Among the Rocks

POEM TEXT

Oh, good gigantic smile o' the brown old earth,
This autumn morning! How he sets his bones
To bask i' the sun, and thrusts out knees and feet
For the ripple to run over in its mirth;
Listening the while, where on the heap of stones
The white breast of the sea-lark twitters sweet.

That is the doctrine, simple, ancient, true;
Such is life's trial, as old earth smiles and knows.
If you loved only what were worth your love,
Love were clear gain, and wholly well for you:
Make the low nature better by your throes!
Give earth yourself, go up for gain above!

SUMMARY

Oh, the old earth smiles a wonderful, huge smile on this autumn morning! How he rests his bones in the sun, sticking out his legs so that the laughing water can run over them. He listens, all the while, to the sweet songs of the sea-larks hopping around on the rocks.

This is the old, plain, deep wisdom: this is the struggle of life (as the smiling earth knows). If you only loved things that deserved your love, then love would do you nothing but good. Make your imperfect soul better through your pains! Give yourself to the world, and look for your reward in heaven!

THEMES

NATURE'S WISDOM AND LIFE'S STRUGGLES

In "Among the Rocks," the earth is like a wise old man to whom the poem's speaker turns for help and comfort. The speaker looks on as the earth basks under the autumn sun, taking pleasure in existence itself. Such pleasure, the speaker reflects, is the "simple, ancient, true" answer to "life's trials." For her, the only way of coping with pain is to embrace the world as it is, knowing that final satisfaction will come only in heaven.

To the watching speaker, the earth's "good, gigantic" face seems to "smile" on a bright autumn morning by the ocean. Like a grandfatherly giant, the earth stretches out in the sun and warms itself, comfortably splaying its rocky knees and listening to seabirds calling. The earth, in other words delights in simply *being*. And "That," the speaker reflects, "is the doctrine, simple, ancient, true." In other words, the earth's way of being is a kind of creed, a statement of an old, deep wisdom. The earth's calm, cheerful embrace of existence encourages the speaker to follow suit: to accept, appreciate, and enjoy the world for what it is.

That's especially important, the poem suggests, because the world is so often a difficult place to be. Disappointed by an imperfect love and feeling as if she's struggling through "life's trial," the speaker resolves to follow the earth's example and "give earth [her]self" for now, turning toward life rather than hiding from it. Final "gain," the ultimate and perfect reward, will have to wait for heaven. Life on earth, as the personified earth itself teaches, means taking on the trial of existence and finding beauty in the struggle.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12

THE DISAPPOINTMENTS OF LOVE

"Among the Rocks" is the seventh in a nine-poem sequence called "James Lee's Wife," in which the titular wife reflects on her complicated, passionate relationship with her husband. In this poem, the speaker's husband has disappointed her so badly that she's led to reflect that love *itself* might be inherently disappointing. Loving, in this poem, means suffering and struggling to find the patience to bear one's pain.

The poem finds the speaker in a moment of romantic turmoil. She's disillusioned about her husband and about love in general. Though the poem doesn't reveal precisely what's happened, the speaker's language suggests that she's feeling sad, bitter, and world-weary about it all. "If you loved only what were worth your love," she reflects, then love would be "wholly well for you," a straightforwardly wonderful thing. But that's just not how it works. You don't only love the people who *earn* or *deserve* your love, in other words. Rather, you can feel love for all sorts of imperfect and disappointing people. Love itself, then, must often end up imperfect and disappointing.

But such disappointment is all part of "life's trial." Anyone who loves, the speaker resolves, must accept the "throes" (or pains) of imperfect love, and even try to see them as a way to raise up "low nature"—that is, to refine and strengthen their character, and perhaps improve the world around them too. By embracing the pain and disappointment of love, then, the poem's speaker finds meaning in her sorrow: facing the pain of disappointed

love can help the soul grow. She can even hold out the hope that her trials on earth will bring her closer to eventual "gain" in heaven.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 9-12

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

Oh, good gigantic smile o' the brown old earth,
This autumn morning! How he sets his bones
To bask i' the sun, and thrusts out knees and feet
For the ripple to run over in its mirth;

"Among the Rocks" begins with a flash of simple pleasure. On a bright "autumn morning" on a rocky coast, the poem's speaker hails the "good gigantic smile of the brown old earth."

