A Toccata of Galuppi's

POEM TEXT

I

Oh, Galuppi, Baldassaro, this is very sad to find!
I can hardly misconceive you; it would prove me deaf and blind;
But although I take your meaning, 'tis with such a heavy mind!

II

Here you come with your old music, and here's all the good it brings.
What, they lived once thus at Venice where the merchants were the kings,
Where Saint Mark's is, where the Doges used to wed the sea with rings?

III

Aye, because the sea's the street there; and 'tis arched by . . . what you call
. . . Shylock's bridge with houses on it, where they kept the carnival:
I was never out of England—it's as if I saw it all.

IV

Did young people take their pleasure when the sea was warm in May?
Balls and masks begun at midnight, burning ever to midday,
When they made up fresh adventures for the morrow, do you say?

V

Was a lady such a lady, cheeks so round and lips so red—
On her neck the small face buoyant, like a bellflower on its bed,
O'er the breast's superb abundance where a man might base his head?

VI

Well, and it was graceful of them—they'd break talk off and afford
—She, to bite her mask's black velvet—he, to finger on his sword,
While you sat and played Toccatas, stately at the clavichord?

VII

What? Those lesser thirds so plaintive, sixths diminished, sigh on sigh,
Told them something? Those suspensions, those solutions—"Must we die?"
Those commiserating sevenths—"Life might last! we can but try!"

VIII

"Were you happy?" —"Yes."—"And are you still as happy?"—"Yes. And you?"
—"Then, more kisses!"—"Did I stop them, when a million seemed so few?"
Hark, the dominant's persistence till it must be answered to!

IX

So, an octave struck the answer. Oh, they praised you, I dare say!
"Brave Galuppi! that was music; good alike at grave and gay!
"I can always leave off talking when I hear a master play!"

X

Then they left you for their pleasure: till in due time, one by one,
Some with lives that came to nothing, some with deeds as well undone,
Death stepped tacitly and took them where they never see the sun.

XI

But when I sit down to reason, think to take my stand nor swerve,
While I triumph o'er a secret wrung from nature's close reserve,
In you come with your cold music till I creep through every nerve.

XII

Yes, you, like a ghostly cricket, creaking where a house was burned:

"Dust and ashes, dead and done with, Venice spent
what Venice earned.
"The soul, doubtless, is immortal—where a soul can be
discerned.

XIII

"Yours for instance: you know physics, something of
geology,
"Mathematics are your pastime; souls shall rise in their
degree;
"Butterflies may dread extinction—you'll not die, it
cannot be!

XIV

"As for Venice and her people, merely born to bloom
and drop,
"Here on earth they bore their fruitage, mirth and folly
were the crop:
"What of soul was left, I wonder, when the kissing had
to stop?

XV

"Dust and ashes!" So you creak it, and I want the heart
to scold.
Dear dead women, with such hair, too—what's become
of all the gold
Used to hang and brush their bosoms? I feel chilly and
grown old.

SUMMARY

Oh, Galuppi—Baldassaro—this is terribly sad to hear. There's no way I could be misunderstanding you; I'd be senseless if I did. Though I hear what you're saying, I hear you with great sorrow.

As I listen to your old toccata, I envision lovely things: is this how they lived in Venice where rich men became the rulers, where St. Mark's Cathedral is, where the leaders used to symbolically marry the sea by throwing it a wedding ring?

Yes, because the canals are the roads there, and the seawater is crossed by... what do you call it... the bridge from *The Merchant of Venice*, with the buildings on it, where they used to celebrate Carnival. I've never left England, but through Galuppi's music, it's as if I'm seeing Venice before me now.

Did the young folks go out and enjoy themselves when the ocean was warm in the springtime? Would they head out to a masquerade ball at midnight and party until noon, then make up new plans for the next day—is that what you're telling me, Galuppi?

Did a lady look like this: with round cheeks and red lips, with her head held up proudly like a bellflower on its stem over a lovely full bosom where a guy could rest his head?

Oh, it must have been elegant to see: the young lovers would stop talking so that a lady could nibble on the edge of her mask, and a gentleman could play with his sword hilt, while you, Galuppi, played your showpiece compositions, looking grand and dignified in front of your keyboard.

Did those sad, sighing chords tell the lovers something? Did the movement of your music remind them of their own mortality? Did those gentler notes make them think, "Well, perhaps we won't have to die! We can give it our best shot!"

"Were you happy?" one might ask the other. "Yes." "Are you still just as happy?" "Yes. Are you?" "In that case, let's keep kissing!" "*I'm* not the one who stopped kissing—a million kisses didn't feel like enough!" But listen: the dominant note plays and plays, and something will have to respond to it!

Finally, a conclusive chord answers that dominant note. Oh, I'm sure those lovers praised your music, Galuppi. They'd say, "Wonderful Galuppi! Now *that's* music: he's just as good at the sad parts and the cheery parts. I'm always happy to shut up and listen when a genius plays!"

Then they'd wander off to enjoy themselves again, until, eventually, one by one—some having lived empty lives, some having done only dastardly deeds—they all died: Death, your music implies, stepped in and took them away to eternal darkness.

And when I sit down to my own work, believing that I can take a firm intellectual stance, rejoicing over my latest scientific discovery—then I hear your icy music playing in the back of my mind, and I shiver all over.

There you are, like a cricket chirping in the ruins of a burned house, saying: "Everything comes to dust, it's all over, the days of old Venice are all used up. The soul might be immortal, but can anyone guarantee it's there?

"You, scientist, for example: you know about physics and geology, you do math for a hobby. Souls do what they're meant to. A lowly butterfly might be afraid of death, but how could *you* possibly die?

"And as for Venice and the Venetians, born only to be beautiful and then die, they were planted here on earth but harvested only frivolous pleasure and foolishness. What was left of them when they couldn't kiss anymore?

"Nothing but dust and ashes!" That's what you croak, Galuppi. But I don't have the heart to judge the silly Venetian dead. Poor sweet dead ladies, with their lovely hair—what's happened to all the gold that used to hang over their breasts? I feel cold and aged.

THEMES

THE POWER OF MUSIC

Listening to a toccata (a short, flamboyant solo composition) by the 18th-century Italian composer Baldassare Galuppi, this dramatic monologue's speaker feels as if he's been transported to Galuppi's time and place. The music doesn't just give the speaker a vision of a decadent Venetian carnival, however. It also reminds him that all the revelers he imagines are dead and gone, and that he will be one day, too. In this poem, music has the uncanny power both to conjure up romantic visions and to tell the awful truth about mortality. Paradoxically, even as it speaks of death and loss, Galuppi's toccata itself survives, and preserves a glimpse of the world it came from.

The poem's speaker "was never out of England," but Galuppi's toccata makes him feel "as if I saw it all"—that is, as if he were looking through a window straight into Galuppi's 18th-century Venice. The music, for the speaker, paints a picture of young lovers enjoying themselves all night long at "balls and masks" during the famous Venetian Carnival (a pre-Lent festival celebrated with wild parties and elaborate costumes). Impossibly lush and romantic, these scenes put the speaker in touch with a magical, far-off world.

