The Last Ride Together

POEM TEXT

I said—Then, dearest, since 'tis so,
Since now at length my fate I know,
Since nothing all my love avails,
Since all, my life seemed meant for, fails,
  Since this was written and needs must be—
My whole heart rises up to bless
Your name in pride and thankfulness!
Take back the hope you gave—I claim
Only a memory of the same,
—And this beside, if you will not blame,
  Your leave for one last ride with me.

My mistress bent that brow of hers;
Those deep dark eyes where pride demurs
When pity would be softening through,
Fixed me a breathing-while or two
  With life or death in the balance: right!
The blood replenished me again;
My last thought was at least not vain:
I and my mistress, side by side
Shall be together, breathe and ride,
So, one day more am I deified.
  Who knows but the world may end tonight?

Hush! if you saw some western cloud
All billowy-bosomed, over-bowed
By many benedictions—sun's
And moon's and evening star's at once—
  And so, you, looking and loving best,
Conscious grew, your passion drew
Cloud, sunset, moonrise, star-shine too,
Down on you, near and yet more near,
Till flesh must fade for heaven was here!—
Thus leant she and lingered—joy and fear!
  Thus lay she a moment on my breast.

Then we began to ride. My soul
Smoothed itself out, a long-cramped scroll
Freshening and fluttering in the wind.
Past hopes already lay behind.
  What need to strive with a life awry?
Had I said that, had I done this,
So might I gain, so might I miss.
Might she have loved me? just as well
She might have hated, who can tell!
Where had I been now if the worst befell?
  And here we are riding, she and I.

Fail I alone, in words and deeds?
Why, all men strive and who succeeds?
We rode; it seemed my spirit flew,
Saw other regions, cities new,
  As the world rushed by on either side.
I thought—All labor, yet no less
Bear up beneath their unsuccess.
Look at the end of work, contrast
The petty done, the undone vast,
This present of theirs with the hopeful past!
  I hoped she would love me; here we ride.

What hand and brain went ever paired?
What heart alike conceived and dared?
What act proved all its thought had been?
What will but felt the fleshly screen?
  We ride and I see her bosom heave.
There's many a crown for who can reach.
Ten lines, a statesman's life in each!
The flag stuck on a heap of bones,
A soldier's doing! what atones?
They scratch his name on the Abbey stones.
  My riding is better, by their leave.

What does it all mean, poet? Well,
Your brains beat into rhythm, you tell
What we felt only; you expressed
You hold things beautiful the best,
  And pace them in rhyme so, side by side.
'Tis something, nay 'tis much: but then,
Have you yourself what's best for men?
Are you—poor, sick, old ere your time—
Nearer one whit your own sublime
Than we who have never turned a rhyme?
  Sing, riding's a joy! For me, I ride.

And you, great sculptor—so, you gave

A score of years to Art, her slave,
And that's your Venus, whence we turn
To yonder girl that fords the burn!
  You acquiesce, and shall I repine?
What, man of music, you grown gray
With notes and nothing else to say,
Is this your sole praise from a friend,
"Greatly his opera's strains intend,
But in music we know how fashions end!"
  I gave my youth; but we ride, in fine.

Who knows what's fit for us? Had fate
Proposed bliss here should sublimate
My being—had I signed the bond—
Still one must lead some life beyond,
  Have a bliss to die with, dim-descried.
This foot once planted on the goal,
This glory-garland round my soul,
Could I descry such? Try and test!
I sink back shuddering from the quest.
Earth being so good, would Heaven seem best?
  Now, Heaven and she are beyond this ride.

And yet—she has not spoke so long!
What if heaven be that, fair and strong
At life's best, with our eyes upturned
Whither life's flower is first discerned
  We, fixed so, ever should so abide?
What if we still ride on, we two
With life forever old yet new,
Changed not in kind but in degree,
The instant made eternity—
And heaven just prove that I and she
  Ride, ride together, forever ride?

SUMMARY

I said: "Well, my darling, if that's the way things are—since now, at last, I know what's going to happen to me; since my love has had no effect; since I've failed in my life's very purpose; since this is my inescapable fate—I bless you wholeheartedly, proud and grateful to have loved you. I return to you all the hopes you gave me and ask only that I will be allowed to remember those hopes. But I'd also like to ask one more thing: please go for one final horseback ride with me."

My beloved tilted her lovely head, and her big dark eyes—full of the pride that made her turn me down, when they could have been soft with pity for me—looked directly at me for a few moments. I felt that my very life was at stake until she nodded: yes! Then, I felt my frozen blood moving in my veins again; at least I'd get this one last wish fulfilled. My beloved and I will be together, alive and breathing, for one more horseback ride—and so, for one more day, I feel like a god. And who knows? Maybe the world will end this very evening and our ride together will be my last experience on earth.

