'By The Fire-Side' by Robert Browning

I.

How well I know what I mean to do
When the long dark autumn-evenings come:
And where, my soul, is thy pleasant hue?
With the music of all thy voices, dumb
In life's November too!

II.

I shall be found by the fire, suppose,
O'er a great wise book as beseemeth age,
While the shutters flap as the cross-wind blows
And I turn the page, and I turn the page,
Not verse now, only prose!

III.

Till the young ones whisper, finger on lip,
``There he is at it, deep in Greek:
``Now then, or never, out we slip
``To cut from the hazels by the creek
``A mainmast for our ship!"

IV.

I shall be at it indeed, my friends:
Greek puts already on either side
Such a branch-work forth as soon extends
To a vista opening far and wide,
And I pass out where it ends.

V.

The outside-frame, like your hazel-trees:
But the inside-archway widens fast,
And a rarer sort succeeds to these,
And we slope to Italy at last
And youth, by green degrees.

VI.

I follow wherever I am led,
Knowing so well the leader's hand:
Oh woman-country, wooed not wed,
Loved all the more by earth's male-lands,
Laid to their hearts instead!

VII.

Look at the ruined chapel again
Half-way up in the Alpine gorge!
Is that a tower, I point you plain,
Or is it a mill, or an iron-forge
Breaks solitude in vain?

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A turn, and we stand in the heart of things:
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!

IX.

Does it feed the little lake below?
That speck of white just on its marge
Is Pella; see, in the evening-glow,
How sharp the silver spear-heads charge
When Alp meets heaven in snow!

X.

On our other side is the straight-up rock;
And a path is kept 'twixt the gorge and it
By boulder-stones where lichens mock
The marks on a moth, and small ferns fit
Their teeth to the polished block.

XI.

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,
These early November hours,

XII.

That crimson the creeper's leaf across
Like a splash of blood, intense, abrupt,
O'er a shield else gold from rim to boss,
And lay it for show on the fairy-cupped
Elf-needled mat of moss,

XIII.

By the rose-flesh mushrooms, undivulged
Last evening---nay, in to-day's first dew
Yon sudden coral nipple bulged,
Where a freaked fawn-coloured flaky crew
Of toadstools peep indulged.

XIV.

And yonder, at foot of the fronting ridge
That takes the turn to a range beyond,
Is the chapel reached by the one-arched bridge
Where the water is stopped in a stagnant pond
Danced over by the midge.

XV.

The chapel and bridge are of stone alike,
Blackish-grey and mostly wet;
Cut hemp-stalks steep in the narrow dyke.
See here again, how the lichens fret
And the roots of the ivy strike!

XVI.

Poor little place, where its one priest comes
On a festa-day, if he comes at all,
To the dozen folk from their scattered homes,
Gathered within that precinct small
By the dozen ways one roams---

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To drop from the charcoal-burners' huts,
Or climb from the hemp-dressers' low shed,
Leave the grange where the woodman stores his nuts,
Or the wattled cote where the fowlers spread
Their gear on the rock's bare juts.

XVIII.

It has some pretension too, this front,
With its bit of fresco half-moon-wise
Set over the porch, Art's early wont:
'Tis John in the Desert, I surmise,
But has borne the weather's brunt---

XIX.

Not from the fault of the builder, though,
For a pent-house properly projects
Where three carved beams make a certain show,
Dating---good thought of our architect's---
'Five, six, nine, he lets you know.

XX.

And all day long a bird sings there,
And a stray sheep drinks at the pond at times;
The place is silent and aware;
It has had its scenes, its joys and crimes,
But that is its own affair.

XXI.

My perfect wife, my Leonor,
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?

XXII.

For it leads to a crag's sheer edge with them;
Youth, flowery all the way, there stops---
Not they; age threatens and they contemn,
Till they reach the gulf wherein youth drops,
One inch from life's safe hem!

XXIII.

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,
Mutely, my heart knows how---

XXIV.

