

THE PATRIOT- AN OLD STORY

Robert Browning

About the poem

The Patriot is a **dramatic monologue** written by the renowned English poet and playwright Robert Browning. He is well known for his dramatic monologues and is widely celebrated as one of the foremost poets of the Victorian era. In this poem, Browning talks about Politics, Patriotism, Religious faith, and the harsh reality of the leaders who are true to their sense of patriotism. It speaks about the sacrifice of such leaders who are misunderstood by the people.

Form and structure of the poem

The Patriot has a curious structure of six stanzas of five lines each. A quick scan reveals that the poem is not based on a **strict metre**. The length of a majority of lines is nine syllables, with a few going a syllable or two beyond that mark. Instead of the metre the musical quality is achieved by the careful placement of words.

The poem has a clear rhyme scheme of **ababa** which is carried and maintained throughout all the stanzas of the poem. As with any good poem with a definitive rhyme, this one too seems to have made a prodigal use of **assonance** and consonance.

Robert Browning

English poet

Robert Browning was an English poet and playwright whose mastery of the dramatic monologue made him one of the foremost Victorian poets. His poems are known for their irony, characterization, dark humour, social commentary, historical settings, and challenging vocabulary and syntax.

Monologue

In theatre, a monologue is a speech presented by a single character, most often to express their mental thoughts aloud, though sometimes also to direct address another character or the audience. Monologues are common across the range of dramatic media, as well as in non-dramatic media such as poetry.

Commented [VP1]: Meter is a stressed and unstressed syllabic pattern in a verse, or within the lines of a poem. Stressed syllables tend to be longer, and unstressed shorter. In simple language, meter is a poetic device that serves as a linguistic sound pattern for the verses, as it gives poetry a rhythmical and melodious sound.

Assonance is a resemblance in the sounds of words/syllables either between their vowels or between their consonants. However, assonance between consonants is generally called consonance in American usage.

Consonance is a stylistic literary device identified by the repetition of identical or similar consonants in neighbouring words whose vowel sounds are different. Consonance may be regarded as the counterpart to the vowel-sound repetition known as assonance.

Stanza I

It was roses, roses, all the way,
With myrtle mixed in my path like mad:
The house-roofs seemed to heave and sway,
The church-spires flamed, such flags they had,
A year ago on this very day.

The poem starts with the patriot describing an event – a grand public welcome – that took place a year ago on that very same day. He is reminiscing the past, and he builds a picture for us as he remembers that day. His walking path was covered with lots and lots of rose petals, with myrtle mixed in them. The path was festooned with these flowers for him.

People standing on the roofs of their houses cheered for him as he passed by. They were overjoyed to see him. The spires of the church – pointed tapering roofs we generally see on old cathedrals and similar buildings – were covered with flaming flags that the people had put up for a celebration. People were overwhelmingly delighted to greet their hero and were enthusiastic to see him as he passed by.

It is only logical to assume that this grand celebration must be as a result of some achievement on the speaker's part. Perhaps it was a victory in war or the assemblage for fighting one, or winning a popular election to an office, or being nominated as a ruler, or maybe something else. It can be assumed at this point in the poem that it concerned the common people highly, and they were happy on the occasion. The patriot is seen as a public hero in this stanza who is greeted with much love and affection by the commoners.

The first stanza is a description of the Patriots feelings towards his Country, or perhaps to his religion as the church is mentioned near the end of the stanza. Browning uses a metaphor saying 'it was roses, roses all the way', in which he is describing elated feelings of love, dedication and happiness through the word roses. The Patriot is euphoric toward his Country, he is full of energy and he sees everything with life and energy, even the houses and church spires. The last line of the stanza tells us that this energetic time of the Patriots life is not the present, but rather something that occurred a year ago. The stanza can also be taken literally, and in that case, it could mean that when he first arrived in this Country people had thrown flowers at him, and everyone had been out cheering for him in excitement, urging him on to make their Country proud. Alliteration is seen in this stanza with Myrtle-mixed-my-mad and flames-flag.

Stanza II

The air broke into a mist with bells,
The old walls rocked with the crowd and cries.
Had I said, "Good folk, mere noise repels--
But give me your sun from yonder skies!"
They had answered, "And afterward, what else?"

