

The dramatic monologue can be described as a poem which has one speaker (a voice other than that of the poet's), a listener and sometimes an interplay between the two. For example, 'My Last Duchess' is spoken solely by the duke, but we sense the envoy's presence through the duke's interaction with him – '*Nay we'll go together down, sir*'. There are exceptions, however: 'Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister' has no listener – as its title describes.

Browning's dramatic monologues are primarily distinguished by their adoption of a voice other than that of the poet and their main significance is, arguably, that they give the reader an insight into the speaker's mind, whether that be of an arrogant Renaissance duke, a petty-minded jealous monk, or an insanely possessive lover.

Please find notes below on:

- 'Abt Vogler'
- 'Love Among the Ruins'
- 'Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister'
- 'The Bishop orders his tomb at Saint Praxed's Church'
- 'The Last Ride Together'

### 'Abt Vogler'

#### Subject

'Abt Vogler' was George Joseph Vogler (1749–1814), a noted 18<sup>th</sup> century organist and composer.

The poem is an interpretation of the power of music and a reflection of Browning's attitude to life. It explores the relationship between music and architecture; as the Abbe extemporises it is likened to the building of a palace. To the building of this palace, all the powers of the universe contribute: music, in its range and variety, is a symbol of the meeting between Heaven and Hell, the past and the present, time and eternity. It is also a symbol of the power of God, exceeding all the other arts in its ideal quality. It notes, however, that unlike the permanence of architecture, music is transient, but no form of beauty or goodness ever dies.

#### Structure

The poem is formed of regular stanzas, each devoted to a different element of the musical composition. The iambic pentameter rhythms of this intensely rhythmic poem build and decrease, in emulation of the way the musician has created his music, and rhymes ABABCD CD.

#### Time / viewpoint

The poem is set after the musician has finished extemporising. The Abbe sits thinking about the music he has made which, because it was extemporised, can never be heard again.

#### Language

The poem is an **extended metaphor** through which the creation of music is compared to the building of a palace.

- The first stanza contains **plosive alliteration** (see final line) which helps to produce the powerful images of the palace being created through all of the elemental energies of the Universe.
- In the second stanza, the keys of the organ are **personified** as part of the metaphysical 'construction crew' – '*my keys in a crowd pressed and importuned to raise*'. There is a wistful desire for the music to '*tarry*' to stay for a while.

- The palace has been built with firm foundations (stanza 2) and the **simile** constructed in the third stanza (lines 21–25) shows the building to have transparent walls of gold, topped off with fire, like the firework display of a Roman festival. (This is an apt comparison for a religious poem as Browning chooses to allude to the great spire of St Peter's Cathedral in Rome.)
- The fourth stanza illustrates the heavens reaching down to meet the music as it rises, with the highest point (crescendo) being the unity of heaven and earth, '*for earth had attained heaven, there was no more near nor far*' – music reaches its pinnacle; spiritual union with God. **Alliteration** appears frequently in these descriptions, emphasising the transcendence of the physical world, the union of Heaven and Earth.
- Stanza 5 shows the world made new, spirits lured to live in a dwelling place fit for them, just as heavenly spirits now find the world a perfect dwelling place. Time, as we know it, stops, or ceases to exist at this perfect moment, brought about by the creation of music.
- Stanza 6 conveys music as the most elevated form of art. Painting and poetry are obedient to the laws of nature, but music appeals to our emotions. Its fundamental quality of impermanence - transient beauty - makes it the highest of all art forms. In the course of his music-making, Abt Vogler achieves epiphany (the revelation of an absolute truth) and it is this moment that the poem conveys.
- Stanza 7 examines the creation of music as comparable to God's divine spark, '*the finger of God, a flash of the will*'. The musician considers whether or not '*such gift be allowed to man*'. The chord resulting from the combination of three sounds produces a fourth, the beauty of which is unexpected and seems to belong to another order, not just another musical sound, but one which seems to transcend this world, '*a star*', the word made prominent through the **rhyme scheme**.
- Stanza 8's **tone** is **melancholic**. The music is gone, '*the palace of music I reared*' and the '*good tears start*'. This composition can never be heard again and the speaker refuses the comfort given that other music, '*better perchance*' may be made. The transient, ephemeral nature of music is again emphasised in these lines as the musician has felt momentarily in touch with God, the '*ineffable name*' through music.
- The ninth stanza recognizes, however, that the past will exist again and will triumph. As God has heard, so shall we '*by-and-by*' – in eternity.
- Stanza 11 acknowledges that pain and ugliness, '*discords*', must exist for us to be able to fully appreciate '*harmony*'. If there were no evil, we wouldn't be able to see how truly good, good is. The musical **analogy** is that we appreciate sound only in contrast with silence, '*Why else was the pause prolonged but that singing might issue thence?*' Although the music he has just made may no longer be heard on earth, it hasn't vanished for ever, because all that is good is indestructible in heaven. Musicians alone seem to be in receipt of this privileged understanding. Abt Vogler says that the philosophers may each make his guess at the meaning of this earthly scheme of '*weal and woe*', but the musicians, those who have felt in their own bosoms the presence of Divine Power and heard its marvellous voice, '*know*'. According to the poem, there is a divine connection between musicians and God.
- In the final stanza we see how the musician, having reached supreme heights through his music, descends, striking different chords as he does so. He finally reaches C major, the natural scale without variations of sharps and flats, which is symbolic of the common level of everyday life, and thus he can attain some peace, '*so, now I will try to sleep*'.

