

"Oh, to be in England, / Now that April's there": Nature as a Metaphor of Longing for the Homeland in Robert Browning's "Home-Thoughts, from Abroad"

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Abstract

This paper examines Robert Browning's treatment of nature in 'Home-Thoughts, from Abroad', showing how the natural world and its elements in the poem reflect the poet's nostalgia for England, his motherland. The paper begins with an introduction that briefly sheds light on Browning as a prominent Victorian poet with a Romantic passion, his literary career, and personal life, particularly his marriage and travel to Italy that kept him homesick. In addition, a theoretical background about nature in Browning's poetry is given, revealing how the poet fondly followed the example of the great Romantic predecessors but at the same time differed from them in his way of handling nature and interacting with its beauties. Then, the researcher provides a detailed analysis of 'Home-Thoughts, from Abroad', explaining how the images of nature in the poem convey Browning's message and reflect the longing for his native land.

Keywords: Nature, Romanticism, nostalgia, longing, homeland, Robert Browning, 'Home-Thoughts, from Abroad'

Introduction

A leading English poet from the Victorian era, Robert Browning (1812-1889) is known for his mastery of the dramatic monologue technique which figures outstandingly in many of his poems such as 'Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister', 'My Last Duchess', and 'Porphyria's Lover'. Other famous poems by Browning are 'The Pied Piper of Hamelin', 'Hilde Roland to the Dark Tower', 'The Lost Leader', 'The Laboratory', and 'Meeting at Night'. Notable among his prose works is *Essay on Shelley*. In addition to poetry and prose, Browning was keen to try his hand on drama; he wrote many distinctive plays such as *King Victor and King Charles*, *Colombe's Birthday*, and *In a Balcony*. According to Britta Martens, Browning's literary career can be divided into three major phases:

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the initial Romantic period, during which he created fictional heroes as thinly disguised *alter egos* of himself; the objective dramatic monologues of the middle period, which cancel out the poet's voice; and the return to a more subjective stance in the late poems, in which he often voices his personal beliefs directly or through the mask of his speaker. (19)

Thus, the poet's eagerness for Nature and Romanticism significantly characterizes the first stage of his literary development.

Browning's personal life took a new direction when he met the English poet Elizabeth Barrett in 1845. The two poets admired each other and had a love story that finally developed into marriage. Barrett's most famous work, *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, written between 1845 and 1846 and published in 1850, recounts the details and traces the progress of the couple's romantic relationship. In 1846, the Brownings travelled to Italy where they spent fifteen years till the death of Elizabeth in 1861. In Italy, Browning felt homesick and longed for every detail of his mother country. Accordingly, he wrote "Home-Thoughts, from Abroad" which reflects the speaker's feelings as a nostalgic traveller and describes the natural beauty of the English countryside.

Nature in the Poetry of Robert Browning

Nature is a significant theme in Victorian literature in general and in Browning's poetry in particular. Two great poets, Tennyson and Browning were among the Victorian poets who took the lead in dealing with nature and writing about it in their poetry. Henry James maintains this idea of dealing with nature in Victorian poetry. "A passionate scrutiny of Nature...culminated in England, in our day, with Tennyson and Browning," James states, chiefly referring to Browning's poetry handling nature as "an extraordinary accumulation of sentiment, a perfect entanglement of emotion" (316). Though not mainly a romantic poet, Browning had a special attachment to nature and adopted a true appreciation of the natural world. A careful reading of his poetry indicates that nature features heavily in his poetry. As Suzanne Edwards observes,

Some of his poems are set in grassy meadows; some on snow-topped mountain peaks; some in parched deserts. He is fond of water: glittering waterfalls, quiet brooks, stormy seas, summer rains. . . He writes of brightly-colored flowers—violets, poppies, cyclamen, daisies, tulips, sunflowers, and fennel--and of wild vegetation—lichen, ferns, and toadstools. (1)

Browning's travel accounts reflect his deep love of nature whose sceneries he closely observes and fascinatingly describes. During their stay in Italy, Browning and Barrett often travelled from Casa Guidi, where they resided, to other villages and towns in Italy, Switzerland, and France where they enjoyed nature and its beautiful landscape.