Commented [VP2]: Yonder is old English term for indicating something far off.

In the second stanza of the poem, the speaker continues narrating the old story from the same day a year ago. He describes the event to the readers. People were rejoicing by ringing bells and the entire atmosphere was thick with its noise. They were standing on some kind of old structure and cheering for the patriot with their cries rocking the walls.

Now the patriot says, had he asked the public for anything – even the dearest things on which their sustenance depends – they would have readily given it to him; such great was his image. They would then ask him what else he wanted.

We can see the exuberance of the people at the sight of the. The poet is trying to establish the kind of popularity the speaker had through this stanza.

Stanza III

Alack, it was I who leaped at the sun
To give it my loving friends to keep!
Nought man could do, have I left undone:
And you see my harvest, what I reap
This very day, now a year is run.

The third stanza of the poem is the speaker's discourse on what all he did for his country. It begins with the poet giving a subtle reference to the old Greek mythological tale of Icarus and Daedalus. Icarus was the son of the great Inventor Daedalus and the story revolves around the escape of these two men from a high tower where they were held prisoners by making wings out of bird feathers and wax. Icarus, taken aback with the ability of flight, flies too close to the sun, which causes the wax in his wings melt and his eventual fall which kills him.

Just like Icarus, the speaker admits that he too was overly ambitious and 'leaped at the sun'. Giving the sun his "loving friends to keep" may suggest that his actions somehow caused the death of his

close friends. Here again, we can hypothesize that the patriot is talking about some battle that claimed the lives of his dear ones.

He did everything a man could have done to make things right. Despite this he is facing his undeserved end. He calls to attention the miserable state he is in. The terms 'harvest' and 'reap' are closely seen as common metaphors for karma, and the poet uses this to convey that what he is facing is not what he truly deserves. He says it has been a year since that day.

Another hypothesis can be that the speaker admits that he was fool enough to try to achieve beyond his limit. In fact, the praises of the countrymen made him too confident to become over-ambitious. Here Browning metaphorically alludes to mythical Icarus. Icarus received his downfall when he became too ambitious to fly towards the sun with his wax wings. Similarly, just like Icarus, the speaker is going to face his downfall which he now realizes after a year.

At the end of this stanza, the poet ends the speaker's flashback and goes on to the present time from the next stanza.

Stanza IV

There's nobody on the house-tops now--

Just a palsied few at the windows set;

For the best of the sight is, all allow,

At the Shambles' Gate---or, better yet,

By the very scaffold's foot, I trow,

The speaker returns to the present and talks about what he sees. He describes the present setting and in a way contrasts it with the one on the same day a year ago. Now he has been convicted and is being led to the gallows to be put to death.

As opposed to the setting in the first stanza, now the place is all empty. Now there's nobody on the roof-tops cheering him. Only old men who are taken down by palsy (a disease) and unable to cross the threshold of their houses are watching the patriot as he marches towards his death.

The reason why no one is there to see the speaker is because people have gathered at the Shambles' gate, the gate of the gallows, to see him die. The people want to be where the action is. The speaker further makes the heart-touching comment that the best sight is at the gate of the slaughterhouse, or at the very foot of the scaffold.

Commented [VP3]: Palsied: paralyzed; unable to move or control muscles. Indicates that only a few people left on windows.

Commented [VP4]: "Shambles" is an obsolete term for an open-air slaughterhouse and meat market. In contemporary usage, "a shambles" is a mess. **Shambles** or **The Shambles** may also refer to: **The Shambles**, an old street in York, England

Commented [VP5]: Scaffold: a raised wooden platform used formerly for the public execution of criminals.

Commented [VP6]: Trow: an archaic verb form for think or believe

Stanza V

I go in the rain, and, more than needs,
A rope cuts both my wrists behind;
And I think, by the feel, my forehead bleeds,
For they fling, whoever has a mind,
Stones at me for my year's misdeeds.

The fifth stanza is the continuation of the previous one and further describes the speaker's humiliation at the hands of the people. The poet starts with filling up the setting even more. It is raining as the speaker is walking towards the scaffold. His hands are tied behind by a tight rope – so tight that it cuts his wrists. He has now arrived closer to the 'Shambles' Gate' where all the people are gathered. The patriot is in his own mind, knowing the steadfast certainty of death ahead of him.

