

Living Life to the Fullest

Having the title and responsibility of a grammarian during the time of the Renaissance is looked at as one of the most influential and important jobs of a lifetime. Being given the chance to sit down with ancient literature and study text in which others could understand, which then allowed us to enrich our knowledge has furthered our existence to a point where no one thought we could have ever achieved. Many devoted their lives to studying and researching text in hopes of not only enlightening their lives, but for everyone else as well. Robert Browning explores the life of a grammarian and focuses on the sacrifices he makes. The speaker, who is his student, praises the scholar for his life that he gave to his works, and a sense of irony comes through as well that suggests the grammarian devoted too much of his life to his work. This irony shows the distinction of the speaker and Browning which in turn gives the dramatic monologue its power.

The rhyme scheme in Browning’s poem is consistent throughout, which shows a sense of order. The scheme is ababcbdefef, and this gives a flow to the poem, and also a the feeling of marching that the men are doing. They are taking their master up to a mountain for his burial, and having this scheme makes the footsteps of the men come alive through the words. There are parentheses that are placed in the poem that hold commands from the student speaker. He directs them to go through the town, and right as they make it to the market-place, he tells them to “Hearten our chorus!” (76) These

parentheses not only show that the student is assuming the position of the new master, but the praise for the grammarian is felt in these commands. He wants his fellow students to go through the town and let everyone know who their master was, let them hear his trials and what he went through in his life. The student verbalizes in line 102 and says “He loves the burthen,” making it clear that even though he gave his life for his works, the love for it was enough to keep him going. One can see irony coming through here, for would a person want their work to be burdensome? The beginning of this poem sets the reader’s idea up for this grammarian as one who is thought of very highly.

The description of where these students wish to bury their master is to be at the top of a mountain, and more particularly, “one that the rest excels” (17). He is described as “our master, famous, calm, and dead, / Bourne on our shoulders” (27-28). Being referred to as master shows the students see him as their leader, and famous further emphasizes the height at which they see the grammarian. Having him “Bourne” on their shoulders symbolically shows how much they praised and honored him, that he belongs up in heaven with God for all that he has done with life. These students praise him because they too have been trained to give their existence for studying literature and language, and this is the very thing that Browning frowns upon. He was born just as any other man, “with [a] face and throat,” (33) and instead “he lived nameless: how should spring take note / Winter would follow? / Till lo, the little touch, and youth was gone!” (35-37). Growing up through your early years is when most information is absorbed and the character of who you are develops. Browning here shows that instead of using the knowledge he is learning through the books, he occupies his time so much that the seasons go by quickly, and before he knows it, his youth has passed. Praising life is one

of the ideas that Browning lives by, and once the poem hits line 50, there is even more of an emphasis on living for books rather than life.

Straight got by heart that book to its last page:
Learned, we found him.
Yea, but we found him bald too, eyes like lead,
Accents uncertain:
“Time to taste life,” another would have said,
“Up with the curtain!”
This man said rather, “Actual life comes next?”

(51-57)

The students see that the grammarian devoted his time to books until the very last page and took it straight to his heart. They found his mind completely wrapped around the text, so mind body and soul was dedicated to the book. The physical attributes of the man are deteriorating due to the studying, and to the students, this seems noble of him. A taste of irony comes through in these lines, making it seem outrageous for a man to lose hair and have heavy eyes from strenuous studying. The opinion of Browning is in the next lines, saying “time to taste life” (55). The alliteration further intensifies this statement. To taste life gives images of sampling all different types of things, which also causes people to learn and grow. The grammarian thinks he is learning about life through books, but would get a better idea if he were to go out in the world and try new and exciting things. For the grammarian to say that actual life comes next is a true statement, but he also needs to realize that God put us on this earth to live the life he has blessed us with. Browning continually uses the words like live, know, and books to show how he viewed text:

Grant I have mastered learning’s crabbed text,
Still there’s the comment.
Let me know all!

.....

Even to the crumbs I'd fain eat up the feast,
Ay, nor feel queasy."
Oh, such a life as he resolved to live,
When he had learned it,
When he had gathered all books had to give!

(59-61, 63-37)

The grammarian is speaking at the beginning of the quote, and he continually refers to learning. He claims he has learned difficult text, but the when he refers to "comment," he means what others have to say about the books he has already read, so he further wishes to read more books about the books he has already read! This shows just how redundant Browning wants the grammarian to look in his quest for knowledge. The feeling of queasiness that he does not fear of having if he feasts upon crumbs can be compared to the books and knowledge he has spent his life reading. No matter how small the text, he wants his mind to absorb it. The grammarian however, is not supposed to be concerned with things to feast upon. To feast is to indulge in something, and being a grammarian and talking of feasting is ironic. They are supposed to be ascetic, and for him to be so focused and in a way obsessed with only books makes him seem self-indulgent. The repetitive use of live is Browning internally emphasizing life, and it was not the books he gave, but actually his life instead. As poem continues, the theme of time and life are touched on more.