Linger for a moment over the adjectives in the first line. The earth's smile, to this speaker, feels purely "good"—not glorious or magnificent or splendid, just *good*. But that simple goodness is in its way overwhelming, "gigantic." The earth's happiness is straightforward, plain, and fabulously *big*; its great smile sweeps the speaker up.

Listen, too, to the order of the adjectives in "brown old earth." "Old brown earth" would be the more standard way to phrase this in English (where, in a phenomenon known as the Royal Order of Adjectives, adjectives almost always fall into the same sequence, with adjectives describing age preceding adjectives describing color). By putting "brown" before "old," old Browning paints a picture of an earth that is *primarily* old: its brownness is secondary to its fundamental ancientness. This is far from the first time the earth has sat and smiled.

The smiling earth, the speaker observes, is thoroughly enjoying itself. Personified, he becomes something like an old sailor relaxing on the shore: he "sets his bones / To bask i' the sun" and "thrusts out knees and feet" into the soft "ripple" of the breakers against the shore. The water is enjoying itself, too; its sounds strike the speaker as "mirth," joyful laughter. The imagery here conjures a bright, warm, clear day—and a living world. The knobbly bones of lean, weather-beaten Old Man Earth are also the brown rocks of the cliffside.

Something about the world on this autumn morning, then, makes the speaker feel *accompanied*. *She* takes pleasure in the *earth's* pleasure; its smile becomes her own. Even the rhythm of the lines here suggests energetic delight. While the poem is mostly written in iambic pentameter—that is, lines of five iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm—this first line uses some rambling, earthy variations:

Oh, good | gigan- | tic smile | of the brown | old earth

The extra unstressed syllable in "of the brown" gives the line a pebbly, irregular texture, and the three energetic stresses of "brown old earth" feel as grand as that "gigantic smile." (It's also possible to read the last foot here as a classic iamb, "old earth," da-DUM—but a one-two-three punch of "brown old earth" feels in keeping with the elation in these first words.)

Alert readers might notice that we're calling the speaker "she" in this guide, though she doesn't give any clue to her identity in this poem. That's because "Among the Rocks" is one segment of a longer sequence of nine poems called "James Lee's Wife." In this long dramatic monologue, the titular wife—who never gets a name of her own—tracks the slow, sad decline of her marriage to a man whom she loves more than he loves her.

"Among the Rocks" isn't her first visit to the seacoast. Other poems follow her as she wanders "Along the Beach" and "On the Cliff," fretting about the inconstancy of love. In this, the seventh and shortest poem of the series, she'll face her pain, drawing courage, conviction, and hope from the smiling, ancient earth.

LINES 5-6

Listening the while, where on the heap of stones
The white breast of the sea-lark twitters sweet.

Stretched out and relaxing by the sea, the personified earth embodies not just the world's pleasure in itself, but the speaker's pleasure in the world. She feels the earth is smiling, and she responds to it with her own enthusiasm; she relishes the "mirth" of the waves, the warmth of the sun.

And she, like the earth, notices something else going on among the rocks. On the cliff or the pebbly shingle, she and the earth alike hear:

> [...] where on the heap of stones
> The white breast of the sea-lark twitters sweet.

This image of little birds hopping and peeping unites sight and sound in a moment of synesthesia. It's not the sea-lark itself but its "white breast" that does the twittering here. On the one hand, that imagery just suggests that the birds' tiny chests are swelling with song. But it might also paint a picture of the flashes of white feathers as a kind of visual "twitter," a flurry of sweet brightness against the brown rock to match the flurry of peeping against the rush and wash of the ocean.

These lines juxtapose weighty, quiet rock and airy, singing birds, bringing together stillness and motion, the inanimate and the living. The earth and the speaker alike sit still and listen to the little flickers of life moving among the rocks.

LINES 7-8

That is the doctrine, simple, ancient, true;

Such is life's trial, as old earth smiles and knows.

As the second stanza begins, something about the scene before the speaker—smiling, brown old earth and sweet white-breasted birds—resolves into a new understanding. Listen to the emphatic parallelism in these first two lines:

> That is the doctrine, simple, ancient, true;
> Such is life's trial, as old earth smiles and knows.

