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## UNIT 37 ROBERT BROWNING: LIFE AND ASPIRATIONS

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### Structure

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### 37.0 OBJECTIVES

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After a study of this unit you would be able to:

- speak on Robert Browning's life and work and the relationship between them;
- appreciate *Sordello*; and
- understand Browning's conception of the office of a poet.

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### 37.1 INTRODUCTION

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In this unit you will read a brief sketch of Robert Browning's life. This would be helpful to you in writing your own term-paper. Still more, it will help you appreciate Browning's poetry.

Robert Browning is buried in Westminster Abbey where poets such as Chaucer and Spenser also lie interred. 'A good many' wrote Henry James about Browning, 'oddities and a good many great writers have been entombed in the Abbey: but none of the odd ones have been so great and none of the great ones so odd' (*The Speaker*, January 4, 1890). It is the combination of Browning's greatness and oddity that you should be able to appreciate finally after you have completed your study of the present and the two following units.

The excerpt from *Sordello* that you will also read in this unit will enable you to understand Browning's aims and aspirations as a poet. Hope you will enjoy reading about Robert Browning and a specimen of his poetry.

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### 37.2 ROBERT BROWNING (b. MAY 7, 1812 – d: DEC 12, 1889)

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The poet Robert Browning bore the name of his father and grandfather. As a young man Browning's father had been sent by his father to West Indies to take care of the family plantation. However, he revolted against the cruelty towards the slaves there, returned home and his father found him employment in the Bank of England as a clerk on a small salary. Robert Browning, Sr. (d. 1866) worked at the Bank until his retirement in 1852. He was a self-effacing person, mild and studious and had collected a library of 6000 books of Greek, Latin and recondite English writings. (A

recondite work, as you know, is about obscure, abstruse, out of the way or little known subjects.) The poet's father was more a man of learning than business and in his youth he had hoped to become an artist. All his life he drew sketches and illustrations to amuse his children and friends. The poet Browning could have inherited his aptitude for the visual arts from his father.

Robert Browning:  
Life and Aspirations



Robert Browning

Browning's mother, Sarah Anna Wiedmann (d. 1849) was born in Scotland of a German father and Scottish mother. She was devoted to her family, her rose garden and the Congregational chapel and was thus a non-conformist. Her husband and children were also made to follow her to the Congregational chapel and not to the

Church of England. Her daughter Sarianna and her son, the poet, were passionately devoted to her.

Robert Browning, the poet, was born on May 7, 1812 at Camberwell, a suburb of London. He was raised there and at New Cross, further to the southeast from London. Browning was a restless child and his biographers record the public reproof of George Clayton, the preacher at his mother's chapel, for his "restlessness and inattention." He had rebelled from school and was later to rebel from London University. His education was conducted mainly by his father and a series of tutors of Greek, Latin, French, Italian and music. He became famous for his quaint learning which was acquired chiefly in his father's library. For his pleasures he roamed the fields, rode on horseback and spent time in Dulwich Gallery. He grew up to be passionate, brilliant but also undisciplined, with an inordinate estimate of his powers, which however, were indeed very great.

Browning's first volume of poems *Incondita* was a collection of lyrics. It was written when he was twelve years old. He later destroyed them; but two survive. *Pauline. A Fragment of a Confession* was published anonymously in 1833. It is marked by the influence of the Romantic poets, especially Shelley: whom he called "sun-treader": "Sun-treader, life and light be thine for ever!" However, it is also a work, which records his disavowal of Shelley who was not popular in the early nineteenth century. At the age of 14, Shelley had provided an exit for Browning from the middle class world of Camberwell and New Cross. The children there never went to Harrow and Rugby much less Oxford and Cambridge. Browning became a disciple of Shelley, took to vegetarianism, adopted liberalism of an extreme kind and also atheism. However, his mother Sarah Anna Wiedmann won her from atheism not through reason but by her tenderness and love, impairing his intellectual independence in religious matters forever. *Pauline* is a record of his faith in "God and truth" rather than Shelley.

Sun-treader, I believe in god and truth  
 And love, and as one just escaped from death  
 Would bind himself in bands of friends to feel  
 He lives indeed, so, I would lean on thee!  
 Thou must be ever with me, most in gloom  
 If such must come, but chiefly when I die,  
 For I seem, dying, as one going in the dark  
 To fight a giant; but live thou forever,  
 And be to all what thou has been to me!