But the music also reminds the speaker that this world is lost. As the toccata moves into "lesser thirds so plaintive, sixths diminished, sigh on sigh"—a hesitant, sorrowful passage—the speaker envisions the Venetians lovers who first heard those chords. Listening to this affecting music, he imagines, they must have felt just as he does now: uncomfortably aware that all their fun is temporary (and empty, and frivolous). The music's answer to their tentative question, "Must we die?" is a resounding *Absolutely*.

Galuppi's toccata thus has a double power: it both speaks of mortality and cuts across it. In the same short composition, Galuppi preserves a glimpse of a romantic Venice at exactly the same time as he warns of its inevitable death—and everyone's inevitable death, for that matter, his and the speaker's included. Almost magically, music here builds a bridge between the living and the dead.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Before Line 1
- Lines 1-3
- Between Lines 3-4
- Lines 4-6
- Between Lines 6-7
- Lines 7-9
- Between Lines 9-10
- Lines 10-12
- Between Lines 12-13
- Lines 13-15
- Between Lines 15-16
- Lines 16-18
- Between Lines 18-19
- Lines 19-21
- Between Lines 21-22
- Lines 22-24
- Between Lines 24-25
- Lines 25-27
- Between Lines 27-28
- Lines 28-30
- Between Lines 30-31
- Lines 31-33
- Between Lines 33-34
- Lines 34-36
- Between Lines 36-37
- Lines 37-39
- Between Lines 39-40
- Lines 40-42
- Between Lines 42-43
- Lines 43-45

MORTALITY AND MEANING

A piece by the 18th-century Italian composer Baldassare Galuppi makes this poem's speaker feel uneasy. An eerie edge to the music, he can't help but feel, speaks of everyone's inevitable death. Whether one spends one's time partying at a carnival, writing music, or studying science, this speaker concludes, there's no evading the finality and mystery of death—and in that light, it can be difficult to find much comfort or meaning in life.

Listening to Galuppi's toccata, the poem's speaker is at first charmed, feeling as if he's been whisked away to the enchanted world of the Venetian carnival. The longer he listens, though, the more uncomfortable he gets. A warning, haunting tone in the composition reminds him that the scene he pictures is a long-lost, ghostly one—and rather a frivolous one, too. Those imagined lovers and partiers had their fun, but now they're dead, and perhaps they haven't left much of a legacy behind them: some, the speaker reflects, led "lives that came to nothing," and some did "deeds as well undone" (things it would have been better if they hadn't done, that is).

Such thoughts lead him to reflect on his own little life. He's a hobby scientist, who knows "something of geology," a little bit of physics, and some mathematics. He loves the feeling of winkling out a secret from "nature's close reserve" (that is, nature's carefully guarded mysteries). His knowledge of nature, however, can't rescue him from the same death that came to the Venetians—and, for that matter, to Galuppi, whose haunting toccata seems to ask the unanswerable question,

"'What of soul [is] left'" after life ends?

No matter how you spend your time or what kind of a person you are, the speaker concludes—whether you fritter life away in partying or spend it making discoveries and music—you'll eventually have to face up to the fact that you'll die, and that no one knows what happens after that. This rather "chilly" thought at least puts him in sympathy with all those "dear dead women" he imagined a moment ago: death is a unifying truth, connecting everyone.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Before Line 1
- Lines 1-3
- Between Lines 18-19
- Lines 19-21
- Between Lines 21-22
- Lines 22-24
- Between Lines 24-25
- Lines 25-27
- Between Lines 27-28
- Lines 28-30
- Between Lines 30-31
- Lines 31-33
- Between Lines 33-34
- Lines 34-36
- Between Lines 36-37
- Lines 37-39
- Between Lines 39-40
- Lines 40-42
- Between Lines 42-43
- Lines 43-45

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

BEFORE LINE 1, LINES 1-3, BETWEEN LINES 3-4, LINES 4-6

I
Oh, Galuppi, Baldassaro, this is very sad to find!
I can hardly misconceive you; it would prove me deaf and blind;
But although I take your meaning, 'tis with such a heavy mind!
II
Here you come with your old music, and here's all the good it brings.
What, they lived once thus at Venice where the merchants were the kings,
Where Saint Mark's is, where the Doges used to wed the sea with rings?

"A Toccata of Galuppi's" begins with an outburst, a dramatic apostrophe. "Oh, Galuppi, Baldassaro," the speaker cries, "this is very sad to find!" He's speaking to someone who isn't there: the 18th-century composer Baldassare Galuppi (whose name he gets slightly wrong).

Galuppi isn't there in person, at least. But he's there in spirit through his "old music." The speaker is listening to (or perhaps playing) a Galuppi toccata—that is, a short, virtuosic piece meant to show off the composer's skill and voice. Through that toccata, the speaker feels, Galuppi is speaking to him, and he's saying something terribly and unavoidably sad. "I can hardly misconceive you," the speaker tells him: he'd be a fool not to understand the bad news Galuppi is trying to tell him.

It might take readers a moment, though, to understand where the speaker's sadness is coming from. The first things he describes hearing in Galuppi's toccata are romantic visions of Galuppi's native Venice:

> Here you come with your old music, and here's all the good it brings.
> What, they lived once thus at Venice where the merchants were the kings,
> Where Saint Mark's is, where the Doges used to wed the sea with rings?

The old and glorious Venice the speaker pictures here goes way back, even before Galuppi's time. The speaker's allusions to doges (Venice's elected leaders, who were indeed often wealthy merchants) solemnly throwing rings into the sea evoke the Renaissance, when the city-state of Venice was a major power. And the legendary glory of St. Mark's Basilica calls up older times still: the current church building was completed in the middle ages.

Already, then, there's a hint that some of the sadness the speaker hears in the toccata is about days gone by. Galuppi lived in the time of the last Venetian doges; only 12 years after his death, Napoleon's armies would conquer Venice, bringing an end to a long-lived and glorious republic. Galuppi's music, in conjuring up the loveliness of the old city, speaks of something lost.

But the poem's form doesn't exactly suggest grief and loss. The rhythms and sounds here are light and lively:

- The tercets (three-line stanzas) rhyme in triplets—a swift, emphatic *one-two-three* pattern.
- Those punchy tercets are written in trochaic octameter: that is, lines of eight trochees, metrical feet with a DUM-da rhythm, like this: "Oh, Gal- | uppi, | Baldas- | saro, | this is | very | sad to | find!" (The missing unstressed syllable on the end makes this catalectic trochaic octameter, no less.)

This difficult, virtuosic, quick-moving shape itself sounds an awful lot like a Galuppi toccata. And that makes sense: this

poem will be all about a longing for life, love, color, and meaning in the face of dark and mysterious death. By evoking swift, exhilarating movement, the toccata (and the poem) suggest what makes the final stillness of death so "very sad" to face.