As he is walking, he thinks he is bleeding from his forehead. He can only feel the trickling of blood. People throwing stones at him are causing the injuries. It is really ironical to note that stones have replaced the petals of roses in just span of one year! He says that the people who are throwing stones are the ones who have an active mind and are aware of his 'misdeeds'. The speaker doesn't seem to be angry with these people for throwing stones at him. It suggests, that despite the treatment he is receiving, he doesn't blame the people; he knows that they have misunderstood him.

We know from the previous stanzas that the patriot had done literally everything in his power to satisfy his people, he had many accomplishments under his belt, but he was still being executed at the end. He may be using sarcasm here by stating that those with a brain were hating on him even while he was being hung or he may be stating how everyone else was so idle and ignorant, so forgetful and static that at least those who threw the rocks at him had some sort of passion, some sort of understanding, whether right or wrong, for why they were watching him die in the first place. The Patriot mentions that he walks in the rain as he's going up to be executed. This could be literal rain, creating a mood of depression and dismay. This rain could also be metaphorical; referring to him being cleansed of his desire to please people and cleansed of sin before he died because his execution was completely unjust.

Stanza VI

Thus I entered, and thus I go!
In triumphs, people have dropped down dead,
"Paid by the world, what dost thou owe
"Me?"---God might question; now instead,

'Tis God shall repay: I am safer so.

The last stanza of the poem reflects on the patriot's death. It is full of philosophical and religious ideas. "Thus I entered and thus I go" – his entry and exit from life, position and people's minds in the presence of so many others – sums up the speaker's life well.

He says that in (his) triumphs, people have dropped (him) down dead. This suggests that he looks at his predicament as a triumph. He believes that he stood by the right things and thus considers himself victorious in defeat.

The final three lines of the stanza deal with the ideas of the speaker. Yet again we see Browning's stout religious belief. He believes that god might say "Your sins were already washed away when you died. The people sought to it. They punished you; what now do you expect from me? You are now free of all corruption". Thus, the patriot thinks that the punishment he got in the mortal world has purged him, and that he hopes to go to heaven instead of hell. He feels safer knowing that god knows he stood for what he thought was right and thus he will be safe under him.

This final stanza refers to the chapter of death in the Patriots life. He feels himself die and as a final thought occurs to him, he is not sacred or full of hate, but rather he is pleased and even relieved that at-least now he is going to God, who will judge him justly. For God sees all and knows all, unlike human beings who react to only what their limited knowledge allows them to understand. This final stanza also brings forward the point that this entire story could have been about a man, patriotic to his religion, who gained a respectable position in the church and society but he began to question his religion and in doing so underwent great lengths in order to find out more about other religions, and people saw him as an apostate and had him hung. However, Browning's mentioning of triumphs in this stanza makes it most likely that this was the story of a hero of a Country who was forgotten and then killed.

Critical Summary

The speaker of the poem is a patriot. The poem is a monologue of this 'patriot speaker' who narrates his tale to us as he has been taken to the scaffold to be executed publicly for his 'misdeeds'. He tells us of his situation: how he was once well loved by everyone, and how he is now despised by the same people. The patriot is innocent of having done any misdeeds, and it is only out of the misunderstanding of the people that he is being put to death. His death sentence is for the wrong reason, and although he's tried to persuade the people to listen to him, it has done him no good.

The Patriot is a tragic tale of a man who fell from being a star citizen to becoming despised so intensely that he was put to death. The entire poem is based on irony as the people who once used to revere the man and put him on a pedestal became the same people who deserted him and even killed him at the end. *The Patriot* is divided into six stanzas, each of which is a different chapter of the Patriots life. Browning uses the poetic devices of irony, metaphors, imagery, and alliteration to show the reader the uncertain nature of society. Society is very dynamic in the people they choose to support. Entire nations can switch sides instantaneously without care or worry about what happens to those they left behind.

The Patriot also has a Sub-heading titled 'An Old Story' this is much like the title of a novel. The Presence of a sub-heading supports the idea that Browning designed his poem to be read as a story, in which each stanza is actually a chapter.