

## **The Philosophy of Life and Death : A Comparison Between Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning**

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### **Abstract**

*Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning are great thinkers and have faith in Almighty God and the existence of eternal soul. Their works present their philosophical thoughts regarding life and death. Both are optimistic and have faith in the creation of God. Their poems answer the questions — What is the aim of life? Why are we sent to the world? Is soul immortal? Should a person be afraid of death? Is this world real? As realists, they are not afraid of death and welcome each rebuff throughout life. To them, God is supreme and rules everywhere. Yet spiritualism is the only subject about which they have different views as Elizabeth Barrett is too credulous and Robert Browning has a questioning attitude. Yet they tolerate each other's attitude. Both have high conception of life and its purposes as it is a precious gift of God to man. He believes that one should have firm faith in God and try to get one's aims of life. However, she has no intention to become a controversialist as she believes that there is a little revolt in all religious societies and people have different beliefs regarding faith and religion. She regards herself a dissenter and expresses her views regarding empty rituals and orthodox and traditional beliefs as she is not ready to accept dogmas and orthodox conventions. She has great respect for the **Bible** and admires the good works of religious societies and missionaries. When they lose something or get failure in life, they begin to lose faith in Him and His mercy. She encourages them to be hopeful and have faith in Him. Both regard sorrow as an integral part of life and it is not proper to weep and curse God. Life is a blending of joys and sorrows and these troubles and sorrows of life impart knowledge to people to realize the truth.*

### **Keywords**

- Puritanism
- Pantheist
- Faith
- Spiritualism
- Almighty

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Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning are great thinkers who have faith in almighty God, and the existence of eternal soul. Their works present their philosophical thoughts regarding life and death. Both are optimistic and have faith in the creation of God. Their poems answer the questions — What is the aim of life? Why are we sent to the world? Is soul immortal? Should a person be afraid of death? Is this world real? As seekers of truth, they are not afraid of death and welcome each rebuff throughout life. Both accept the presence of evil and sufferings in the world and believe that one should have courage and fortitude to fight and struggle against the odds of life. As true scholars, they do not hesitate to express their views regarding God, soul, life and death and inspire the readers to struggle hard to achieve their ideas in life as life is meant for a continuous struggle. They believe that God is Supreme and rules everywhere in the world. Yet spiritualism is the only subject about which they have different views as Elizabeth Barrett Browning is too credulous and Robert Browning has a questioning attitude. Yet they tolerate each other's attitude. Robert Browning is universally regarded as a philosophical poet as his poetry is replete with philosophical views on life, soul, death, immortality etc. Actually his poetry is pervaded with note of optimism. Though the Victorian age is regarded as an age of doubt and disillusionment, Robert Browning is firm in his faith regarding God and believes :

God's in His heaven —

All's right with the world. (BP 2)

Actually, he has a higher conception of life and its purposes as it is a precious gift of God to man. He believes that one should have firm faith in God and must strive hard to get success in life. His poems Rabbi Ben

Ezra, Prospice, The Last Ride Together, A Grammarian's Funeral, A Death in The Desert, La Saisiaz etc. reveal his philosophy of life and death. His poems reveal his religious as well as individual outlook. To him, God is the symbol of love, sympathy, knowledge, beauty, purity, power, truth etc. His God is not tyrannical as presented by P.B. Shelley. Neither his God is deaf nor indifferent to the troubles of the worldly people as he believes that God inspires people to choose the right way for success. Robert Browning has his original theory of God and his relation to man and has no storm of doubt and trouble on religious matters while the other poets of his age like Arnold show the struggle and doubts- of the period of materialism. Regarding the poetry of Robert Browning Stopford A. Brooke remarks :

*Whatever men may think of his faith and his certainties, they reveal the strength of his characters, the enduring courage of his soul and the inspiring joyousness that born of his strength, characterized him to the last poem he wrote while the other poets were tossing on the sea of unresolved question, he rested musing and creating, on a green island whose rocks were rooted on the ocean-bed, and wondered, with the smiling tolerance of his lifelong charity, how his fellows were of so little faith, and why the skeptics made so much noise. He would have reserved the Psalmist's cry. He would have said, "Thou art not cast down, O my soul; thou art not disquieted within me. Thou hast hoped in God, who is the light of thy countenance, and thy God." (PRB 9-10)*

Elizabeth Barrett Browning is a great devotee of God, soul and spirit. In her lifetime she was well known as a deep religious poet and her spiritualism is regarded the record of a saint. Actually she led the life of a spirit and her works are replete with her mystic thoughts. Like R.W. Emerson, she revolts against rituals of the church. Like John Milton she admires the simplicity of Puritanism. Actually she thinks that the whole universe is guided by one divine High Priest i.e. God and His love. As a free thinker she has her own opinion regarding God, soul and religion. Even at the age of twelve, she was conscious of her choice regarding faith and religion as she says :

*I was in great danger of becoming the founder of religion of my own. I revolted at the idea of an established religion — my faith was sincere but my religion was founded solely on the imagination. It was not the deep persuasion of the mild Christian but the wild visions of an enthusiast. (BCI 351)*

However, she has no intention to become a controversialist as she believes that there is a little revolt in all religious societies and people have different beliefs regarding faith and religion. She regards herself as a dissenter and expresses her views against empty rituals. Like R.W. Emerson, she is bold enough to confess :