BETWEEN LINES 6-7, LINES 7-9, BETWEEN LINES 9-10, LINES 10-12

III
Aye, because the sea's the street there; and 'tis arched by . . . what you call
. . . Shylock's bridge with houses on it, where they kept the carnival:
I was never out of England—it's as if I saw it all.
IV
Did young people take their pleasure when the sea was warm in May?
Balls and masks begun at midnight, burning ever to midday,
When they made up fresh adventures for the morrow, do you say?

The speaker's toccata-inspired dreams of Venice, these stanzas reveal, are just that: dreams. His ideas of what Venice might be like come entirely from hearsay. He himself was "never out of England."

When, for example, he tries to dredge up the name of "Shylock's bridge," he's thinking of a character in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* (and of the Rialto Bridge, as it happens). And when he remembers that this is where "they kept the carnival," he alludes to one of Venice's most famous festivities: the city-wide masquerade that marks the last day before Lent begins. This, he also seems to have gotten an idea of through art: perhaps by admiring a Canaletto or reading a spicy novel.

The thought of what the Venetians might have gotten up to disguised in their carnival masks makes him daydream about what they did all the rest of the year. Listen to his intense alliteration as he describes his imagined Venice in Galuppi's time:

> Balls and masks begun at midnight, burning ever to midday,
> When they made up fresh adventures for the morrow, do you say?

All those alternating /b/ and /m/ sounds give these lines a concentrated, hypnotic music, evoking the nonstop partying the speaker imagines Venice once enjoyed. Or at least, the partying its "young people" enjoyed: the speaker's Venice seems to be populated exclusively by beautiful young ladies and gentlemen of leisure.

The speaker's idea of Venice, in other words, is an Englishman's dream of an idealized place, an over-the-rainbow world of eternal youth and play. Himself a homebody, a guy who's never gotten the chance to leave his native country, the speaker comes across as rather sweet here: he might not have had that much experience of the wider world, but he's a romantic soul, and he longs for something a little more magical than what he knows.

He's also, don't forget, responding to Galuppi here, asking the composer: is that how it was, "do you say?" The flash and dazzle of the toccata paints this picture for him. 18th-century Venice, the music seems to tell him, was an enchanted place.

BETWEEN LINES 12-13, LINES 13-15, BETWEEN LINES 15-16, LINES 16-18

V
Was a lady such a lady, cheeks so round and lips so red—
On her neck the small face buoyant, like a bellflower on its bed,
O'er the breast's superb abundance where a man might base his head?
VI
Well, and it was graceful of them—they'd break talk off and afford
—She, to bite her mask's black velvet—he, to finger on his sword,
While you sat and played Toccatas, stately at the clavichord?

Sinking deeper into the music, the speaker zeroes in on one vision in particular: a beautiful lady. With "cheeks so round" and "lips so red," she, like her city, is an idealized figure, and a very appealing one, too. The rounded /b/ alliteration and consonance in these lines—"buoyant," "bellflower," "bed," "breast's superb abundance"—evokes her curvaceous shape, and the simile of her head held up like a "bellflower" suggests her springy, fresh, proud bearing. "A man might base his head" on such a woman's magnificent bosom, the speaker observes, with a touch of yearning.

Rather than imagining what he might do were he in this scene with this lady, however, he backs off and introduces a fine gentleman. He also introduces Galuppi himself, playing the clavichord (a small, delicate keyboard instrument) as the young lovers "break talk off":

> —She, to bite her mask's black velvet—he, to finger on his sword,
> While you sat and played Toccatas, stately at the clavichord?

All that mask-biting and sword-fingering suggests some serious sexual tension, and the highlighted parallelism makes this lady and gentleman feel matched in their desire. Meanwhile, Galuppi tinkles away in the background, not caught up in this drama, but fulfilling his own "stately," dignified role.

Up until now, Galuppi and his music have been conjurors, not actors. The toccata the speaker listens to has worked something like the soundtrack to a movie, an atmospheric

accompaniment to a dream vision. Now, though, Galuppi himself is in the scene, playing this very toccata while the lady and the gentleman make eyes at each other. The toccata thus seems to travel through time: the speaker hears it now, the imagined lovers heard it then. In some sense, through his music, Galuppi is thus present in both times and places. The toccata builds a bridge between the speaker's world and Galuppi's own.

BETWEEN LINES 18-19, LINES 19-21, BETWEEN LINES 21-22, LINES 22-24

VII
What? Those lesser thirds so plaintive, sixths diminished, sigh on sigh,
Told them something? Those suspensions, those solutions—"Must we die?"
Those commiserating sevenths—"Life might last! we can but try!"
VIII
"Were you happy?" —"Yes."—"And are you still as happy?"—"Yes. And you?"
—"Then, more kisses!"—"Did
I
stop them, when a million seemed so few?"
Hark, the dominant's persistence till it must be answered to!

Now, the speaker imagines how the lovers might have felt as they listened to the same toccata he's hearing now. He suspects that they would have heard Galuppi's music saying something to them—just as he does, hearing a sad message he can "hardly misconceive."

The music, here, gains its own personality:

> What? Those lesser thirds so plaintive, sixths diminished, sigh on sigh,
> Told them something? Those suspensions, those solutions—"Must we die?"
> Those commiserating sevenths—"Life might last! we can but try!"

These personified "thirds," "sixths," and "sevenths"—all different kinds of chords—aren't at all happy about their message. Plaintive, commiserating, and sighing, they deliver bad news with regrets.

That bad news—the same bad news the speaker's nostalgia hinted at back in the poem's first stanzas—is that the lovers' time of youth, pleasure, and freedom won't last forever. Both the music and the lovers themselves seem to ask the same question: "Must we die?"

Browning cleverly uses musical terminology to suggest the toccata's painful poignancy. "Suspensions" and "solutions" are ways that chords can flow into each other, but the words also evoke two experiences of time: the "suspension" of believing that your youth and happiness will last forever, and the "solution," the inevitable conclusion, that will reveal the folly of that belief.

The music's sad, warning notes start to infect the imagined lovers. The speaker lets us listen to a little of their dialogue here:

> "Were you happy?" —"Yes."—"And are you still as happy?"—"Yes. And you?"
> —"Then, more kisses!"—"Did *I* stop them, when a million seemed so few?"

The highlighted repetitions in these lines suggest that the lovers start to feel just a touch anxious as they listen to the toccata. They suddenly feel the need to double-check that everything is still just as good as they thought: they're still just as happy as they ever were, there are still millions upon millions of kisses to share.

But Galuppi's music won't let them get away with that. A "dominant" note keeps on ringing out like a warning bell that "must be answered to," inviting a conclusion. And a conclusion, the toccata seems to say, inevitably arrives, one time or another.