### Ideas for comparison

- There is a contrast between this poem, which could more accurately be called a **soliloquy**, and other poems in the selection. The subject of the poem is music, *not* the musician, unlike Browning's dramatic monologues, where the character of the speaker is revealed through what they say.
- Like 'Rabbi Ben Ezra', this poem shows absolute faith in the triumph of God and goodness. Both poems use religious figures, but they are mainly about religious belief. By the time Browning wrote 'Abt Vogler' and 'Rabbi Ben Ezra', Elizabeth had died (1861) and Browning had returned to England. This may shed light on the poems' philosophies.

## 'Love among the ruins'

### Subject

The enduring power of love is compared with the illusory power of man.

### Structure

A striking verse form written in alternate long iambic lines and very short lines of 3 syllables.

**Enjambment** ensures the conversational flow between the lines, while the short alternate lines stress or confirm the image or idea created in the previous line.

### Time / viewpoint

The male speaker stands gazing at the Italian countryside, reputedly the site of a once-great and powerful Roman civilization, now obliterated by time and reclaimed by Nature.

### Language

The poem begins peacefully, almost sleepily, the scene described in a hushed tone. The speaker is painting a picture of rural tranquillity; early evening is **personified** as smilingly benevolent and '*quiet-coloured*', while sheep meander at their will. The reference to the city's existence comes in the first stanza and from here the speaker 're-constructs' the vanished city in aggressively active **adjectives, verbs** and **similes**:

*'daring palace shot its spires'  
Up like fires...*

*Bounding all'*

Materialism and hunger for power forms the subject of much of the poem as the ancient city, its peoples, their pleasures and pursuits are described in similar terms of power and wealth.

Such power is relative, however, the ancient scene regularly compared with the one in immediate view, reminding us that temporal power is fleeting; even the mightiest will fall. The theme of the poem could be 'love conquers all' as even such great achievements and testament to worldly power are overcome by the humblest of plants, the caper and the houseleek, that have overrun the site. The poem shows that nature will not be confined or reduced (a typical **Romantic** theme) but will endure.

Browning's devout Christianity appears in the speaker's reference to the '*brazen pillar high/as the sky*', (note the deliberately *clichéd simile*) built by the ancient civilization to their 'gods', an allusion to pagan worship and perhaps to the brazen calf worshipped by the Israelites when Moses had gone to the mountain to receive the Ten Commandments. Gold, bronze, marble and stone – hard, apparently unyielding substances – composed the city which now only exists in the speaker's imagination. These final lines show the staggering power of such a nation, one that could send a '*million fighters forth*' to conquer the world, yet still keep in reserve a '*thousand chariots in full force*' – but despite its might, there is nothing left. The might of Ancient Rome is undeniable, but despite its '*triumphs and glories*' it is summed up as '*whole centuries of folly, noise and sin*'. The speaker commands '*Shut them in*'. Love has the final word – '*Love is best*' denoting its power.

### Ideas for comparison

- It is useful to compare 'Love Among the Ruins' with the other poems by Browning that hark back to events that took place long before.
- Explore the pursuit of wealth and rejection of love by the Duke and its corollary in Andrea del Sarto, whose speaker has sold his artistic soul in an attempt to keep his wife happy.
- Shelley's 'Ozymandias' also deals with the theme of a great civilisation falling into dust.

## ‘Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister’

### Subject

This is a poem of deepest hatred, expressed through the thoughts, or inner monologue, of an anonymous monk. It can read as quite comical in the sheer depth of its petty tantrum-like fury!