The similar shape of lines 7 and 8 suggests that the "doctrine," the old wisdom the speaker has gathered, is something to do with "life's trial"—language that might equally suggest life's pain or life's *tests*. Like an affectionate grandfather, "old earth smiles and knows" about this struggle; in fact, the smile seems related to the trial. Notice how the internal rhyme of "smiles" and "trial" makes the one chime with the other.

Readers might feel as if they're overhearing the speaker rather than seeing into her mind here, for it's not immediately clear what she means. All readers can gather at first is that the speaker's vision of the earth on this autumn morning has given her a sudden strong conviction. *What* is the "doctrine," the lesson or the wisdom? *What* is "life's trial"? The speaker doesn't explain; she doesn't need to. She's understood something freshly on her own terms. The doctrine and trial alike are what she sees in the landscape before her.

Though her thoughts remain partly private, the language she uses gives readers a sense of what she's feeling. Look again at that first line:

> That is the doctrine, simple, ancient, true;

The asyndeton in these lines makes each of those adjectives—"simple, ancient, true"—drop with an even weight, firm as stones. This "simple, ancient, true" doctrine has something in common with the "good gigantic smile of the brown old earth." Like that smile, it's simple (as goodness is simple) and ancient (as the earth is ancient). And as the earth's smile is "gigantic" and all-encompassing, this doctrine is straightforwardly *true*: a plain and unequivocal word. This wisdom is something the speaker feels in her bones.

LINES 9-10

If you loved only what were worth your love,
Love were clear gain, and wholly well for you:

Now, in a rush, the speaker reveals some part of the particular struggle that's on her mind at the moment:

> If you loved only what were worth your love,
> Love were clear gain, and wholly well for you:

Her vision of the earth's smile, these lines suggest, has given her some consolation in the midst of a serious romantic disappointment. In the context of the longer sequence, readers know that the speaker has always worried about her marriage's shaky foundations, often feeling herself unworthy of a husband she idealizes. In this poem, she seems suddenly on her own side: loving only "what were worth your love," she reflects, simply doesn't happen in this world. These words suggest that she has a high standard of "worth"—one she knows her husband hasn't met. The alliteration in "what were worth" evokes her swift, urgent new thoughts: one word tumbles into the next.

Even outside the wider context of the sequence, readers might recognize the speaker's predicament here. We don't only love kind people who love us back—and thus, love is very rarely "clear gain, and wholly well for you" (that is, uniformly good, easy, and rewarding). There's a quiet irony in the speaker's tone here: *If you loved only worthy objects, well, wouldn't* that *be great*. But that, the speaker knows, is not how things go.

The speaker's use of the second person here makes it sound as if she's talking to herself, but also as if she's addressing whoever's listening. Love is painful, love is disappointing, and love is imperfect—and that, certainly, is part of "life's trial," shared by all.

These lines also suggest that the speaker is a disappointed idealist. As the longer sequence shows, she has loved her husband deeply. Perhaps she's also imagined that he was better than he was, worthier than he was of her total devotion. A note of bitterness in her voice here mingles with her resignation to the fact that love, as she puts it in an earlier stage of the poem, can be worm-eaten and rickety as shipwreck timber.

The poem's closing lines, however, will suggest that the "doctrine" the speaker takes from the earth's smile is not only sad, but heartening.

LINES 11-12

Make the low nature better by your throes!
Give earth yourself, go up for gain above!

The poem closes with the speaker's fervent encouragement to herself—and to whoever hears her. Her vision of the smiling earth has left her determined to:

> Make the low nature better by your throes!
> Give earth yourself, go up for gain above!

Here, the "simple, ancient, true" doctrine she takes from "this autumn morning" comes into focus. She won't withdraw from "life's trial," its imperfections and disappointments. Rather, she'll allow the "throes" of her pain to "make the low nature better"—language that suggests she's treating her pain as a "trial" in the sense of a test of her mettle. Her own "low nature," the weaker parts of her character, might be refined by her suffering; so might the "low nature" of her husband, or even the world around her. For that to happen, she feels, she must "give

earth [her]self."

Think back, here, to the vision of the old earth's "good gigantic smile" in the poem's first lines. The earth's smile, there, came from nothing more than *being*: the earth took pleasure in its mere existence under the sun on "this autumn morning." In line 8, that smile was also a knowing one. The earth, sympathetic to the speaker's pain, is also old enough and wise enough to know that life *is* pain, as often as not.