These lines make a poignant point about time. As Keats (one of Browning's heroes) famously pointed out, there's no music without time, and no kissing either. These pleasures can't exist without both beginnings and endings.

Even as Galuppi's toccata warns the lovers of their inevitable end, however, it paradoxically reaches out across time, coming to the speaker like a ghostly visitation. Music *needs* time, but it can also transcend it.

BETWEEN LINES 24-25, LINES 25-27, BETWEEN LINES 27-28, LINES 28-30

IX
So, an octave struck the answer. Oh, they praised you, I dare say!
"Brave Galuppi! that was music; good alike at grave and gay!
"I can always leave off talking when I hear a master play!"
X
Then they left you for their pleasure: till in due time, one by one,
Some with lives that came to nothing, some with deeds as well undone,
Death stepped tacitly and took them where they never see the sun.

At last, Galuppi's toccata strikes its final "octave," and the imagined ladies and gentlemen break off their longing stares to applaud the maestro. Their praise seems a little less than Galuppi might deserve:

> "Brave Galuppi! that was music; good alike at grave

and gay!
"I can always leave off talking when I hear a master play!"

These are, shall we say, not the words of connoisseurs. The ladies and gentlemen know that Galuppi is meant to be "a master" and that fashionable people should thus admire him. But all they can find to say about his music is that it's good when it's sad and good when it's happy, and that they're willing to briefly shut up so they can hear him. Pretty superficial praise.

These words also hold at a distance the uneasy note the speaker hears in the music. While Galuppi played, the young Venetians thought of death. Now that the toccata is over, they can write it off as just another splendid entertainment on another splendid day of fun, then trot off "for their pleasure," making good on all that flirtatious mask-chewing and sword-fingering they were doing a moment ago.

The speaker himself can't brush aside Galuppi's more serious meaning so easily. Sure, all those Venetians had plenty of good times. But "in due time":

[...] one by one,
Some with lives that came to nothing, some with deeds as well undone,
Death stepped tacitly and took them where they never see the sun.

Not much good came of these shallow pleasure-seeking lives, the speaker suggests—and then those lives ended. The image of Death taking the ladies and gentlemen to a place "where they never see the sun" feels especially grim after the speaker's bright images of Venice in May. None of the delights of the world follow these lovers into the land of death.

Galuppi's toccata, then, has given the speaker two things at once: an impossibly romantic vision of a dream-Venice, and a dreadful reminder that this place and time is dead, just as all times, places, and people one day will be. This isn't just a problem for the dead Venetians, either. This whole story is taking place in the speaker's head, remember, and his vision of dead beauties speaks to his own life and his own worries.

BETWEEN LINES 30-31, LINES 31-33, BETWEEN LINES 33-34, LINES 34-36

XI
But when I sit down to reason, think to take my stand nor swerve,
While I triumph o'er a secret wrung from nature's close reserve,
In you come with your cold music till I creep through every nerve.
XII
Yes, you, like a ghostly cricket, creaking where a house was burned:
"Dust and ashes, dead and done with, Venice spent what Venice earned.
"The soul, doubtless, is immortal—where a soul can be discerned.

In these stanzas, the speaker reveals a little more of himself. Readers might be surprised to learn that this romantic soul is a scientist, or at least a hobby scientist. He spends his time in "reason[ing]," winkling out secrets from "nature's close reserve"—that is, unraveling the mysteries of the natural world. He's not, in other words, a frivolous young thing who lives for pleasure like his imagined Venetians are. He's a thinker and a doer.

His intellectual pursuits don't make him immune to the chilly note in Galuppi's music, though. Just because he does something more obviously useful with his time than partying doesn't save him from a shiver when Galuppi's plaintive notes remind him of death. The "cold music" makes him "creep through every nerve"—a moment of tactile imagery that suggests the toccata has gotten under his skin. The word "toccata," in Italian, means something like "touch-piece," meaning that it shows off a composer's personal touch, their style. Now, the toccata becomes a touch-piece in more ways than one, reaching out a bony finger to poke the speaker in the shoulder.

A few stanzas ago, the speaker personified the toccata, imbuing its notes with feelings. Now, he goes a step further, imagining that the toccata in some way *is* Galuppi. Like a "ghostly cricket, creaking where a house is burned," Galuppi now speaks back to the speaker who's been apostrophizing him all through the poem. The ghastly, funny simile suggests that Galuppi's lone, small voice is the only thing that survives in a ruin.

His message is not a cheerful one:

"Dust and ashes, dead and done with, Venice spent what Venice earned.

The alliterative /d/ sounds hit like hammer blows as Galuppi unromantically nails down the lid on Venice's coffin.

If the speaker wants to reach for thoughts of the afterlife to make him feel better about all that death and loss, well, he's welcome to, but perhaps there's not as much comfort there as the speaker might like:

"The soul, doubtless, is immortal—where a soul can be discerned.

There's some dark irony in Galuppi's tone. It's all well and good to believe in immortal souls, he seems to say, but who ever really *proved* that the soul exists?

Remember, Galuppi's voice *is* the speaker's: these are the

thoughts Galuppi's music puts into the speaker's head, not Galuppi's words. It's the speaker's uneasy scientific skepticism that rings out here. He might have wrung a lot of secrets out of "nature's close reserve," but the existence or nonexistence of the soul isn't one of them.

BETWEEN LINES 36-37, LINES 37-39, BETWEEN LINES 39-40, LINES 40-42

XIII
"Yours for instance: you know physics, something of geology,
"Mathematics are your pastime; souls shall rise in their degree;
"Butterflies may dread extinction—you'll not die, it cannot be!
XIV
"As for Venice and her people, merely born to bloom and drop,
"Here on earth they bore their fruitage, mirth and folly were the crop:
"What of soul was left, I wonder, when the kissing had to stop?

In the speaker's imagination, Galuppi continues his relentless speech. Now he's not just pronouncing Venice dead. Abruptly, casually, he turns to the speaker himself to darkly tease him:

> "Yours for instance: you know physics, something of geology,
> "Mathematics are your pastime; souls shall rise in their degree;
> "Butterflies may dread extinction—you'll not die, it cannot be!

Enumerating the little bits and bobs of science and math the speaker has studied, Galuppi makes light of all that learning. (Perhaps there's even the suggestion that the speaker is more of a Victorian gentleman scientist, a hobbyist with a drawer full of beetles on pins, than he is a professional.) What knowledge the speaker has pieced together, Galuppi seems to say, might only be a way of distracting himself from death, just as the Venetians' partying was.

Mockingly, Galuppi puts on the speaker's own voice to anxiously imagine that his "degree," his importance, is higher than a mere butterfly's—and that *he* couldn't possibly die like a bug in a specimen box. The clever little internal rhyme that links "souls shall rise" and "butterflies" hints that there's no such consoling distinction between the souls of people and those of butterflies. These words hit hard coming from a man long dead. Notice Galuppi's tone, too: he's stern, certainly, but he also seems to be enjoying himself a little, teasing cruelly. The dead have the right to mock the living about their illusions of immortality.