For Browning, the treatment of nature has a purpose that differs from that of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelly, Blake, Keats, and other Romantic poets. Significantly, the Romantics placed nature at the heart of their works to describe its elements, convey its beauty, and reflect its spiritual significance, symbolic aspect, and unprecedented power in providing man with companionship, relief, and serenity. Put another way, for the Romantics, nature is what one can turn to "for guidance, spiritual sustenance, and psychic restoration" (Chunhong 5). As for Browning, the matter is different. Of course, he realized all these blessings of nature and undoubtedly enjoyed most of them as he had his close observation and vivid portrayal of the natural world. His poetry also reveals a sense of gratitude for God Who created nature and its fascinating world. The speaker in his poem 'Fra Lippo Lippi' feels thankful to the Creator for

The beauty and the wonder and the power,
The shapes of things, their colours, lights and shades,
Changes, surprises,—and God made it all! (*Selections* 168)

Despite all this, Browning mainly treated nature to establish a certain mood or to convey a particular feeling rather than to describe nature for the sake of nature itself.; there is always an implied goal behind approaching the natural world, exactly as the case is in the above-quoted lines through which he aims to set up the mood of gratitude for the Creator, and also as the case is in 'Home-Thoughts, from Abroad', the poem under discussion, in which the primary purpose of the poet is to reveal, through the suggestive images of

nature, the feelings of homesickness and yearning for his homeland. Shedding more light on the way Browning handles nature, William Raymond writes,

While as a follower of the Romantic era he inherits its love of nature, he rarely describes nature for her own sake. Though there is much fine landscape painting in his poems, this is the background rather than the foreground of his canvas. Nature is subordinated to man. His portrayal of her is selective, designed to illustrate and enhance, either by likeness or contrast, those human moods or states which are the dominating motifs of his poetry. (116)

Like the Romantics, Browning believed in the idea of change and dynamism, but he differs from them in the way change is viewed. While the great predecessors perceived change as a constituent of a comprehensive process that finally leads to an evolving, harmonious universe, Browning saw change as a process with no definite purpose. As Professor Clyde Rayls explains in his significant book titled *Becoming Browning: The Poems and Plays of Robert Browning 1833 1846*, whereas the Romantics "envisioned change as part of a revolutionary process leading to a new heaven and a new earth, Browning views change as a process without *telos*" (3).

The function achieved by imagination is another crucial point in which Browning adopts a point of view dissimilar to that of the foremost Romantic poets, Coleridge and Shelley in particular. In the words of Professor Rayls,

Coleridge, for example, speaks. . .of the imagination as the means of synthesizing or reconciling opposites. And Shelley alludes everywhere in his work. . . to the encounter of the self with the Absolute in moments of harmonious union. . . . Browning, on the other hand, maintains that it is the function of the imagination not to reconcile opposites but to transcend them by accepting them as antinomies. (3)

These are some literary views that make Browning's poetry dealing with nature different from the poetry of the Romantics, the great predecessors whom he adored and followed, especially in his earlier work, but at the same time, adopted viewpoints that sometimes oppose theirs. Nevertheless, Browning remains an authentic voice and an

honest interpreter of nature and its beauties, a skilled observer of the fascinating symphonies played by its creatures: plants, flowers, birds, ants, and all kinds of animals, even the savage ones. In her book *Browning and His Century*, Helen Clarke reveals Browning's fondness of nature and its creatures, showing the details of this close bond between the poet and the natural world. Clarke states,

He touches upon plant life and animal life. The grass grows bright, the boughs are swollen with blooms, ants make their ado, birds fly in merry flocks, the strand is purple with its tribe of nested limpets, savage creatures seek their loves in wood and plain. (25).