*I can never see anything in these sacramental ordinances, except a prospective sign in one (Baptism), and memorial sign in the other (the Lord's Supper), and could not recognize either under any modification as a peculiar instrument of grace, mystery or the like. The tendencies we have toward making mysteries of God's simplicities are as marked and sure as our missing the actual mystery upon occasion. God's love is the true mystery and the sacraments are only too simple for us to understand. (EBB 11)*

However, she opposes established religion and faith and like R.W. Emerson, she is not ready to accept dogmas and orthodox conventions. As an individualist she believes that the spirit of God is omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient. And yet she has high regard for the Bible and admires the good works of religious societies and missionaries. There was a religious atmosphere in her family and as a child she attended the nearest dissenting chapel of Congregationalists with her father. She also read the works of the English divines and the Greek Christian Fathers. Yet as an adult she began to avoid the services of her father's church and criticized the sermons. Like Robert Browning, Elizabeth Barrett Browning believes in the living power and supports every act of life. It is God who gives power and fortitude to man to endure the sufferings of the world. Like John Milton, she believes that God opens the ways of right as well as wrong before man and it is his own will whether he chooses the right or the wrong. As a moralist, she believes that it is God who can move soul to follow the path of righteousness and purity. So people should always listen to the voice of God. In the poem Sounds she says :

Hearken, hearken!  
God speaketh to thy soul,  
Using the supreme voice which doth confound  
All life with consciousness of Deity,  
All senses into one, —  
As the seer Patmos, loving John ...  
It speaketh now,  
Through the regular breath of the calm

creation,  
Through the moan of the creature's  
desolation  
Striking, and in its stroke resembling  
The memory of a solemn vow  
Which pierceth the din of a festival  
To one in the midst, — and he letteth fall  
The cup with a sudden trembling. (CPW 354)

Robert Browning is not a pantheist like William Wordsworth and Elizabeth Barrett. He believes that there is God in nature in all things. Sights and sounds of nature are glorified by His light. It is a fact that God remains invisible and yet His presence cannot be avoided. As a mystic, Elizabeth Barrett Browning regards God mysterious and His mysterious power can be felt only by those who have true faith in Him. God helps His true devotees in every weal and woe. God is the source of this world and human life. Like William Wordsworth, she accepts the mysterious ways of God as well as human life. Life is also a mystery to her. In Human Life's Mystery she says :

God keeps his holy mysteries  
Just on the outside of man's dream;  
In diapason slow, we think  
To hear their pinions rise and sink,  
While they float pure beneath his eyes.  
Like swans adown a stream. (CPW 395)

Regarding Robert Browning's religious experience J.M. Cohen remarks :  
*It was not that he was a man with first-hand religious experience. He remained a doubter to the end, and if ever he ventured to affirm more than he knew the resulting falsity in his poetry is easy to detect. But Browning, at his best, could express the whole of his experience of love, faith and creative power, which were the three poles upon which his universe hung. (RB 6)*

However, Robert Browning expresses his various views through the characters who are his mouthpiece. His poetry shows his philosophical development and changing attitude to life. As a follower of God, he regards himself as His agent and admires the creation of God and tries his best to serve His purpose. In the poem Saul he says :

I have gone the whole round of  
Creation : I saw and I spoke!

I, a work of God's hand for that  
purpose, received in my brain  
And pronounced on the rest of his  
handwork — returned him again.  
His creation's approval or censure : I  
spoke as I saw.  
I report, as a man may of God's work  
— all's love yet all's law! (BP 38)

In Introduction to Browning Poems W.T. Young remarks :

*In his survey of life he treats certain elements as axiomatic. He never questions the existence of supreme authority, or God, controlling the manifold energies of the world. He is not however of the pantheistic school of Wordsworth; for though he can see evidence of the hand and intention of God in the most unpromising quarters, yet his individualizing instinct, more keenly alive to the separations and divisions than to the continuities of existence conceived of God as a distinct personality from the life of nature and man. (XXXIII-XXXIV)*

However, his poetry reveals the fact that he is firm in his views regarding God, man, life and death and his faith is not shaken by the struggle of this worldly life. To him, the aim of human life is to achieve spiritual development so that the soul may attain its spiritual destination after death. To him, body and soul are interdependent and the aim of life is not merely to enjoy physical pleasures. Life is not merely for eating, drinking and merry-making. Through Rabbi Ben Ezra, Robert Browning expresses his own views and asserts that a person must have some spiritual aims in his life as without it life is meaningless and there is no difference between man and beast. As a satirist, he criticizes the epicurean philosophy and says :

Poor vaunt of life indeed,  
Were man but formed to feed  
On joy, to solely seek find and feast:  
Such feasting ended, then  
As sure an end to men;  
Irks care the crop-full bird? Frets  
doubt the maw-crammed beast? (RBE)

To him, life is very precious and God bestows physical gifts to man so that he may utilize it for spiritual advancement. Like William Shakespeare, he expresses his thankfulness to God that being a man he is able to see the whole plan of God. He believes that God has created many beautiful things in the world. But man is wonderful and majestic as he is gifted with the noble reasoning power. God gives him unlimited powers of mind and body. In fact, he is nearer to God as he has a divine spark that inspires him to spiritual gains. Like John Milton, he believes that God does not need either man's work or his own gifts. As a devotee of God he believes that one should devote his whole life to the service of God. Only God is real and all these earthly pleasures are only trials for the human soul. To conclude, both the poets believe that nothing that is good, beautiful, truthful and powerful can decay. Both have trust in God and exhort the readers to love life and live with hope, courage and faith in God.

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