If the speaker is to give herself to the earth, she's also hoping to give herself to the earth's way of being—its calm acceptance and enjoyment of what's in front of it. She won't hide, in other words. The earth's smile has given her a rush of renewed commitment to the imperfect, lovely world.

She doesn't resign her idealism altogether, though. Love may never be "wholly well" on earth, but she can still aim to "go up for gain above"—that is, she can toseek heaven, where she might at last earn the reward of a longed-for perfection. (You can hear her grip tightening around the idea in the closing line's intense alliterative /g/ sounds: "Give earth yourself, go up for gain above!") While she's on the ground, she won't hope for what the world can't give her. Nor will she turn from what it can.

Something about the mixture of the earthy and the airy, the ancient brown earth and the sweet white birds, has given shape to the speaker's resolution. The good gigantic smile of the earth itself keeps her "Among the Rocks," planted on the ground.

POETIC DEVICES

PERSONIFICATION

The poem's personified earth is a kindly presence: a wise old man whose "good gigantic smile" suggests a grand embrace of life.

The earth, in this speaker's vision, is brown and lean, old and worn. The speaker's particular attention to the earth's "bones" stretched out to warm in the sun and to his "knees and feet" resting in the water paints a picture of a lanky old sailor, a guy who's seen enough of life to really appreciate the peace of a sunlit morning. At just the same time, these images evoke the knobbly, weather-beaten rocks of a cliff.

Where this personified earth sits, all is well. His "good gigantic smile" suggests there's something simply *right* about this day; the very waves on the beach ripple with "mirth," giddy laughter. The plainness of the word "good" and the vastness of the word "gigantic" suggest that the speaker perceives a fundamental, simple, and grand contentment in the earth's way of being.

She takes part in that contentment, too. She may be suffering, but in the sage, kindly company of the earth, she's not alone. Like an affectionate grandfather, "old earth smiles and knows," sympathizing: "life's trial," his wise contentment suggests, can't be dodged, but must be embraced.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-5:** "Oh, good gigantic smile o' the brown old earth, / This autumn morning! How he sets his bones / To bask i' the sun, and thrusts out knees and feet / For the ripple to run over in its mirth; / Listening the while,"

IMAGERY

A few brushstrokes of imagery in the first stanza evoke both a bright, rocky shoreline and the freshened gaze of a person coming to terms with their pain.

To the speaker, the earth on this "autumn morning" looks like a tough, brown old man, all "knees" and "bones," his rocky limbs "thrust[] out" and warming in the sum. But if the earth is bony and grizzled, he's also happy, healthy, and well. The sun shines, the "ripple" of the sea on the shore seems full of "mirth" (or laughter), and the "sea-lark twitters sweet" among the rocks. The speaker's special attention to the birds' "white breast[s]" paints a picture of bright flashes of feather against the worn brown of the rock, the color standing out against the backdrop as the sweet twitter of birdsong might stand out against the rush of the ocean.

These images set up a contrast between solid rock and weightless birds, the earthy and the airy. They also suggest that these contrasts in some way *go together*. The poem's speaker, disappointed in love, seems to see her predicament in a new and brighter light as she rests in this scene. Rather than longing for a perfect world in which all "love were clear gain"—that is, in which love is always uncomplicatedly happy—she grounds herself in the lovely, ordinary day.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "good gigantic smile o' the brown old earth"
- **Lines 2-4:** "sets his bones / To bask i' the sun, and thrusts out knees and feet / For the ripple to run over in its mirth"
- **Line 6:** "white breast of the sea-lark twitters sweet"

ASYNDETON

A moment of asyndeton evokes the speaker's fresh resolve to face life as it is. The speaker never precisely explains the flash of old wisdom that she intuits from the smiling earth on "this autumn morning." Perhaps it's not something she *can* explain, at least not directly. But she does declare that what she realizes or remembers here among the rocks is:

> the doctrine, simple, ancient, true;

Set side by side without conjunctions, these three words ring

out evenly, each the same weight. But they also build to a crescendo:

- First come "simple" and "ancient," words that evoke a kind of wisdom as old and plain as a sea-worn stone.
- Then comes "true." The speaker has an utter uncomplicated conviction in this simple, ancient doctrine, that closing word suggests: it's nothing more or less than the very truth.