Galuppi doesn't stop there, either, but goes on to make short work of the people of Venice. All that came of that city, he declares, was "mirth and folly," empty fun and stupidity. Like flowers, the Venetians were briefly pretty, then they died—and that was that for them:

> "What of soul was left, I wonder, when the kissing had to stop?

This question is an unanswerable one. Whatever happened to all those Venetians' souls—or whether they had them at all—isn't a matter the speaker, or anyone, can settle.

There's an odd paradox here, though. The speaker has the strongest sense that the long-dead Galuppi is speaking to him right now: the toccata has survived, and it preserves something of what Galuppi felt. The thoughts here may be the speaker's own, but the emotion comes from the music. Musical brilliance couldn't save Galuppi from the grave any more than kissing could save the Venetians or scientific pottering will save the speaker. But the music, nevertheless, lives.

BETWEEN LINES 42-43, LINES 43-45

XV
"Dust and ashes!" So you creak it, and I want the heart to scold.
Dear dead women, with such hair, too—what's become of all the gold
Used to hang and brush their bosoms? I feel chilly and grown old.

Galuppi concludes his imagined speech with a raven-like croak, repeating the same words he began with: "Dust and ashes!" His language, once again, seems more like the speaker's than an 18th-century Italian's. He alludes to the words "ashes to ashes, dust to dust," part of the burial service from the Book of Common Prayer—a very Anglican text that an 18th-century Italian Catholic wouldn't have anything to do with. Galuppi's music has crept under the speaker's skin and spoken to him in a language he understands, warning him that there's no dodging death and no knowing what comes afterward.

The speaker feels chastened. What Galuppi's toccata has told him, he feels, is quite right. But he doesn't have the "heart to scold" whatever remains of the frivolous dead Venetians. Instead, a note of wistful romanticism (and pretty imagery) creeps back into his voice as he thinks of all those "dear dead women," wondering:

> [...] what's become of all the gold
> Used to hang and brush their bosoms? [...]

Perhaps he doesn't want to think about that question for too long, though. Anyone who ponders for a second can answer: all that golden hair is rotted away in coffins. No wonder, then, that the speaker ends the poem feeling "chilly and grown old."

Remember, too, the role the speaker's imagination plays here. He "was never out of England," and the lovely old Venice he pictures is ghostly in two ways: it's a dreamed-up, illusory version of a real place, and the real place is dead. Reality is hard.

All through this poem, that toccata of Galuppi's is just the touch-piece it claims to be: it preserves something of Galuppi's personal touch, and it touches both the speaker's imagination and his fears. Speaking of life and death in the same plaintive chords, the toccata, paradoxically, is the only thing here that might be close to immortal.

The poem itself now does exactly the same thing that the music does. Virtuosic, lively, and darkly funny, this toccata of Browning's reaches toward the modern reader as Galuppi's toccata reaches toward the speaker.

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Strong alliteration helps to give this poem its rich music. Even before alliteration comes in, this poem's rhymed triplets and urgent trochaic meter feel intense and brightly colored. Now listen to what happens when Browning gets alliterative within that already striking structure:

> Did young people take their pleasure when the sea
> was warm in May?
> Balls and masks begun at midnight, burning ever to
> midday,
> When they made up fresh adventures for the
> morrow, do you say?

After those first punchy /p/ sounds, the weaving /b/ and /m/ sounds make these lines sound as hypnotic and non-stop as the Venetian parties they describe.

Browning's alliteration can be quiet and sinister, too:

> What? Those lesser thirds so plaintive, sixths
> diminished, sigh on sigh,
> Told them something? Those suspensions, those
> solutions—"Must we die?"
> Those commiserating sevenths—"Life might last! we
> can but try!"

The sibilant /s/ sounds here feel close to creepy. The "voice" of Galuppi's toccata seems to whisper as it warns the partiers of their inevitable deaths; the delicate /l/ alliteration of their response suggests their impossible longing not to.

When the speaker imagines Galuppi addressing him in turn, the maestro's voice gets a little less subtle:

> "Dust and ashes, dead and done with, Venice spent
> what Venice earned.
> "The soul, doubtless, is immortal—where a soul can
> be discerned.

Those thumping /d/ sounds feel like nails hammered into Venice's coffin.

Lively, dramatic sounds like these are a hallmark of Browning's poetry (and one of the reasons some of his more fainthearted contemporaries didn't know what to do with him). The alliteration here makes this poem as Browning-y as Galuppi's toccata is Galupp-y.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "misconceive"
- **Line 3:** "meaning," "mind"
- **Line 7:** "sea's," "street"
- **Line 8:** "kept," "carnival"
- **Line 10:** "people," "pleasure," "May"
- **Line 11:** "Balls," "masks," "begun," "midnight," "burning," "midday"
- **Line 12:** "made," "morrow"
- **Line 13:** "round," "red"
- **Line 14:** "buoyant," "bellflower," "bed"
- **Line 15:** "breast's," "man might," "base"
- **Line 16:** "break"
- **Line 17:** "bite," "black"
- **Line 18:** "sat," "stately"
- **Line 19:** "sixths," "sigh"
- **Line 20:** "something," "suspensions," "solutions"
- **Line 21:** "sevenths," "Life," "last"
- **Line 26:** "Galuppi," "good," "grave," "gay"
- **Line 29:** "deeds"
- **Line 30:** "Death," "tacitly," "took," "see," "sun"
- **Line 31:** "sit," "stand," "swerve"
- **Line 32:** "secret"
- **Line 33:** "come," "cold," "creep"
- **Line 34:** "Yes, you," "cricket," "creaking"
- **Line 35:** "Dust," "dead," "done"
- **Line 36:** "doubtless," "discerned"
- **Line 38:** "degree"
- **Line 39:** "dread," "die"
- **Line 40:** "born," "bloom"
- **Line 42:** "soul," "stop"
- **Line 43:** "Dust"
- **Line 44:** "Dear dead"
- **Line 45:** "brush," "bosoms"

PERSONIFICATION

Through subtle moments of personification, Galuppi's music seems not just to move its listeners, but to speak to them.

Picturing a couple of 18th-century Venetian lovers making eyes at each other while Galuppi plays the clavichord in the

background, the speaker imagines that they might, at some point, feel a strange shiver as the music grabs their attention. Galuppi's chords take on a personality:

> What? Those lesser thirds so plaintive, sixths diminished, sigh on sigh,
> Told them something? Those suspensions, those solutions—"Must we die?"
> Those commiserating sevenths—"Life might last! we can but try!"

Plaintive, sighing, and commiserating, the music *speaks* here, mournfully telling its listeners that, indeed, they must die someday, no matter how invincibly young and beautiful they feel now. Galuppi's chords "str[ike] the answer," insisting that there's no escape.

