers:

Oh the sense of the yellow mountain-flowers,  
And thorny balls, each three in one,  
The chestnuts throw on our path in showers!  
For the drop of the woodland fruit's begun (XI. 51–54)

In such a mood of high excitement, the two lovers find themselves in the middle of the woods surrounded by the mountains. In their memories, the two lovers suddenly place Italy, the place where they got married, side by side with England; as if time and place come to a moment of union similar to that which brings the two lovers together. This indicates that the lovers live freely out of the limits of time and place due to the effect that the natural scene has on them. William O. Raymond (2007) points out that "the wood and mountains hang over the lovers as they wait for that moment which would unite their lives in one" (p. 505). Raymond confirms that the lover-poet, through his description, reaches an entire identification with the elements of setting, including time and place. Thus, the poet evokes a sense of emotional fulfillment that he describes as a worthy "prize":

... how worth  
That a man should strive and agonize,  
And taste a veriest hell on earth  
For the hope of such a prize! (XLIV. 217 – 20)

Being entirely explored, Browning's love for his wife takes a new turn. It becomes a kind of love that is divinely protected and will continue to be so in old age because it is a "gain" to both "earth" and "heaven" (LIII. 262).

The poet uses a personal tone throughout the lines because his purpose is to convey his true feelings gained from a real experience of love. Art Gupta (2002) rightly remarks:

The poem is autobiographical through and through, and it throbs with the intensity of his love for his beloved wife Elizabeth Barrett. It is one of those rare poems in which he speaks in his own person, and he expresses the most intimate feelings of his heart. In the monologue the poet is the speaker and his beloved wife is the interlocutor, the two sit by the fire side and the poet pours out his very heart to her. (p. 43)

According to Gupta, the poem is significant because it shows how Browning guides his wife to feel the joy of love inside their house while they sit by the fireside. The lover-poet wants his wife to be emotionally ready to read about other lovers with similar scenes in his volume *Men and Women*. The poem also stresses the important point that the Brownings have achieved their romantic ideal of love that will remain forever because it is written in verse.

Browning's personal expression of love finds its clearest examples in "One Word More" and "By the Fireside." The former is a personal love poem Browning offers as a token of love to his wife. It is also personal because the speaker is Browning himself revealing his true identity as lover-poet. Moreover, the tone is personal as is evident in the dedication of the poem. The latter poem with its descriptive language and personal tone introduces the intimate atmosphere Browning wants to set

up for his wife. Furthermore, it depicts the significant moment that is the focus of Browning's description. It is the moment in which he travels in memory back and forth both in time between the present, past and future and in place between Italy and England. This is the moment in which the two lovers come into union with each other. The fact that the speaker is Browning himself creates a mode of subjectivity around the poem. Based on the assumption, as Corson (2013) explains, that "the work of Art is apocalyptic of the artist's own personality" and that "it cannot be impersonal" (p. 55), Browning, it seems, believes that his poetry has to reflect his own personality. His faith in domestic, married love forms an essential part of his personality and he could not give the best expression of his romantic ideal in any other way than speak in his own person in "One Word More" and "By the Fireside". These two poems, therefore, show Browning to be a poet with an ideal; a poet who is so true and loyal to his ideal that he directly expresses it by embodying his own character and describing his real feelings in a real, rather than dramatic, context. Significantly, through his use of the first person in the two poems, Browning realizes the difficulty of being impersonal in his poetry. He also reveals that part of his poetic experience, especially at moments of exalted emotions, has to be expressed in a subjective mode.

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