Landing one by one at a steady pace, like pebbles dropped to the beach, these words feel calm and certain. The wisdom the speaker gathers from this scene, the asyndeton here suggests, seems as much a fact to her as the earth itself. As the earth itself is "true," plain and real and solid, so is her realization that she must embrace life as wholly as the smiling earth appears to.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "simple, ancient, true"

ALLITERATION

Moments of powerful alliteration bring the poem's setting and the speaker's deep feeling to life. Listen, for instance, to the alliterative sounds in the first stanza's description of the "brown old earth" by the shore:

> [...] How he sets his bones
> To bask i' the sun, and thrusts out knees and feet
> For the ripple to run over in its mirth;
> Listening the while, where on the heap of stones
> The white breast of the sea-lark twitters sweet.

The blunt /b/ of "bones" and "bask" calls up an image of the earth's weighty, relaxed, sun-warmed limbs—the very rocks the speaker stands among. The lighter /r/ sound, meanwhile, suggests the rush of the ocean's "ripple[s]," the wavelets whose sound strikes the speaker as a burst of "mirth." Soft /w/ and /s/ sounds evoke the whistles of the sweet-voiced little birds, piping over it all.

In the second stanza, meanwhile, alliteration lets readers hear the emotion in the speaker's voice:

> If you loved only what were worth your love,
> [...]
> Give earth yourself, go up for gain above!

The string of /w/ and /wer/ sounds in "what were worth" makes one word tumble easily into the other, as if the speaker's insight comes to her all in a rush. The firm /g/ sound in her closing words—"Give earth yourself, go up for gain above!"—captures her conviction and fervor.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "bones"
- **Line 3:** "bask"
- **Line 4:** "ripple," "run"
- **Line 5:** "while," "where"
- **Line 6:** "white," "sea," "sweet"
- **Line 9:** "what were worth"
- **Line 12:** "Give," "go," "gain"

VOCABULARY

O' (Line 1) - A contraction of "of."

Bask (Line 3) - Luxuriously enjoy, bathe in.

I' (Line 3) - A contraction of "in."

Mirth (Line 4) - Laughter.

The while (Line 5) - All along.

Sea-lark (Line 6) - A small seabird.

Doctrine (Line 7) - A spiritual lesson or credo; a statement of belief or principle.

Throes (Line 11) - Pains, sufferings.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Among the Rocks" is the seventh in a sequence of nine poems collectively titled "James Lee's Wife." These poems, spoken in the voice of the titular wife, explore her fears about her slowly collapsing relationship with her husband: that he'll change, that she'll change, that their love will change, that love itself is inherently ruinous. Each poem takes its title from the place where the wife thinks these thoughts, often near a rocky coastline: "Along the Beach," "Under the Cliff." This is the shortest entry in the sequence: a twelve-line poem built from just two sestets (or six-line stanzas).

Among companion poems that are often longer and more complex, the brief and simple "Among the Rocks" captures one calm, still moment of understanding. As the poem's speaker—the wife, suffering an unspecified but painful romantic disillusionment—looks out over the rocks on a bright autumn morning by the sea, she finds courage in the realization that the earth delights in merely being. The poem's short, plain shape reflects both the earth's simple pleasure and the speaker's fresh resolve to take life on its own terms.

METER

"Among the Rocks" is written in iambic pentameter. That means that each of its lines is built from five iambs, metrical feet with a

da-DUM rhythm. Here's how that sounds in line 12:

Give earth | yourself, | go up | for gain | above!

While that iambic pulse keeps the poem going, there are plenty of variations here, too. Listen to the rhythm of lines 7 and 8, for instance:

That is | the doc- | trine, sim- | ple, an- | cient, true;
Such is | life's trial, | as old | earth smiles | and knows.

By starting these two forceful lines with trochees—the opposite feet of iambs, with a DUM-da rhythm—Browning gives the speaker's voice the ring of conviction as she renews her commitment to life on this imperfect earth.

Variations in the meter can be atmospheric, too. Listen to the very first line:

Oh, good | gigan- | tic smile | o' the brown | old earth,

The rambling, rumbly rhythm here, with its extra unstressed syllable and its string of three bold stresses at the end of the line, paints a sound-picture of "brown old earth" with his rocky bones stretched out in the sun.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem's rhyme scheme runs like this:

ABCABC

Even within the confines of a short poem, this pattern feels unhurried and thoughtful, making readers wait a moment for rhymes to resolve (as they wouldn't in a more common AABBCC or ABABAB scheme). These leisurely rhymes evoke both the earth's easy pleasure in the morning and the speaker's moment of calm amidst pain. She's gotten over the most acute phase of her suffering here, and—following the earth's example—she's ready to take a deep, philosophical breath and face the world in all its imperfection.