The speaker can't escape this answer any more than the imagined Venetians can. Later on, Galuppi's music becomes a personification of Galuppi himself, talking to the speaker in even more direct terms:

> Yes, you, like a ghostly cricket, creaking where a house was burned:
> "Dust and ashes, dead and done with, Venice spent what Venice earned.
> "The soul, doubtless, is immortal—where a soul can be discerned.

This personification suggests, paradoxically, that Galuppi somehow does live on: his music, insistently reminding the speaker of mortality, is a message from beyond the grave.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 19:** "Those lesser thirds so plaintive, sixths diminished, sigh on sigh,"
- **Line 21:** "Those commiserating sevenths"
- **Line 24:** "Hark, the dominant's persistence till it must be answered to!"
- **Line 25:** "So, an octave struck the answer."
- **Between Lines 33-34:** "XII"
- **Lines 34-36:** "Yes, you, like a ghostly cricket, creaking where a house was burned: / "Dust and ashes, dead and done with, Venice spent what Venice earned. / "The soul, doubtless, is immortal—where a soul can be discerned."
- **Between Lines 36-37:** "XIII"
- **Lines 37-39:** ""Yours for instance: you know physics, something of geology, / "Mathematics are your pastime; souls shall rise in their degree; / "Butterflies may dread extinction—you'll not die, it cannot be!"
- **Between Lines 39-40:** "XIV"
- **Lines 40-42:** ""As for Venice and her people, merely born to bloom and drop, / "Here on earth they bore their fruitage, mirth and folly were the crop: / "What of soul was left, I wonder, when the kissing had to stop?"
- **Between Lines 42-43:** "XV"
- **Line 43:** ""Dust and ashes!" So you creak it, and I want the heart to scold."

IMAGERY

As he sinks into Galuppi's toccata, the poem's speaker envisions a magical 18th-century Venice (in spite of the fact that he's never even been to contemporary Venice). His imagery here suggests that his visions are informed by picture galleries and swoony novels.

Old Venice, in the speaker's mind, is a place where parties, like the torches that light them, "burn[]" all night long. Glamorous Venetian ladies with "cheeks so round and lips so red" hold up their delicate heads as proudly as "bellflower[s]" over the "superb abundance" of their curvy figures. Such ladies, of course, wear carnival masks of sexy "black velvet" and flirt with handsome gentlemen who, apparently overwhelmed with lust, "finger on [their] sword[s]" as they gaze into their beloveds' eyes.

These images all sound like something from a Canaletto landscape: romanticized, idealized, and decadent. But reality creeps in around the edges as the speaker lets Galuppi's music get to him. The toccata might speak of Venice's decadent beauty, but it's also so "cold" that it makes the speaker "creep through every nerve," giving him a "chilly" shiver: the melancholy edge on the music reminds him that all those imagined ladies and gentlemen are long dead, Galuppi is dead, and he himself will one day be dead, too.

The poem's movement from visual imagery to images of temperature and touch thus follows the music's path into the speaker's very bones.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Line 11:** "Balls and masks begun at midnight, burning ever to midday,"
- **Lines 13-15:** "cheeks so round and lips so red— / On her neck the small face buoyant, like a bellflower on its bed, / O'er the breast's superb abundance"
- **Line 17:** "—She, to bite her mask's black velvet—he, to finger on his sword,"
- **Line 33:** "In you come with your cold music till I creep through every nerve."
- **Line 34:** "Yes, you, like a ghostly cricket, creaking where a house was burned:"
- **Lines 44-45:** "what's become of all the gold / Used to hang and brush their bosoms? I feel chilly and grown old."

REPETITION

With its pattering trochaic meter and the one-two-three punch of its stanzas, "A Toccata of Galuppi's" is a markedly rhythmic poem. Inside those regular patterns, repetitions create rhythms within rhythms.

Listen to the dreamy swing of the lines in which the speaker first pictures 18th-century Venice, for example:

> Here you come with your old music, and here's all the good it brings.
> What, they lived once thus at Venice where the merchants were the kings,
> Where Saint Mark's is, where the Doges used to wed the sea with rings?

Anaphora makes the music and the visions it conjures seem to enter hand in hand: they're both "here" at once. Then, more anaphora on "where" gives each new image of Venice its own space—and divides the lines irregularly, adding a little variation in the middle of those intense eight beats. It's an effect as musical as the toccata.

Later on, repetitions heighten the intensity of the speaker's already lofty daydreams. He imagines a pair of Venetian lovers in conversation:

> "Were you happy?" —"Yes."—"And are you still as happy?"—"Yes. And you?"

The diacope on "happy" and "yes" here suggests that the lovers believe (or at least want to believe) that their happiness will be endless. The questioning repetition of the words, however, suggests that they already feel anxious about whether that's true!

For, as Galuppi's music will grimly tell the speaker, "Venice spent what Venice earned," and all is "dust and ashes" now—words the poem will repeat twice, perhaps nodding to the burial service that ends, "ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "Here," "here's"
- **Line 5:** "where"
- **Line 6:** "Where," "where"
- **Line 13:** "lady," "lady"
- **Line 17:** "She," "he"
- **Line 19:** "lesser thirds," "sixths diminished," "sigh," "sigh"
- **Line 20:** "Those," "those"
- **Line 21:** "Those"
- **Line 22:** "happy," "Yes," "happy," "Yes"
- **Line 28:** "one," "one"
- **Line 29:** "Some," "some"
- **Line 35:** "Dust and ashes," "Venice spent," "Venice earned"
- **Line 36:** "soul," "soul"
- **Line 43:** "Dust and ashes"

ALLUSION

"A Toccata of Galuppi's" alludes not just to the 18th-century composer Baldassare Galuppi, but to the whole Venetian world around him.

By the time Galuppi was writing his music, Venice—long one of the richest and most powerful city-states in Italy—was well on its way through a long, slow decline. It was still, however, a place famous for its romantic canals, its lavish masked balls, and its pleasure-loving populace. The speaker's visions of this time and place draw on both its delights and its decay.

The speaker, who has never been "out of England," bases his picture of Venice on what he's heard and read:

- When he refers to "Shylock's bridge," for instance, he's thinking of a central character in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* (and of the famous Rialto Bridge, which Shylock mentions).
- His pictures of ladies in velvet masks evoke stories of Carnival, the pre-Lent festival in which Venetians dress up in elaborate disguises and party the night away.
- And his idea of Venice as a place "where the merchants were the kings" suggests he's done some reading about Renaissance Venice, which was governed by elected leaders known as doges (who were often rich and powerful merchants).

All these allusions together paint a picture of a dreamlike, imaginary Venice—the Venice a guy who's never left his home country might wistfully conjure up. These romantic visions don't last long, however. Galuppi's music has just enough of a chilly edge to remind the speaker that the real live Venice of the 1700s is long gone.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Galuppi, Baldassaro"
- **Lines 5-6:** "they lived once thus at Venice where the merchants were the kings, / Where Saint Mark's is, where the Doges used to wed the sea with rings?"
- **Lines 7-8:** "Aye, because the sea's the street there; and 'tis arched by . . . what you call / . . . Shylock's bridge with houses on it, where they kept the carnival:"
- **Line 11:** "Balls and masks begun at midnight, burning ever to midday,"
- **Lines 17-18:** "—She, to bite her mask's black velvet—he, to finger on his sword, / While you sat and played Toccatas, stately at the clavichord?"