Discussion:

Nature as a Metaphor of Longing for the Homeland in 'Home-Thoughts, from Abroad'

"Home-Thoughts, from Abroad" is a poem from Browning's poetry collection *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics*, published in 1945. The poem was written when the poet resided in Italy with his wife, Elizabeth Barrett. Nostalgia is the central theme of the poem which consists of nineteen lines distributed between two stanzas. The first stanza includes seven lines, and the second contains twelve. Throughout the poem, Browning romantically describes an eye-catching springtime scene in England, revealing his sense of longing for his mother country. In the first stanza, Browning writes:

Oh, to be in England,
Now that April's there,
And whoever wakes in England
Sees, some morning, unaware,
That the lowest boughs and the brushwood sheaf
Round the elm-tree bole are in tiny leaf,
While the chaffinch sings on the orchard bough In England - now!

(*Dramatic Lyrics* 65)

The stanza opens with the poet's wish to be in his motherland to enjoy the beauty of nature that characterizes England during April. The melancholy sigh, 'Oh, to be in

England', with which the poem starts suggests that the poet is nostalgic, casting himself as a homesick traveller who yearns for his home where the grace of nature intensifies his feeling of longing that grows inside his heart for his loved country. The poem's opening line, 'Oh to be England', is often classified as one of the most famous opening lines in English poetry. It reminds one of those famous lines with which great poets open their poems, such as 'Tyger! Tyger! Burning Bright' by William Blake, 'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud' by William Wordsworth, 'April is the cruellest month' by T. S. Eliot, 'O, My Luve's Like a Red, Red Rose' by Robert Burns, 'Stop All the Clocks, Cut off the Telephone' by W. H. Auden, and William Shakespeare's opening line in Sonnet 18: 'Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day?'

In the above stanza, the poet's recollection of the English springtime stirs his nostalgia. It increases his desire to return to his homeland, whose image constantly occupies his mind and heart, even if he is away in another country. What particularly catches the imagination of the speaker is the morning; 'whoever wakes in England', he tells us, can clearly see that spring is there, with its charming features represented by the singing of birds, the blooming of flowers, and the dancing of 'the lowest boughs' of trees. 'And whoever wakes in England', the speaker adds, can certainly enjoy the scene and see how beautifully the low branches and the undergrowth that surround the elm tree begin to produce fresh tiny leaves. At the same time, one can hear the sweet singing of 'chaffinches', those beautiful birds whose melodies are heard everywhere in 'the orchard'. This is what is taking place 'in England - now', the poet yearningly states and expressively concludes the first stanza of his poem.

Browning's close observations of particular plants, like 'the elm tree' with its 'tiny' beautiful leaves, and specific birds, like 'the chaffinch' who sings 'on the orchard branch' announcing the coming of spring, indicate how far he is familiar with the features nature and spring in his homeland. But, more importantly, these detailed descriptions of nature suggest that he yearns so much for watching those sceneries in his motherland again. Such remembrance of the memories the poet previously experienced in the natural world of England intensifies the homesickness that increasingly develops in his soul. Here, nature is a metaphor conveying the poet's

longing for his homeland and a vehicle via which he expresses the last reminiscences he had in England.

Expressively, the lines draw a romantic atmosphere where spring is spreading its beauty everywhere in the English landscape; the morning is shining, plants are coming into buds, and chaffinches are singing in a blissful response to the grace of nature. Imagining these beauties in his mind, the poet feels homesick and wishes he were there in his homeland to enjoy nature and find the tranquility and peace of mind which home provides. Browning's 'Home-Thoughts, from Abroad' brings into mind Wordsworth's 'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud', specifically the last stanza of the poem in which the great Romantic poet states,

For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils. (219).

Unlike Wordsworth, who feels happy and satisfied whenever he remembers those eye-catching memories of the past, Browning finds in those recollections a reflection of longing for his motherland and accordingly comes to lament being away from it.