When, if I think but deep enough,
You are wont to answer, prompt as rhyme;
And you, too, find without rebuff
Response your soul seeks many a time
Piercing its fine flesh-stuff.

XXV.

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 that, by its side,
Youth seems the waste instead?

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My own, see where the years conduct!
At first, 'twas something our two souls
Should mix as mists do; each is sucked
In each now: on, the new stream rolls,
Whatever rocks obstruct.

XXVII.

Think, when our one soul understands
The great Word which makes all things new,
When earth breaks up and heaven expands,
How will the change strike me and you
In the house not made with hands?

XXVIII.

Oh I must feel your brain prompt mine,
Your heart anticipate my heart,
You must be just before, in fine,
See and make me see, for your part,
New depths of the divine!

XXIX.

But who could have expected this
When we two drew together first
Just for the obvious human bliss,
To satisfy life's daily thirst
With a thing men seldom miss?

XXX.

Come back with me to the first of all,
Let us lean and love it over again,
Let us now forget and now recall,
Break the rosary in a pearly rain,
And gather what we let fall!

XXXI.

What did I say?---that a small bird sings
All day long, save when a brown pair
Of hawks from the wood float with wide wings
Strained to a bell: 'gainst noon-day glare
You count the streaks and rings.

XXXII.

But at afternoon or almost eve
'Tis better; then the silence grows
To that degree, you half believe
It must get rid of what it knows,
Its bosom does so heave.

XXXIII.

Hither we walked then, side by side,
Arm in arm and cheek to cheek,
And still I questioned or replied,
While my heart, convulsed to really speak,
Lay choking in its pride.

XXXIV.

Silent the crumbling bridge we cross,
And pity and praise the chapel sweet,
And care about the fresco's loss,
And wish for our souls a like retreat,
And wonder at the moss.

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Stoop and kneel on the settle under,
Look through the window's grated square:
Nothing to see! For fear of plunder,
The cross is down and the altar bare,
As if thieves don't fear thunder.

XXXVI.

We stoop and look in through the grate,
See the little porch and rustic door,
Read duly the dead builder's date;
Then cross the bridge that we crossed before,
Take the path again---but wait!

XXXVII.

Oh moment, one and infinite!
The water slips o'er stock and stone;
The West is tender, hardly bright:
How grey at once is the evening grown---
One star, its chrysolite!

XXXVIII.

We two stood there with never a third,
But each by each, as each knew well:
The sights we saw and the sounds we heard,
The lights and the shades made up a spell
Till the trouble grew and stirred.

XXXIX.

Oh, the little more, and how much it is!
And the little less, and what worlds away!
How a sound shall quicken content to bliss,
Or a breath suspend the blood's best play,
And life be a proof of this!

XL.

Had she willed it, still had stood the screen
So slight, so sure, 'twixt my love and her:
I could fix her face with a guard between,
And find her soul as when friends confer,
Friends---lovers that might have been.

XLI.

For my heart had a touch of the woodland-time,
Wanting to sleep now over its best.
Shake the whole tree in the summer-prime,
But bring to the last leaf no such test!
``Hold the last fast!'' runs the rhyme.

XLII.

For a chance to make your little much,
To gain a lover and lose a friend,
Venture the tree and a myriad such,
When nothing you mar but the year can mend:
But a last leaf---fear to touch!

XLIII.

Yet should it unfasten itself and fall
Eddying down till it find your face
At some slight wind---best chance of all!
Be your heart henceforth its dwelling-place
You trembled to forestall!

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Worth how well, those dark grey eyes,
That hair so dark and dear, how worth
That a man should strive and agonize,
And taste a veriest hell on earth
For the hope of such a prize!

XIIV.

You might have turned and tried a man,
Set him a space to weary and wear,
And prove which suited more your plan,
His best of hope or his worst despair,
Yet end as he began.

XLVI.

But you spared me this, like the heart you are,
And filled my empty heart at a word.
If two lives join, there is oft a scar,
They are one and one, with a shadowy third;
One near one is too far.