- **Lines 19-21:** “What? Those lesser thirds so plaintive, sixths diminished, sigh on sigh, / Told them something? Those suspensions, those solutions—"Must we die?" / Those commiserating sevenths—"Life might last! we can but try!"”
- **Line 24:** “Hark, the dominant's persistence till it must be answered to!”
- **Lines 25-27:** “So, an octave struck the answer. Oh, they praised you, I dare say! / "Brave Galuppi! that was music; good alike at grave and gay! / "I can always leave off talking when I hear a master play!"”
- **Line 35:** “"Dust and ashes, dead and done with, Venice spent what Venice earned.”
- **Lines 40-41:** “"As for Venice and her people, merely born to bloom and drop, / "Here on earth they bore their fruitage, mirth and folly were the crop:”

APOSTROPHE

This poem is one long apostrophe to Baldassare Galuppi, the long-dead composer of the toccata the speaker is listening to. Apostrophes address someone or something who can't respond—who isn't there or who can't normally speak (like a Grecian urn, for instance). In this case, however, the speaker imagines that the long-dead Galuppi *can* in some sense talk back to him: his voice is preserved in his music.

That voice says lots of things the speaker finds "very sad": in capturing the atmosphere of a vanished Venice, Galuppi's toccata also speaks of mortality and decay. The speaker replies to these notes of sorrow with wistful questions, asking Galuppi if things in Venice really were the way the music seems to suggest they were: if ladies were really that lovely, if lovers danced all night, if the doges really used to throw symbolic wedding rings into the sea.

Galuppi's imagined reply is not a romantic one. All the music will say, in essence, is: "It hardly matters what happened in Venice way back when, it's all dead now."

By framing the poem as an apostrophe, Browning suggests that his speaker yearns to reach out to the lost past, recapturing something long gone. Insofar as Galuppi can answer him, it's only to point out that this isn't really possible—that's the whole point.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- Before Line 1
- Lines 1-3
- Between Lines 3-4
- Lines 4-6
- Between Lines 6-7
- Lines 7-9
- Between Lines 9-10
- Lines 10-12
- Between Lines 12-13
- Lines 13-15
- Between Lines 15-16
- Lines 16-18
- Between Lines 18-19
- Lines 19-21
- Between Lines 21-22
- Lines 22-24
- Between Lines 24-25
- Lines 25-27
- Between Lines 27-28
- Lines 28-30
- Between Lines 30-31
- Lines 31-33
- Between Lines 33-34
- Lines 34-36
- Between Lines 36-37
- Lines 37-39
- Between Lines 39-40
- Lines 40-42
- Between Lines 42-43
- Lines 43-45

VOCABULARY

Galuppi, Baldassaro (Line 1) - The speaker refers to the 18th-century Italian composer Baldassare Galuppi here—and gets his name ever-so-slightly wrong.

Misconceive (Line 2) - Misunderstand.

Saint Mark's (Line 6) - Saint Mark's Cathedral, Venice's central (and legendarily gorgeous) church.

Doges (Line 6) - The elected lords of Italian city-states. Venice's doges were often wealthy merchants.

Wed the sea with rings (Line 6) - Venetian doges held an annual ceremony in which they'd throw a ring into the sea, symbolically uniting their city-state with the waters that flow around and through it.

Shylock's bridge (Line 8) - Shylock is a character from Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. The bridge the speaker refers to is the Rialto Bridge, which crosses Venice's Grand Canal.

Carnival (Line 8) - Lavish celebrations held in the week before Lent. The Venetian carnival is famous for its elaborate costumed masquerade balls.

Masks (Line 11) - That is, masquerades—parties that people would attend dressed in elaborate costumes complete with masks to disguise their identities.

Buoyant (Line 14) - Held right up, as if floating.

Afford (Line 16) - Make time, make an opportunity.

Toccatas (Line 18) - A toccata is a solo piece of music, often written for piano-like instruments (such as the harspichord and clavichord), meant to show off a composer's personal style.

Stately (Line 18) - Grand, dignified.

Clavichord (Line 18) - A small, quiet keyboard instrument, a precursor to the piano.

Thirds, Sixths, Seventhes, Octaves (Line 19, Line 21, Line 25) - Different kinds of musical chords.

Plaintive (Line 19) - Touchingly sad-sounding.

Suspensions, Solutions (Line 20) - Different ways that chords can flow into each other.

Commiserating (Line 21) - Sympathetic, pitying.

Dominant (Line 24) - The fifth note of a musical scale.

Brave (Line 26) - Here, the word "brave" doesn't mean "courageous," but excellent, splendid, or fine.

Grave and gay (Line 26) - Serious and lighthearted.

Tacitly (Line 30) - In a way that's implied but unspoken.

Nature's close reserve (Line 32) - Nature's guarded treasures.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"A Toccata of Galuppi's" is one of Browning's famous dramatic monologues, poems spoken in the voice of a particular character. Often, Browning's speakers tell on themselves, revealing more than they might have intended to about their less charming qualities. This speaker, however, seems like a perfectly nice guy: a wistful gentleman scientist with a fondness for 18th-century Italian clavichord music. Though he enjoys dreamy visions of long-ago Venice, he's not a fool or a fantasist, at least not for long: his romantic musings are tempered with an uncomfortable awareness of mortality.

He tells his story in 15 tight tercets (or three-line stanzas) with a triplet rhyme scheme and a swift-paced, pattering meter. Each stanza thus feels concentrated and contained, marking one moment in the speaker's slow progress from romantic daydreams to a chilly confrontation with death.

METER

"A Toccata of Galuppi's" is written in a flashy, dramatic, and difficult meter: trochaic octameter. That means that each line uses eight (!) trochees, metrical feet with a DUM-da rhythm. What's more, this is catalectic trochaic octameter, which means that each line drops its last unstressed syllable.

Here's how all that sounds in the first stanza:

> Oh, Ga- | luppi, | Baldas- | saro, | this is | very | sad to | find!
> I can | hardly | miscon- | ceive you; | it would | prove me | deaf and | blind;
> But al- | though I | take your | meaning, | 'tis with | such a | heavy | mind!

This pattering meter is as virtuosic as Galuppi's toccata. A "toccata," which means (roughly) "touch-piece" in Italian, is meant to show off a composer's style, their "touch"; this poem is a sort of toccata of Browning's, demonstrating his exuberant metrical skill.

The rhythm here also suits the speaker's experience. Swept up in the momentum of the music, he's also swept away toward thoughts of death.