Listen quietly: imagine that you saw a cloud floating in the western sky, curvy as a woman's breast, illuminated and blessed by the lovely lights of the sun, the moon, and Venus all at once. And imagine that you, watching this cloud in adoration, realized that your love for it was pulling it (and all the beautiful lights captured in it) down toward you, nearer and nearer, until you felt you might leave your body behind and enter heaven itself, dying of bliss. That's just how she leaned toward me, filling me with delight and terror at once; that's just how she embraced me for one short moment.

So we set out for our ride. I felt my soul, which had been packed tightly away for so long, uncrumpling itself and flying like a flag behind me in the breeze. My earlier hopes were lost now. So what good would it do for me to struggle against my unfortunate fate? If I'd done this or that, things might have been better, or they might have been worse. Would she have loved me if I'd done something differently? She might just as easily have hated me—who knows! And how much worse would my situation have been if she refused even to go on this ride with me? For look: here we are, riding together.

Am I the only person whose efforts fail? Certainly not: do *anyone's* efforts completely succeed? As my beloved and I rode on, I felt as if my soul were flying over far-off lands, while the world rushed past around us. I thought: everyone works hard at something, and everyone is forced to reckon with failure. Compare results with intentions; contrast the little things people manage to accomplish with all the greatness they hoped to achieve, or their present reality with what they once dreamed might happen! Me, I hoped my beloved would love me back; and here we are, instead, on this final ride.

When was a person ever able to do just what they dreamed of? Who ever both conjured up a brilliant plan and completed it perfectly? What action ever lived up to hopes? Whose willpower was never thwarted by the imperfect reality of mortal life? (My beloved and I keep riding, and I see her breast rise and fall.) Oh, sure, there are plenty of triumphs and rewards in the world for the people who pursue them. But a great leader's glory amounts to nothing more than ten short lines in an old history book. And all that remains of heroic soldiers is a pile of bones with a flag stuck into them. And what makes up for such a fate? The soldier just gets his name written on the walls of Westminster Abbey. No offense to them, but I think my ride is a better reward.

Well, you poet: what do you have to say about these questions?

Your mind taps out a beat, you record the things that most people only feel—and you've said that you think beauty is the best thing in the world. You line beauties up in rhymed lines, one after the other. Such an achievement isn't nothing, it's a lot more than nothing: but do you, poet, actually lead the best possible *life*? Or are you—impoverished, ill, and old before your time—any closer to the beauties you celebrate than those of us who never wrote a single poem? You can go ahead and write poems that say, "Riding is a delight!" Me, I just ride.

And what about you, oh great sculptor? You sacrificed 20 years of your life to the goddess Art, making yourself her servant. The result is a lovely statue of Venus—which we all turn away from as soon as an ordinary pretty girl crossing a stream catches our eye. You willingly make your sacrifice—and would I wish you to do otherwise? And you, you musician, prematurely gray-haired, with nothing to say for yourself but a few songs: the only thing your friends have to say about you is, "Well, he's an ambitious composer, but we all know how musical tastes change...." I, like you artists, sacrificed my best years to a thankless cause: but, after it all, at least my beloved and I are riding together.

Who can say what's best? If Fate had decreed that I should get what I wanted, and requited love should make my very soul overflow with bliss—if I had been able to marry her—well, everyone needs to have something left to aspire to in heaven. We all need an idea of perfection that we can only barely imagine; if I'd achieved my idea of perfection on earth, and found my soul wrapped in the celebratory wreaths of fulfilled love, would I have any dream left over to hope for? There would be only one way to find out! But the thought makes me fall back in fear. If I achieved the absolute height of joy on earth, would I even care about heaven any more? Now, at least, both my beloved and heaven itself are alluringly out of my grasp, somewhere beyond this ride.

But—my beloved has been quiet for so long! What if heaven itself only meant that the very best and most beautiful moment of our life (the moment when we look up into the heavens and feel as if we're seeing the whole point of life blossoming like a flower) would last forever? What if the two of us were to ride on forever, always doing the same thing and always feeling it to be fresh and new? What if we never did anything but ride—except that we got to do it eternally, one second stretching out into infinity? What if heaven was just the two of us riding on forever?

THEMES

THE PAINS AND CONSOLATIONS OF LOVE

"The Last Ride Together" suggests that intense love can inspire bliss even in the middle of heartbreak. The speaker, a man whose proposal has just been declined by his beloved, makes a final request: that she go for one last horseback ride with him. Even if his love for her is unrequited, it's still so strong that this devastating final outing with her feels to him like heaven itself. Love, in this poem, doesn't need to be reciprocated to be meaningful; on the contrary, the speaker suggests that thwarted love can be beautiful, worthwhile, and even sacred.