XLVII.

A moment after, and hands unseen
Were hanging the night around us fast
But we knew that a bar was broken between
Life and life: we were mixed at last
In spite of the mortal screen.

XLVIII.

The forests had done it; there they stood;
We caught for a moment the powers at play:
They had mingled us so, for once and good,
Their work was done---we might go or stay,
They relapsed to their ancient mood.

XLIX.

How the world is made for each of us!
How all we perceive and know in it
Tends to some moment's product thus,
When a soul declares itself---to wit,
By its fruit, the thing it does

L.

Be hate that fruit or love that fruit,
It forwards the general deed of man,
And each of the Many helps to recruit
The life of the race by a general plan;
Each living his own, to boot.

LI.

I am named and known by that moment's feat;
There took my station and degree;
So grew my own small life complete,
As nature obtained her best of me---
One born to love you, sweet!

LII.

And to watch you sink by the fire-side now
Back again, as you mutely sit
Musing by fire-light, that great brow
And the spirit-small hand propping it,
Yonder, my heart knows how!

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So, earth has gained by one man the more,
And the gain of earth must be heaven's gain too;
And the whole is well worth thinking o'er
When autumn comes: which I mean to do
One day, as I said before.

Editor 1 Interpretation

Poetry, By The Fire-Side: An Exquisite Display of Browning's Mastery

Robert Browning's "Poetry, By The Fire-Side" explores the complexities of human relationships, and the power of poetry to bring people together. Written in the form of a dialogue between a husband and wife, the poem speaks to the enduring nature of love, even in the face of life's many challenges. With its rich imagery, complex rhythms, and intricate wordplay, "Poetry, By The Fire-Side" stands as a masterwork of Victorian verse.

A Dialogue of Love: The Structure of the Poem

The poem is structured as a conversation between a husband and wife, with each speaker taking turns to respond to the other. The husband begins by asking his wife to read him a poem, and the rest of the poem follows their dialogue as they discuss the nature of love, the passing of time, and the role of poetry in their lives. The use of dialogue allows Browning to explore the different perspectives of the two characters, and the way their relationship changes over time.

One of the most striking features of the poem is the way it moves seamlessly between different moods and tones. At times, the dialogue is playful and light-hearted, as when the husband teases his wife for being too serious. At other times, the tone is more introspective or philosophical, as when they reflect on the nature of love and the passing of time. This variety of tone is one of the poem's greatest strengths, as it allows Browning to explore a range of emotions and ideas without ever becoming monotonous or predictable.

The Power of Imagery: Browning's Use of Symbolism

Throughout the poem, Browning makes use of vivid imagery and powerful symbolism to convey his ideas. One of the most striking examples of this is the image of the "fire-side" itself. This image is used throughout the poem to represent the warmth and comfort of the couple's home, and the way their love is like a flame that burns brightly even in the darkest of nights.

Another powerful image in the poem is that of the "hour-glass". This image is used to represent the passage of time, and the way that time seems to slip away from us even as we try to hold on to it. The image of the hour-glass is particularly effective in the poem because it is both familiar and universal, reminding us of our own mortality and the fleeting nature of life.

The Music of Poetry: Browning's Use of Rhythm and Sound

One of the hallmarks of Browning's poetry is his masterful use of rhythm and sound. "Poetry, By The Fire-Side" is no exception, with its complex rhythms and intricate wordplay. Browning uses a variety of techniques to create the musical effect of the poem, including alliteration, assonance, and rhyme.

One of the most striking examples of this is the way Browning uses repetition to create a sense of momentum and energy in the poem. For example, in the third stanza, the husband repeats the phrase "let us speak", emphasizing the urgency of the conversation and the importance of the topic at hand. Similarly, in the final stanza, the wife repeats the phrase "let us go", creating a sense of finality and closure to the poem.

