

CC-6 (Sem-2)

Critical Analysis of *Rabbi Ben Ezra*

The Poet

Robert Browning (1812-1889) was an important literary figure of Victorian English Literature. He was a poet in the Victorian Age who was highly regarded in his time. After his death came a period when critics questioned his poetry and in the twentieth century his popularity declined.

Science and the discoveries in science created more problems for religion and tradition. Everything seemed to be in doubt- questions were being raised about religion and the Bible. It was a period of doubt and confusion. All this is reflected in Browning's work as through his dramatic monologues.

Browning was then a major poet of his time and an important influence on modern poetry though that was acknowledged much later. In his later years he came to be looked upon as a wise old man and was highly regarded for his knowledge. Modern critics like T.S Eliot did not hold him in high esteem but Ezra Pound paid him a tribute by calling him one of his literary fathers.

Browning's development as a poet and a writer can be divided into three periods:

- a) The Period of Immaturity (1832—1840)
- b) The Period of Maturity (1841—1869)
- c) Decline of the Artist (1870—1889)

Opening lines of the poem:

*Grow old along with me!
The best is yet to be,
The last of life, for which the first was made:
Our times are in His hand
Who saith "A whole I planned,
Youth shows but half; trust God: see all, nor be afraid!"*

Critical Analysis of *Rabbi Ben Ezra*

“Rabbi Ben Ezra” was first published in 1864. It has 192 lines and is the clearest expression of Browning's optimistic philosophy of life. “Rabbi Ben Ezra” is the narrator here. He was a real twelfth century Jewish scholar. What

he says here is that in youth, man gathers experience; in age he uses this experience to control his nature and behaviour. Through man's struggle in youth, through his mistakes, he comes to a spiritual understanding of God, the Universe and man's place in the whole scheme of things. What counts in reality is not what he has achieved but what his intention is. His aspirations count and also how much effort he has put in to achieve his goal. He may not be successful in the worldly sense but if the effort, the striving is genuine, then that is all that matters. It is the glorification of failure.

The poet takes the symbol of the potter. Just as the potter shapes the pot on the wheel, so also God moulds man. He shapes his character by putting him in difficult situations and then sees how he copes. Whatever imperfection there is in the world, it is there because God has made it so to make man work hard. Thus behind man's imperfection is the perfection of God. Man has only to understand it. He is the pitcher shaped on the wheel by God and now the pitcher is ready for use - for a future beyond life.

Stanzas I-V

The poem was published in the volume 'Dramatis Personae' in 1864. It gives us his philosophy of life. Old age is the best period of life for which youth, the first period of life, has been made. Man's life is a whole - youth and old age together. It is not youth alone with its passion and energy; nor old age with its spirituality, but a blend of the two together. Man is distinct from the beast. He has intelligence which separates him from the animals. But if he wastes his life by simply running after pleasure what is there to boast about. What separates him from animals that only care for food? Once they have eaten as much as they can, they have no other care in the world. Man is not like that.

Stanzas VI-X

Man is not like animals that worry only about food. He is nearer God because of his intelligence, his mind. Therefore have a goal in life and try to achieve it. Each rebuff or failure should be welcome because it should make us work harder. Joy is made up of three parts pain - the striving, the hard labour we put in to achieve our goals. Now comes the paradox. Does life succeed when it fails? Aspiration counts much more than achievement. If you have a goal you should work hard to achieve it. You may fail to do so but that should only make you work more. Man's character is moulded by failure. Success makes life easy and man complacent. Failure brings out the strength and courage of man and

shows how he is when things are against him. Man is no better than an animal if his soul too is brutish and if he only tries to satisfy his physical cravings. Youth has its own uses. The experience man gains in his youth is stored up in the brain to be made use of in old age He can learn from experience and it helps him to come to a spiritual understanding of life and God and man. He understands that the whole of man's life is a part of God's plan and man should surrender to God and his plan.

Stanzas XI-XV

Both body and soul are equally important and body without soul makes man a brute. We should not say that we have gone ahead in spite of the body. Both together make the whole of man-- body and soul, youth and old age-- one cannot do without the other. Therefore age should acknowledge the contribution of youth-experience. It is this experience which has formed his character and made him whole. Old age is also a period of rest before the soul goes on with a new adventure. Man is complete, made according to God's plan and before being put to use (after death) old age is the time of rest. Browning hints at his belief in life after death.

Stanzas XVI-XX

When the moment of death comes the soul leaves the body. The soul has been formed by man's experience and now it is ready for its flight. In the formation of man we can see the hand of God and get an idea of how he works. In youth he makes mistakes and learns from them and in old age he uses it to control his nature. Wisdom comes with age and he should not be tempted by worldly pleasures. It is also the time when experience, wisdom and a sense of peace tell man that there is no need to be afraid of death. Age waits for death calmly.