Browning's exposure and exploitation of his own emotions and his "intense and morbid self-consciousness" in *Pauline* was disliked by J.S. Mill (1806-73), a leading intellectual of his time. Perhaps it was Mill's criticism that discouraged him from confessing his own emotions and encouraged him to write objectively.

In 1834 Browning went on a tour of Russia with George de Benkhousen, the consul general. In 1838 and '44 he made two short visits to Italy. In the meantime *Paracelsus*, Browning's first acknowledged work, was published in 1835. The career of the historical Paracelsus (1493-1541), the Swiss-born physician, served Browning as a stalking-horse or pretext for his exploration into the true felicitous of a poet's endeavours, that is, in the conflicting claims of love (self-forgetting) and knowledge (self-assertion) in the mind of the poet. *Paracelsus* was a resounding critical success. It introduced him to the great artistic and literary world of London. At a dinner in 1836 Wordsworth, who in a few years was to become the Poet Laureate, proposed a toast to Browning and welcomed him to the company of the poets of England. (The event may remind you nearer home of the reception of Rabindranath Tagore by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya). Browning came to know not only Wordsworth but also Dickens, Henry James, Carlyle and Tennyson. The publication of *Sordello* in 1840, however, eclipsed Browning's reputation for over twenty years.

Fortunately *Paracelsus* had found him two friends: John Forster (1812-76) the drama critic, editor, biographer and later literary executor of W.S. Landor, Dickens and Carlyle, and William Charles Macready (1793-1873) actor and manager of both Covent Garden and Drury Lane theatres at different times. They encouraged Browning to write for the theatre. *Strafford* (1837), a historical tragedy in blank verse, was written at the instigation of Macready who produced it on the day of its publication, in Covent Garden with himself in the title role. (If you have read British history you would recall that Sir Thomas Wentworth, first earl (1593-1641) of Strafford was the chief advisor of Charles I). In the meantime Browning helped Forster to write the biography of Strafford.

Browning found writing plays more congenial to his temper because it allowed him to escape his subjective emotions and for the next ten years he wrote plays that were published along with his shorter dramatic poems under the title *Bells and Pomegranates* (1841-46). These were a series of eight pamphlets that were published as one volume after 1846. *Pippa Passes* (1841), *A Blot in the Scutcheon* (1845) and *A Soul's Tragedy* (1846) were among the better known plays of his. As a playwright, however, Browning was not much successful. The reason, Browning himself pointed out, was his emphasis on 'Action in character, rather than character in Action'.

The third and seventh pamphlets in the series (1842, 1845) were devoted to short poems. These included 'My Last Duchess', 'Soliloquy of a Spanish Cloister', 'The Pied Piper of Hamelin', 'How they Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix' (16-), 'Pietor Ignotus', 'Florence 15 -', 'The Lost Leader', 'Home Thoughts from Abroad' and 'The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St Praxed's Church'. These were lively, carried the force of emotion but were often learned. They wrote a contemporary reviewer, 'look as though already packed up and on their way to posterity'. However, Landor opined thus:

Since Chaucer was alive and hale  
No man has walked along our road with step  
So active, so inquiring eye, or tongue  
So varied in discourse.

It was clear to Landor that Browning was in the tradition of Chaucer, Shakespeare and Donne.

The reason for the choice of his title *Bells and Pomegranates*, however, was not clear to anyone until Browning had explained it in the last number of the publication. It indicated, Browning pointed out, 'an alternation or mixture, of music with discoursing, sound with sense, poetry with thought' which [looked] too ambitious, thus expressed, so the symbol was preferred'.

One of the contemporary poets who admired Browning's early poems was Elizabeth Barrett (1806-61) daughter and eldest of the twelve children of Edward Moulton Barrett, a rich proprietor of Jamaican plantations. She came to know Browning from his writing and sent her two volumes of her *Poems* (1844) which he received on his return from a trip to Italy. In some of the poems in these volumes she had praised Browning and the latter responded through a telegram on 10 January, 1845: 'I love your poems, dear Miss Barrett, and I love you too.' However, it was not until the May of 1845 that he was allowed to call.

Almost everything appeared to be inopportune when Browning met Elizabeth Barrett in 1845. She was six years older than him. In 1838 she had fallen ill seriously due to a broken blood vessel and was sent to Torquay to recover. There her eldest brother Edward was drowned to her lifelong grief. As a result she returned to London in 1841, still an invalid. On top of these Mr. Barrett was a tyrannical father and he had forbidden any of his children to marry. Browning found Elizabeth in her invalid's