RHYME SCHEME

The rhyme scheme of "A Toccata of Galuppi's" runs in triplets, like this:

> AAA BBB CCC

This tight, regular pattern makes each stanza feel like a self-contained thought. As the speaker gets lost in Galuppi's music, new ideas float up to him, one by one.

But those sequences of three rhymes over and over also feel pretty intense. Confronting his mortality, the speaker comes up against a hard limit to his understanding; the insistent rhymes here reflect the inescapable mystery of death.

The poem also uses some elegant internal rhyme—for instance, in the lines where the speaker seems to hear Galuppi warning him of his mortality:

> "Mathematics are your pastime; souls shall rise in their degree;
> "Butterflies may dread extinction—you'll not die, it cannot be!

The witty pairing of "souls shall rise" and "butterflies" hints that souls might be just as lovely, fragile, and transient as butterflies are.

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker has lived an insular life, having never been "out of England." But he's read enough to longingly picture what Venice must have been like in the 18th century, when Baldassare Galuppi was writing music. (Notice, though, that he misremembers Galuppi's first name as "Baldassaro"; an expert, he is not.) His idealized vision of long-ago Italian balls and parties paints him as a bit of a romantic—at first.

However, he doesn't have to think about it long before he realizes that there might have been a sad hollowness in a life of Venetian partying. Spurred by the sorrow he hears in Galuppi's

toccata, he turns to more melancholy thoughts of everyone's inevitable mortality: the Venetian lovers are dead, Galuppi is dead, and he himself will be dead one day, too. Then what?

This dreamy speaker is also a scientist, or at least a hobbyist, with interests in physics, geology, math, and biology. These pursuits might get him excited about the possibilities of the human intellect, but they also remind him that he can't live forever any more than a butterfly can. Nor art nor science, the speaker realizes with a shiver, offer any answers to the riddles of death: they only assert that death will certainly come.

SETTING

The poem takes place more in the speaker's imagination than in his surroundings. All that readers know about the speaker's actual life is that he's listening to (or perhaps playing) that transporting toccata of Galuppi's. The music gives him vivid, romantic dreams of 18th-century Venice, carrying him away to a place where the Doges (powerful elected leaders) "wed the sea with rings" and beautiful young lovers kiss and revel from midnight to midday.

Readers might, however, guess that the speaker lives in Browning's own 19th century. His interest in math, physics, and geology makes him sound like a Victorian gentleman hobbyist, a guy who does a bit of research in his free time, caught up in his century's optimistic excitement about the possibilities of science. However, as he uneasily admits, his learning has its limits—and he can't fully escape into a nostalgic past, either. Wherever and whenever he looks, death appears, grinning and waving.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

The English poet Robert Browning (1812-1889) was most famous in his time for not sounding much like a poet. His contemporaries were confused by his most distinctive works: dramatic monologues like this one, in which Browning inhabited a character like an actor playing a part. Even Oscar Wilde, a big Browning fan, famously said that "[George] Meredith is a prose Browning, and so is Browning." The Victorian literary world was much more at ease with the melancholy lyricism of Tennyson or the elegance of Elizabeth Barrett Browning (Browning's wife, and a much more famous poet) than with the novelistic storytelling of Browning's work.

But it's on his earthy, vibrant dramatic monologues that Browning's enduring reputation rests. His most famous poems form a veritable rogues' gallery, with narrators from a corrupt bishop to a murderous Italian duke to an equally murderous lover. By allowing these hideous men to speak for themselves, Browning explored the darkest corners of human nature—and took a particular interest in the ways that people justify their terrible deeds. Villains, Browning's monologues suggest, don't tend to think that they're villains. Browning's poetry wasn't all theatrical murder and greed, though; he also wrote tenderly about heroism, homesickness, and heartbreak.

The speaker in this poem, a melancholy scientist, is one of Browning's gentler narrators. He made his first appearance in the important 1855 collection *Men and Women*, a book that would deeply influence 20th-century modernist poets like Ezra Pound. Browning still moves readers to this day: for instance, his life and work inspired contemporary writer A.S. Byatt to write her acclaimed novel *Possession*.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

This is only one of many Browning poems about Italy. Browning and his wife Elizabeth Barrett Browning eloped to Florence to escape her disapproving father, and the pair were fascinated by their adoptive land. Many of the narrators in Browning's dramatic monologues are corrupt Italians from the height of the Renaissance: the monstrous Bishop of St. Praxed's and the dreadful Duke of Ferrara are two famous examples.

In this poem, however, Italy is just a romantic idea, a dream perceived by a guy who "was never out of England." As this poem's speaker listens to Galuppi's toccata, he feels as if he's been transported to 18th-century Venice: a time and place of decadence and decline.

Up through the late Renaissance, the seaside Italian city-state of Venice was a serious power, a prosperous and peaceful trading port with a reputation for fine goods, glorious architecture, and a pleasure-loving populace. Run, as the speaker observes, by doges (elected rulers, often from a wealthy merchant class), Venice was a hub of art and culture.

By the 18th century, however, Venice's power had begun to crumble. As other Italian city-states developed their own robust trade routes, Venice's ports became increasingly irrelevant. No longer a major player in political events, the city would eventually become little more than a gorgeous, gilded, and gradually sinking tourist destination.

If the speaker feels haunted by visions of Venice's beauty and decline, his discomfort might have something to do with his own time and place. He seems to be (like Browning himself) a Victorian Englishman, a guy living at the height of his own country's influence, power, and wealth. At the time Browning was writing, the sun proverbially never set on the British Empire: Britain held worldwide colonial power and busily extracted riches from all the countries it had subjugated.

But not so very long after Browning's death, the British Empire would wane, losing much of its sway over the course of the 20th century. Looking back on the fallen glory of Venice, this poem's speaker might get a little premonitory shiver. Like

people and like butterflies, powerful states inevitably decline and die, too.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Men and Women — See images of an early edition of Men and Women, the collection in which this poem first appeared. (https://archive.org/details/menwomen00brow/mode/2up)
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to the actor Alec Guinness reading the poem aloud. (https://youtu.be/peRVF1S9YDY)
- More on Browning — Find a wealth of Browning resources at the Victorian Web. (https://victorianweb.org/authors/rb/index.html)
- A Galuppi Toccata — While no one has pinned down which of Galuppi's toccatas (if any) this poem refers to, this Toccata in F Major, a solo piece for the clavichord, offers a taste of the composer's style. (https://youtu.be/n5xzF_5Qk4U)
- A Brief Biography — Learn more about Browning's life and work via the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/robert-browning)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ROBERT BROWNING POEMS

- Confessions
- Home-Thoughts, from Abroad
- How they Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix
- Life in a Love
- Love in a Life
- Meeting at Night
- My Last Duchess
- Porphyria's Lover
- Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister
- The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church
- The Laboratory
- The Last Ride Together
- The Lost Leader
- The Patriot
- The Pied Piper of Hamelin

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