SPEAKER

The speaker here is "James Lee's Wife" herself, the titular character of the sequence this poem comes from. Without that context, readers wouldn't gather much about her identity; she doesn't say anything about herself here.

Still, readers can gather that this speaker is a saddened idealist, a person whose high hopes for love and life have been disappointed or even betrayed. Here, she leans on a philosophical acceptance of imperfection and a willingness to embrace the world, facing "life's trial" with calm courage. Her delight in the "good gigantic smile o' the brown old earth" on a lovely autumn morning gives her the resolve to embrace what she can't change. She has, too, a consoling faith in the eventual rewards of heaven. Everything she goes through on earth, she believes, will refine her soul and lead to "gain" in a better world.

SETTING

The poem paints a picture of a sea coast on a bright autumn morning. Here, the "brown old earth" seems to be sunning himself. With his old bones stretched out to "bask i' the sun," he's like nothing so much as a kindly old sailor making the most of a beautiful day. This knobbly, browned personification suggests a landscape of weathered, rocky sea-cliffs with their "feet" dabbling in the breakers—and a world delighting in itself, from the "mirth" (or laughter) of the waves to the "good gigantic smile" of the earth.

There's a gentle sweetness to this scene, as well: the "sea-lark twitters" softly in the background. Perhaps its song reminds the speaker that there's "gain" to be hoped for from "above" as well as here on earth: there's pleasure in this landscape (in spite of the world's disappointments), and there's pleasure to be found beyond it.

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: his dramatic monologues, in which he 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 at the time) 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 best-known 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 darker 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.

"Among the Rocks" is the seventh segment of a sequence entitled "James Lee's Wife," sometimes just called "James Lee" in earlier printings. In this series of nine connected poems, the

titular (and otherwise nameless) Mrs. Lee reflects on her passionate, fraught, complex relationship with her husband. Here, she finds consolation in nature after he badly (but mysteriously) disappoints her. Browning first published "James Lee's Wife" in the important 1864 collection *Dramatis Personae*. That collection's great dramatic monologues would go on to influence writers from Henry James to Jorge Luis Borges to A.S. Byatt.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Many critics see "James Lee's Wife," the sequence from which this poem comes, as partly autobiographical, an exploration of some of the more difficult dynamics in Browning's own marriage. That marriage, however, was a more balanced and loving one than poor James Lee's wife ever enjoys.

In 1845, Browning paid his first visit to a rising star in the literary world: Elizabeth Barrett. Unusually for a woman writer of the time, Barrett had become wildly famous; Browning was only one of many readers to be moved by her soulful, elegant poetry. He wrote her a fan letter, and the two began a warm correspondence. Eventually, they fell deeply in love.

Barrett's tyrannical father was having none of it, however. Besides preferring to keep his talented daughter (and her earnings) to himself, he disapproved of Browning, who was several years younger than Barrett—unconventional in a Victorian marriage—and not yet a commercially successful writer himself. Defying Mr. Barrett, the couple eloped to Italy in 1846 (which they might have rather enjoyed, following as they were in the romantic footsteps of their heroes Mary and Percy Shelley). Outraged, Elizabeth's father disinherited her.

The newlywed Brownings, undaunted, set up house in Florence. There, they would live happily for over a decade until Elizabeth fell ill. She died in Robert's arms at the age of only 55.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Dramatis Personae — See images of the first edition of Dramatis Personae, the important collection in which this poem appeared. (https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/6a22b890-ba11-0132-4966-58d385a7b928)
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to a reading of the poem. (https://youtu.be/s5Rr1-iwXos)
- More on Browning — Visit the Victorian Web to find a wealth of resources on Browning's life and work. (https://victorianweb.org/authors/rb/index.html)
- A Brief Biography — Learn more about Browning's life and times via the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/robert-browning)
- Portraits of Browning — Admire some portraits of Browning via London's National Portrait Gallery. (https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/person/mp00603/robert-browning)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ROBERT BROWNING POEMS

- A Toccata of Galuppi's
- 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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