In the second stanza of the poem, Browning shifts from April to May. He states,

And after April, when May follows,
And the whitethroat builds, and all the swallows -
Hark! where my blossomed pear-tree in the hedge
Leans to the field and scatters on the clover
Blossoms and dewdrops - at the bent spray's edge -
That's the wise thrush; he sings each song twice over,
Lest you should think he never could recapture
The first fine careless rapture!
And though the fields look rough with hoary dew,

All will be gay when noontide wakes anew
The buttercups, the little children's dower,

- Far brighter than this gaudy melon-flower! (*Dramatic Lyrics* 65)

The conjunction 'and' at the beginning of the lines connects the two stanzas of the poem, creating coherence between them. More importantly, it suggests that the poet is keen not to escape mentioning even a single detail of the beauty that characterizes his home country; he continues in describing the beauty of nature in England, showing how the natural world evokes in him a profound sense of nostalgia for his homeland. Responding to nature's pleasant development, birds, principally the whitethroats and the swallows, celebrate spring and positively interact with the beauty around them. This wonderful communication with nature moves the poet's feelings and reveals his fondness of such a magnificent atmosphere that immediately takes him back, in fancy, to his beloved homeland.

The word 'Hark' at the start of the third line of the stanza means to listen and suggests that the poet attempts to attract the attention of his readers and listeners to something significant he will mention. He refers to his own 'blossomed pear-tree' which magnificently bends over the field, scattering the blossoms and dewdrops on the clover, that small tender plant that happily reacts and actively interacts with the rhythms of nature. The pear tree, the clover, the blossoms, and the dewdrops are all images of nature that stimulate the poet's imagination, reminding him of his motherland and deepening his homesickness.

Of all birds and plants referred to in the poem, the thrush is the cleverest in interacting with that striking symphony of natural beauty. The personification of the thrush as 'wise' enriches the meaning the poet associates with that bird. The thrush is keen to deliberately repeat his song twice to guarantee that those who are listening to the song do not think that the thrush is unable to 'recapture / The first fine careless rapture', that is, unable to interact with the beauty of nature around him and contribute to the magnificence the natural world is offering. The rhyme between 'recapture' and 'rapture' not only creates music in the lines but also connects the two words, attracting attention to the thrush's eagerness to repeat his song and actively respond to the joy and ecstasy felt by those who are listening to the first song sung by the bird, to assure

for them that he is also happy like them. Significantly, Browning portrays the thrush "as a flashback that imaginably fetches him back home" (Salih 302).

Noticeably, the seventh line of the above stanza contains an example of apostrophe. Using the pronoun 'you', the poet addresses the persons listening to the thrush's song, explaining why 'the wise thrush' is repeating his song. That the poet suggests that other people are sharing with him those observations of nature and its elements in his home country suggests that the poet longs so much for England that he imagines he is already back there, dwelling with his native people in the English landscape whose birds and plants provide him with joy and delight.

An evocative natural image is the depiction of the 'hoary' or white-coloured dew covering the fields and making them look 'rough' or not in a full state of perfection. Using the word 'anew', the poet asserts that perfection in its complete form will be restored once noontime appears around. As soon as "the noon sun comes up, the dew fades and the grayish-white color of the field changes to an exuberant green" (qtd. in Salih 302). This, of course, suggests the renewal implied by spring. In the last two lines, Browning holds a comparison between two kinds of flowers: the buttercup that is used as an element of nature in the English springtime scene which he describes in the poem, and the melon-flower to which he refers using the demonstrative 'this', giving his readers the impression that it is very close to him or near in place, that is, it is a kind of flower he saw in Italy where he was staying when the poem was written. Concluding that the buttercup of the English landscape is 'brighter' than the 'melon-flower' growing in Italy, Browning implies that nature is more brilliant and more beautiful in England than it is in Italy. This depiction indicates how much he emotionally misses everything in his motherland and eagerly longs for every feature of its beauty.