The praise of the grammarian continues when the student refers to those to talk of living for today as mistrusting in line 81. Those that mistrust say "But time escapes: / Live now or never!" The grammarian's response to that claim is "What's time? Leave Now for dogs and apes! / Man has forever" (83-84). His conception of time is a diluted.

He looks at time as if it were something expendable, questioning what it is, and even thinks animals are the creatures that should focus on spend time wisely. He feels that when he gets to heaven, the time he spent with his books will be returned to him in heaven. The capitalization of “Now” causes it to stand out to the reader, showing that Browning wants us to notice the “now” that surrounds us and not to neglect it like the grammarian does. The end of the poem is where the height of the irony comes through.

More description of the grammarian is provided in lines 85-89, and to the students, makes him out to be a strong and almost invincible:

Back to his book then: deeper dropped his head:
Calculus racked him.
Leaden before, his eyes grew dross of lead:
Tussis attacked him.
“Now, master, take a rest!”—not he!

.....
Not a whit troubled,
Back to his studies, fresher than a first,
Fierce as a dragon

The texts being studied are now not books of literature, but of calculus. Any literature can take a toll on a person, and math will especially take time for a man to understand. The cough, or “tussis,” as well as calculus are italicized. Browning wants to focus the readers attention on those two words, showing that he has in fact moved on to mathematics, and that he is not willing to stop, even for his health. To the students, it seems and looks noble, but to Browning, the irony of comparing a man who has a “dropped head,” and eyes full of lead, should not be compared to a dragon. Dragons are not seen as old, sick, cramped up men, but the strong and, just as Browning says, fierce. The root of Browning’s irony comes from the grammarian not living his life to the extent in which most people do. Line 112 has a description of life as having a “pale lure.” Since

he has not gone out and seen the world, of course he is going to look at life as having no color and boring. He relies on the after life, thinking about “heaven’s success” and “earth’s failure.” God gives life to us not to be seen as a failure, but to say we thrived at life and to be able to look towards greater success in heaven. One of the most pivotal moments in the poem is when lower and higher men are compared.

That low man seeks a little thing to do.
Sees it and does it:
This high man, with a great thing to pursue,
Dies ere he knows it.
That low man goes on adding one to one,
His hundred’s soon hit:
This high man, aiming at a million,
Misses an unit.

(113-120)

When the low man’s doings are described, it seems as if he is not doing things throughout his life that are worth being seen in God’s eyes. The first line talks of little things to do, and once that “little thing” realized is realized, he focuses on it. That is Browning’s way of living day by day. Waking up each day and realizing what one must do to make the best out of that day allows him to be able to reflect on that small thing, and it is the small things in life that bring us pleasure. “Adding one to one,” or going year to year, is what people should do. Remembering our life through each year gives us the chance to reflect, and once that hundred hits, it will not be a wasted hundred years. The great man however, has a singular thing that he focuses on in his life. And from this one “great” thing, time flies by. Browning even says that as the time goes by, he misses and dies before he knows it. The last four lines of the poem have alliteration weaved throughout, particularly focusing on the letter L:

Lofty designs must close in like effects:
Lofty lying,
Leave him—still loftier than the world suspects,
Living and dying.

(145-148)

The word lofty means to be exalted and elevated in character. From the student's point of view, this is a very appropriate way to end the praise of their master. They have made it clear how high they hold him in their minds, and lying in the ground as close to the heavens is what they see best fits him. God himself is an exalted being, and so is their teacher. Browning however is once again using the letter L to bring life back to the minds of his readers. The grammarian did not live his life to give him the title of being lofty, but in actuality shut himself up in a room and died slowly through his years. He went straight from living to dying, with nothing in between.

To study life and not actually live it is a sin to Browning. A man that devotes his life to text and does not share it with others and use it to his advantage is shutting himself out to the rest of the world. You cannot devote your life to art and not notice the art that God has put on this earth for us to see. Browning says it best in line 139 by saying "This man decided not to Live but Know—" with emphasis on the capitalization of live and know. Taking what you learn from art and using it to better life is what God wishes for his people on earth, and once the after life comes, then can reflection happen. If you do not use your life to it's full potential though, then no reflection can happen, and the gift of life that was given is a waste.

Words with quotations: 2, 253
Words without quotations: 1,993

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