### Structure

The poem consists of nine 8-line stanzas in **trochaic tetrameter**, the force of which produces a jerky rhythm, delivering short, sharp syllables and words that are growled, hissed, or spat out. The opening line is an example with the **onomatopoeic**, animalistic growl of *G-r-r-r*. The soliloquy is divided into a set of petty grievances in a somewhat obsessive **list**.

### Time / viewpoint

Set in a monastery in medieval Spain, the hatred that consumes the speaker would seem to have been going on for some time. He has carefully collected a set of observations about Brother Lawrence and lists them. The speaker thinks of nothing else and the poem reads as if we are eavesdropping on these private thoughts.

### Language

The poem's punctuation – exclamation and questions marks – clearly convey the speakers' furious rage and sarcasm, with the opening line setting the **tone** for the piece. The speaker, who should be an intensely moral and religious man who has given up worldly demands, is consumed with jealousy and uses language more suited to the tavern than the actual religious confines of a monastery, ‘*damned flower pots*’, ‘*Hell dry you up with its flames!*’ In this poem, the speaker's own lechery is expressed through the excessive detail he gives of the maids' appearance, using sensual **sibilance** wholly inappropriate in a monk ‘*brown Dolores*’, who ‘*squats outside ... steeping tresses in a tank*’ / *blue-black, lustrous, thick like horsehairs*. **Ironically**, it is the speaker who becomes aroused when watching the women. Browning's implicit criticism of the Catholic Church can be discerned in the many ways this monk behaves, swearing, cursing, guilty of blasphemy and worst of all, intending to sell his soul to the devil to ensure Brother Lawrence's damnation, calling him a Manichee (a heretical follower of the prophet Mani) and thus illustrating the depth of his venomous rage. His **short, broken sentences** also indicate spluttering fury and culminate in a final verse in which the enjambed lines run headlong toward a spell-like curse of the backward prayer to the Virgin, ‘*Plenia gratia/ave Virgo*’ which, blasphemously juxtaposed with ‘*Gr-r-r you swine!*’ shows the speaker unable to articulate any further.

### Ideas for comparison

Look at other monologues in the selection to how Browning allows other speakers, such as the Duke and Porphyria's lover, like this monk, to damn themselves through their own words.

## ‘The Bishop orders his tomb at Saint Praxed’s Church’

### Subject

A dying Renaissance bishop gives orders for his tomb to be constructed. One motive is to outshine that of his predecessor, Gandolf, but the key one is to achieve a form of immortality, knowing that his time on earth – his *‘pilgrimage’* has been *‘evil and brief’*.

### Time / viewpoint

Spoken at the end of his life and looking back, the main event of this monologue is yet to be – the construction of the tomb, the luxurious details of which are presented in meticulous detail. The setting is **medieval**.

### Structure

The bishop speaks in **iambic pentameter**. The conventions of the dramatic monologue form are present in the natural speech rhythms and internal references to his listeners with some interaction between them – giving the impression of an authentic speech. Towards the end of the monologue, his strength begins to falter and he becomes more irritated with those around him – perhaps aware that his time is near and his wishes won’t be carried through.

### Language

The speaker’s worldly concerns are displayed in the materials from which he wishes his tomb to be constructed and embellished. **Luxuriant adjectives and striking similes** depict the rich colours and textures of the rare materials needed *‘peach-blossom marble ... true peach, rosy and flawless’*, a lump of *‘lapis lazuli as big as a Jew’s head’*, *‘jasper ... pure-green as a pistachio nut’* to ensure his tomb is ostentatiously decorated. The Bishop is remarkably un-Christian in his desire to leave his mark on the world and to find immortality; it is apparent that he has been thinking about his tomb for some time, evidenced by the hiding away of treasured materials.

Part of his motive is because of his long-lasting resentment of Gandolf – who, while alive, had seemingly envied the bishop’s mistress, *‘Old Gandolf envied me, so fair she was’*. Note how Gandolf’s name repeatedly crops up in the bishop’s dying words. Despite the bishop having *‘fought tooth and nail to save my niche’*, Gandolf lies in the place he wanted for himself. He disparages Gandolf’s tomb, constructed from cheap materials – slate – *‘paltry onion stone’*, while the bishop’s will be a magnificent work of art. The bishop even imagines being able to look condescendingly ‘down’ on Gandolf after death, commanding his listeners to put him, *‘where I can look at him’*. Gandolf, having beaten the bishop to the favoured spot, will have to spend eternity in the ‘shade’ of the bishop’s monument to earthly power.