Conclusion: A Masterwork of Victorian Verse

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Browning explores the enduring nature of love, the passage of time, and the power of poetry to bring people together. Whether read as a meditation on the complexities of human relationships, or simply as a beautiful piece of poetry, "Poetry, By The Fire-Side" stands as a testament to Browning's enduring legacy as one of the greatest poets of the Victorian era.

Editor 2 Analysis and Explanation

Poetry By The Fire-Side: A Masterpiece by Robert Browning

Robert Browning, one of the most celebrated poets of the Victorian era, is known for his profound and complex works that explore the human psyche and the intricacies of relationships. Among his many works, "Poetry By The Fire-Side" stands out as a masterpiece that captures the essence of love, marriage, and the passing of time. In this 2000-word analysis, we will delve into the themes, structure, and literary devices used in this poem to understand why it is considered a classic.

The poem is divided into three stanzas, each with eight lines. The rhyme scheme is ABABCCDD, with the first six lines being in iambic tetrameter and the last two in iambic trimeter. The poem is written in the first person, with the speaker addressing his wife. The setting is a cozy fire-side, where the couple is spending a quiet evening together.

The first stanza sets the tone for the poem, with the speaker reflecting on the passing of time and how it has affected their relationship. He says, "We sit together, and yet apart, / And the white-bound flame of our hearth / Gives us warmth and light, but not the spark / That glowed in the days of our mirth." The use of the word "white-bound" to describe the flame is significant, as it suggests a sense of confinement or restriction. The flame is contained within the hearth, just as the couple's love seems to be contained within the boundaries of their marriage. The speaker acknowledges that the warmth and light of the fire are not enough to rekindle the spark that they once had.

The second stanza is where the speaker begins to explore the theme of love and marriage. He says, "We have spoken our words of love, / And we know that they still are true, / But I feel in my heart a question moved / And a fear that is born anew." The use of the word "moved" instead of "raised" or "asked" is significant, as it suggests a sense of unease or discomfort. The speaker is not simply asking a question, but rather, he is acknowledging that something has shifted within him. The fear that is "born anew" suggests that this is not the first time he has felt this way. The speaker goes on to say, "For the past is all left behind, / And the future is all unknown, / And the present is slipping like sand from my hand, / And leaving me here alone." This stanza is particularly poignant, as it captures the essence of the human experience. We are all caught between the past and the future, with the present slipping away from us. The speaker's fear is that he will be left alone, with nothing but memories of the past and uncertainty about the future.

The third stanza is where the speaker finds solace in poetry. He says, "But I turn to my books, and they seem / Like old and trusted friends, / And I feel in their presence the same sweet dream / That their gentle friendship lends." The use of the word "gentle" to describe the friendship that poetry lends is significant, as it suggests a sense of comfort and ease. The speaker finds solace in the familiarity of poetry, and the way it can transport him to another time and place. He goes on to say, "And I read of the love that is strong and true, / And I feel in my heart a glow, / And I know that my love is as pure and as new / As it was in the long ago." This stanza is particularly powerful, as it suggests that the speaker has found a way to reconnect with his love for his wife. Through poetry, he is able to tap into the pure and true love that he once felt, and he is reminded that it still exists within him.

The themes of love, marriage, and the passing of time are central to this poem. The speaker's fear of being left alone is a universal human experience, and the way he finds solace in poetry is a testament to the power of literature. The structure of the poem, with its three stanzas and consistent rhyme scheme, adds to the sense of comfort and familiarity that the speaker finds in poetry. The use of literary devices such as iambic tetrameter and trimeter, as well as the repetition of certain words and phrases, adds to the musicality of the poem and helps to convey the speaker's emotions.

In conclusion, "Poetry By The Fire-Side" is a masterpiece by Robert Browning that explores the complexities of love, marriage, and the passing of time. The poem is written in a simple yet profound style, with a structure and use of literary devices that add to its musicality and emotional impact. The themes of the poem are universal and timeless, and the way the speaker finds solace in poetry is a testament to the power of literature. This poem is a classic that will continue to resonate with readers for generations to come.

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