

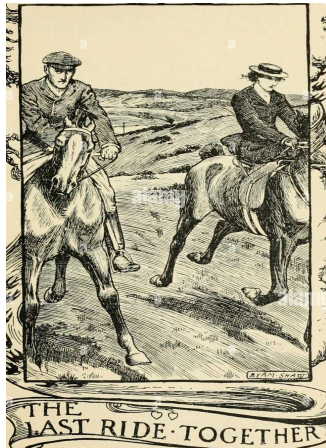
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Robert Browning's 'The Last Ride Together'



Robert Browning's poem 'The Last Ride Together'—first published in *Men and Women* (1885) and later included in *Dramatic Romances* (1868)—is a dramatic lyric expressing intense personal feelings of a lover-speaker in an impersonal way. The speaker is a rejected lover engaged in a monologue. Instead of brooding in despair, he is nobly resigned. He argues and reasons with himself to derive the best consolation from his situation.

The lover-speaker after being rejected readily accepts his destiny. He, however, expresses his gratefulness to the lady for the experience of having enjoyed her company for so long. In order to sustain his memory of love, he requests the lady to accompany him for a last ride together. Initially the lady seemed undecided as her pride protested against the request while her pity softened her. To the lover, that moment of procrastination seemed a matter of life and death. Her acceptance meant a new lease of life for the lover. The lover imagines that if Doomsday comes while they both are riding together, their moment of togetherness would be eternalized. At this ecstatic moment, the intensity of his passion is so overwhelming that it seems to him that the cloud in the western sky is radiant with the light of sun, moon and evening star, and it has come so closer towards him that he feels that heaven has bowed down to him. But he also has the fear that the bliss would be short-lived. In the company of his beloved, his cramped soul seems to spread out in joy like a crumpled sheet of paper smoothes out its wrinkles under the effect of wind.

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Reflecting on the fate of humanity the lover-speaker observes that despite hard work; human beings have failed miserably, but have endured failures bravely. There is a gulf between hope and realization, ambition and achievement, “petty done” and “undone vast”. The statesman after a lifetime service to the nation merely gets a brief obituary as a reward. The heroic soldier’s rewards are a flag and an epitaph over his tomb in Westminster Abbey. The poet expresses other’s feelings in melodious language, but dies in sickness and poverty, no nearer to his ideas of beauty and perfection. The sculptor spends years making a statue but people prefer real life figures, however ordinary, compared to such cold statues. The musician’s composition fades in value as fashion changes. Compared to them, the lover-speaker is better-off as he actually experiences the bliss of his lady-love’s company suggesting that life is greater than art.

The lover-speaker argues that if he would have achieved the love of his lady in this earthly life, there would have been no more rewards for him in the Heaven. If he would have reached his ideal on earth, Heaven would have been relegated into insignificance. Disappointments on earth help one to cherish hopes of fulfillment in heaven. He has borne disappointment in love, but he can die with the hope of achieving his beloved’s love in the life beyond. For the lover, his beloved’s company is heaven as paradise must just be the bliss of two people’s togetherness.

The lover wistfully reflects on the possibility of the ride continuing for ever so that the moment may be transformed into eternity. The poem ends on a climax of optimism which sees failure as instigation to greater struggle and the hope of reward in the next world. The lover-speaker’s gospel of hope looks forward or aspires to a union with his beloved in heaven. Professor of English Literature at University of Manchester, Charles Harold Herford, deftly sums up:

“The glory of failure is, with Browning, a familiar and inexhaustible theme, but its spiritual abstraction here flushes with the human glory of possession, the ethereal light and dew are mingled with breath and blood; and in the wonderful long-drawn rhythm, we hear the steady stride of the horses as they bear the riders farther into the visionary land of Romance.”