As the monologue lengthens and death approaches, the bishop’s thoughts and words begin to ramble, becoming less coherent – the *‘dwindling’* tapers remind him of his imminent death – *‘strange thoughts/ Grow, with a certain humming in my ears’*. A realistic sense of someone in the final hours of life is created through the slightly delirious gasps of, *‘Do I live, am I dead?’* With the knowledge that his time is short, the bishop’s feverish desperation for his project to come about becomes more urgent and he threatens to cut his listeners out of his will, *‘All lapis, sons! Else I give the Pope/my villas!’* The frequency of **caesura** in the final lines marks the way in which the speech breaks down, as delirium (or pain?) gains hold. The mood at the end of the poem is resigned, however, as the speaker realises that no matter how much time, effort and money he has spent on trying to achieve this ultimate aim, it’s unlikely to come about – as he will not be there to oversee it. His final thoughts, typically, are of his old enemy – Gandolf.

### Ideas for comparison

- Compare the **materialism** in this poem with that in ‘My Last Duchess’.
- Browning’s implicit criticism of the Roman Catholicism – or at least those who lead it – is evident in the way in which the bishop has spent more time on planning his tomb than devoting himself to preparing his soul for the afterlife. Compare this to ‘Soliloquy in a Spanish Cloister’ and the discussion of the purpose of art in ‘Fra Lippo Lippi’.

## 'The Last Ride Together'

### Subject

The speaker, another rejected lover, is allowed one last ride with his former love, during which he comes to a fatalistic (*since this was written and needs must be*) acceptance of the end of their love (*since now at length my fate I know*) and philosophises about life, which, as in much of Browning's poetry, is seen as struggle.

### Structure

There are 11 lines in each stanza, the first 9 lines in regular tetrameter with an added syllable to the last 2 lines. The rhythmic motion of two horses riding side-by-side is indicated by the poem's regular structure.

### Time / viewpoint

Although the action of the ride is taking place at the moment of speaking, the relationship is over and so, the main event – their relationship – is in the past.

### Language

Much of the poem is in the past tense, indicating that the pair have been riding for some time when the speaker is articulating his thoughts. Only in the last verse does the speaker refer to events in the present tense and even looks to the future, imagining the ride never coming to an end, '*What if we still ride on, we two*' and '*the instant made eternity*'.

During the ride, the speaker muses on the importance we place on worldly obsessions, statesmanship, soldiership, the arts – poetry, music, painting and sculpture, coming to the conclusion that life is greater than art, even the greatest art of all. We constantly strive but '*who succeeds?*' We achieve so little – '*the petty done*' compared with what we leave undone'. The speaker condemns the '*great sculptor*' for giving a '*score of years*' to art, where the real beauty lies in life '*yonder girl who fords the burn*'.

One of the more endearing aspects of the poem is the number of questions included – we are presented with a character who has attempted to understand life. His lack of egocentricity and arrogance '*Fail I alone, in words and deeds?*' contrasts with other dramatic personae (see below).

The monologue ends with the speaker wondering whether paradise is really this moment – the final unending ride they take together – '*What if heaven be that, fair and strong/ At life's best with our eyes upturned/ Whither life's flower is first discerned,/ We, fixed so, ever should abide?*' Again, we should grasp the moment and '*Hold it fast*' when it is offered, rather than fruitlessly striving for perfection.

'The Last Ride Together' is a poem of unsuccessful love – characteristic of Browning, but here defeat is accepted with courage and faced with equanimity. The message seems to be to make the best of what life offers and the speaker appears to have found his heaven in this final, rapturous ride.

### Ideas for comparison

- As in 'A Lover's Quarrel', the lover featured is not Browning himself: the poet adopts a persona.
- As in many of Browning's other dramatic monologues, the main event (the end of the love affair) is already in the past.
- There is a link with 'Porphyria's Lover' where the lover takes Porphyria's life in an attempt to freeze the 'perfect' moment of togetherness. His warped perceptions lead him to believe that he has achieved what much of Browning's other monologues deny – the state of spiritual union with another. The speaker in 'Last Ride' is not a possessive psychotic; however, his fantasy is that this moment of exhilarating togetherness will never end, as he knows that when they come to the end of their journey, it will be the end of their relationship. In this way, the ride is a metaphor.
- Compare the speaker's thoughts that life is greater than art with 'Love among the ruins' where the destruction of the once great city is proof that love is the most powerful and will endure long past man's hubristic monuments to power.
- Contrast the speaker's humility with the arrogance of the duke in 'My Last Duchess' who is so sure of his rightness (and the duke believes in the elevation of art above life – so far that he now prefers his wife as a painting). 'Porphyria's lover' is again arrogantly positive that he knows what his lover wants and that even God must agree with his actions.