Stanzas XXI- XXV

With age comes wisdom and we realize that everything is according to God's plan. In youth, the body works hard and in age, the soul feeds the body. Who will give judgement on man? The world believes that man's success is based on his achievement in this world. Browning says this is not so. Success does not depend on achievement but on aspiration, on intent. His goals, thoughts, aims, wishes and dreams and how hard he worked to achieve them, is what matters. Thus according to worldly standards, he may be a failure but in actuality he is a

success. The effort he has made to win his goals, matters. In God's eyes these things matter and according to his standard, man is perfect and well formed.

Stanzas XXVI-XXXII

The worldly man believes since life is temporary and will pass soon, man should make the most of life. He should enjoy life while he can. Soon he will grow old and weak and die. Therefore enjoy life while you can. What he does not realize is that the body changes, grows old and dies, the earth and the seasons too pass but the soul remains eternal. It is immortal. God and the soul alone survive—the potter and the clay. All else is temporary and will pass from this earth one day. The soul and God alone last. Failure is just a means of purifying and strengthening man's soul. Just as gold is purified by fire so also man's soul is made perfect by difficulties and failures.

God is the potter and man is the clay. The potter is shaping the clay on the wheel which is the world. The experiences of youth have made lines on the pitcher or the pot. They have been formed and are hardened but near the rim are new lines formed by age which are strong and can bear any amount of stress.

To sum up

“Rabbi Ben Ezra” is Browning's clearest attempt to explain his philosophy or his outlook on life, this Universe, God and man's relation to all this. It is, in one sense a dramatic monologue because only one man speaks. The speaker is Rabbi Ben Ezra or Abraham Ibn Ezra, a twelfth century Jewish scholar who was an actual person. Whom he speaks to is not made clear. He just puts forth his idea of God, man and the universe. He is the spokesman for Browning. Of course Browning generally says that his poems are objective and do not express any of his opinions. But some views are repeated so often that we can take them as being Browning's own views.

The poem is a glorification of old age and has been written from the standpoint of age-Old age is the best period of life and men should look forward to it. It brings wisdom, knowledge, dignity and a certain resignation and acceptance of life. Youth is a period of doubt and rebellion. Living for mere pleasure is foolish. In youth man thinks pleasure is everything and tries to drown himself in it. He does not realize that youth is a preparation for old age which is the best period of life.

The experience we gather in our youth changes to wisdom in old age because it is through mistakes that we learn. The knowledge that there is a God and man is but a part of God's plan comes much later. Man should surrender himself to God and then he will realize that God has planned man as a whole—youth and old age, body and soul. Just as youth lays the foundation for age so also the body is no less important than the soul. The two go together. The poem is also a glorification of failure. He underlines the fact that it is aspiration and not achievement that counts. He may not have achieved much according to the standards of the world, but in reality, his hopes and wishes and goals and the effort he makes to achieve them is what is of importance to Browning. Failure should not discourage us; in fact it is better than success because success makes us take things easy. We no longer work as hard because we have got what we want. But failure makes us work that much harder, so it is good.

Style and allegory

Through the metaphor of the potter and the pitcher, Browning explains God's plan for man. God is the potter who is shaping the clay (man) on the wheel of life. He is shaping man by giving him pain and suffering and failure. All this is meant to strengthen his character so that he emerges a strong man. This is also his explanation for the imperfection we see around us. The world is imperfect because God has made it so to try man. Thus behind imperfect man and the imperfect world is perfect God who has a plan.

Man has only to submit to the plan to know his place in the scheme of things. Once the pitcher is shaped, it is ready for use by the Gods. The soul has been purified by suffering and now it is ready for its journey which comes after death.

Browning as a Love Poet

There are two different sides to Browning as a poet- one is the love poet and the other is the intellectual-the thinker and philosopher. Critics have always been of the opinion that when his poetic side was dominant, he was the greatest poet. But when the intellectual side took over, the philosopher in him was predominant, and then there was much to criticize in his poetry. Of course, at times there was a happy blend of the poet and philosopher e.g. "Rabbi Ben Ezra".

Courtesy: Dr. Md. Ejaz Alam

SUGGESTED READINGS

Compton, A. & Rickett. *History of English Literature*. London: T.C. and E.C. Jack.1985. Print.

Chesterton, G.K., *Robert Browning*.GL: G. P. Echo Library. 2006. Print.

Legouis,E. & Cazamian, L., *History of English Literature*. New Delhi: Macmillan Publishers India Ltd., 1981.Print.

Litzinger B.& Smalley D.A., ed. *Browning the Critical Heritage*. London: Routledge and K. Paul. 1970. Print.