In addition to the highly expressive images of nature, the poetic techniques employed by Browning throughout the poem enrich the lines and reflect the speaker's nostalgia. This can be seen in the poem's meter and rhyme scheme. Concerning meter, the first stanza consists of a mixture of trimeters, tetrameters, and pentameters. On the

other hand, the second stanza is written in a combination of pentameter and trimeter lines. As for the poem's rhyme scheme, the first stanza rhymes ababccd whereas the second rhymes aabcbcddeeff. It is clear that Browning does not stick to a regular pattern of meter and rhyme throughout the poem. This technical issue may have specific significance, as it reflects the meanings the poet intends, mirrors the psychological state he is experiencing, and reveals the themes and ideas he poses in the lines. In other words, the pattern of meter through which the poet uses alternating short and long lines, as well as the uneven rhyme scheme that characterizes the lines give a sense of oscillation that depicts the poet oscillating between two psychological states; the first is his fascination of the beautiful natural sceneries of his homeland and the second is his painful realization that he is unable to enjoy that beauty because he is away from home and the blessings of relief and serenity it offers. This is the longing for the motherland in its most profound sense.

Conclusion

This paper investigated how nature is used to metaphorize homesickness in Robert Browning's 'Home-Thoughts, from Abroad'. Browning's poems focusing on the natural world reveal the poet's eagerness for Romanticism which figures significantly in his poetry. However, despite this Romantic fondness, Browning treats nature in a way that differs from that adopted by the Romantic predecessors. He rejects the principle of describing nature for its own sake. For him, the treatment of nature is often directed at achieving a particular goal, such as, for instance, revealing a feeling or reflecting a psychological state in the poem. This is what we have noticed in 'Home-Thoughts, from Abroad', which indicates that the poet, though significantly interacting with nature's beauty during the spring season in England, mainly attempts to express his longing for the homeland from which he is detached as a homesick wanderer. Expertly, Browning employs the images of nature so skillfully that they honestly reflect how much his native land occupies him and how far he longs to come back and throw himself among the arms of his own home. Nature, in all its elements, depicts this feeling of nostalgia. Spring, fields, morning, noon, elm-trees, pear-trees, boughs, bushes, dewdrops, blossoms, buttercups, melon-flowers, as well as birds, particularly thrushes, chaffinches, and

whitethroats, all reflect the beauty of nature and imaginatively take the poet back to his motherland for which his longing knows no bounds.

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”أه، لو أنني في إنجلترا / الآن حيث شهر أبريل“: الطبيعة كتصوير للحنين إلى الوطن في قصيدة ”أفكار عن الوطن، من خارج البلاد“ لـ روبرت براوننج

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ملخص البحث:

تقدم هذه الورقة البحثية قراءة في قصيدة "أفكار عن الوطن، من خارج البلاد" للشاعر الإنجليزي روبرت براوننج بهدف التعرف على كيفية تناول الشاعر للطبيعة في القصيدة واستخدامها كتصوير لحنينه إلى وطنه إنجلترا، خاصة وأن القصيدة كتبها الشاعر أثناء وجوده في إيطاليا والتي مكث بها خمسة عشر عاماً بعيداً عن أرض الوطن. تبدأ الورقة البحثية بمقدمة مختصرة عن الشاعر، وأهم أعماله، ومراحل تطوره الأدبي. ويتناول الإطار النظري للبحث الطبيعة في شعر براوننج، وشغفه بالشعر الرومانسي ورواده الأوائل. ورغم تأثره بالأسلاف الرومانسيين واقتفاء أثرهم الواضح في شعره، إلا أن براوننج اختلف عنهم في طريقة تناوله للطبيعة في قصائده كما يتضح في قصيدة "أفكار عن الوطن، من خارج البلاد". بعد ذلك تقدم الباحثة تحليلاً شاملاً للقصيدة، موضحةً كيف أن الشاعر يستخدم الطبيعة وعناصرها المختلفة كتصوير لحالة الحنين إلى الوطن التي تجتاح مشاعره، وتستحوذ على خياله.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الطبيعة، الحركة الرومانسية، الحنين للوطن، روبرت براوننج، "أفكار عن الوطن، من خارج البلاد"