The speaker's love for the woman he wanted to marry is so huge and so fundamental to him that, without it, he feels he doesn't have much left to live for. The speaker's adoration of his beloved has made her the center of his life—and when she doesn't love him back, he feels as if "all [his] life seemed meant for" has "fail[ed]." In other words, he feels that winning his beloved's affection was his only purpose in life. And now that she's turned him down, his life itself seems like a failure.

But even unrequited love, the poem says, can feel almost divine. When the speaker goes on his "last ride" with his beloved, the simple joy of being in her company is so huge that he can think of no greater pleasure, even though he knows that pleasure must come to an end. He even speculates that heaven might be nothing more than an eternal version of this ride: perhaps paradise itself could offer no deeper joy than this "instant" of his beloved's company becoming "eternity." Beside her, he himself even feels "deified," almost made into a god himself. He wouldn't trade this single moment for any other triumph the world could offer him.

The poem thus suggests that love can crush people's hearts and offer a glimpse of paradise at the same time. The speaker's loss and disappointment might be devastating, but he's still had the profound experience of adoring someone so much that even an hour or two in her company gives him the greatest imaginable pleasure. Love, the poem says, is deeply worthwhile, life-giving, and spiritually meaningful even when one's love isn't returned.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-44
- Lines 100-110

HOPE AND EXPECTATIONS VS. REALITY

Life, the poem's speaker reflects, never lives up to dreams. From disappointed love to disappointed ambitions, life doesn't ever seem to reach the glory that people can conjure up in their imaginations: "all men strive" for something perfect, the speaker says, but no one "succeed[s]." That doesn't mean that ambitious hopes and dreams have no place in life, however: earthly failures and disappointments can help people to imagine (and strive to reach) a perfect afterlife. If people never get what they want on earth, in other words, then they always have a heavenly ideal to quest for.

Mourning an unrequited love, the speaker philosophically

reflects that he's far from alone in his suffering: people's hopes are never completely fulfilled by what actually happens. "What act," the speaker asks, ever "proved all the thought had been?"—in other words, *when did anything ever come out exactly the way a person meant it to?* Even the greatest "poet" or "sculptor," for instance, might celebrate ideal beauties in their work, but that doesn't mean that they'll get anywhere near the perfection they imagine in either their flawed art or their flawed lives. Reality just isn't perfect, plain and simple.

And when people *do* achieve something great, the speaker mourns, their triumph is short-lived. Even grand victories are marred by death: the noblest "statesman" or "soldier" ends up nothing more than a "ten line[]" entry in the history books and a "heap of bones." The speaker himself feels this sorrow acutely. On a final horseback ride with his beloved, he speculates that heaven, for him, might be an eternal version of these few moments with her—all the while knowing that, here on earth, this ride has to end sometime. Perhaps the world's *greatest* imperfection, in other words, is that even its highest delights don't last.

But perhaps, the speaker reflects, life's imperfection can also inspire people's hopes for "a life beyond": all the disappointments of reality might help people to dream of a heavenly afterlife. *Not* getting exactly what you want in exactly the way you want it means that there's always something more to hope for: if "Earth" offered perfection, he asks, "would heaven seem best?" The world's flaws, in other words, leave room for the imagination, and keep people questing for ideals that they can reach only in a heavenly eternity.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 38-99

ART VS. EXPERIENCE

In this dramatic monologue, the speaker gets in a few jabs at the people who devote their lives to capturing the ideal in art—like the guy writing this poem, just for instance! Because art can never perfectly capture life, the speaker suggests, it's ridiculous to waste the best years of one's life on trying: the only thing to do is to *live* life rather than describe it.

Attempting to capture life's deepest moments of feeling in art, the poem suggests, distracts artists from living. While poetry, for instance, might be meaningful and consoling, it also doesn't bring the poet "nearer one whit" to their "own sublime": since poetry can never fully capture experience, *writing* about "things beautiful" is a far cry from *experiencing* beauty in the moment.

The speaker himself has no time for living life at a remove this way: he tells poets, "Sing, riding's a joy! For me, I ride." In other words, the poets can go ahead and write about how wonderful it is to go riding with one's beloved, but he himself would much rather be actually riding, thank you very much.

The big irony here, of course, is that the speaker is saying so *in a poem*. That irony invites readers to reflect that art and life might have a more complicated relationship than the speaker claims. All through the poem, the speaker regrets that life *itself* always falls a little short of dreams; his own heartbreak is the proof. If that's the case, then art and life might actually have a lot in common: both are full of failed grasps at perfection. Imperfect art is thus a fitting tribute to imperfect life.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 56-88

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

I said—Then, dearest, since 'tis so,
Since now at length my fate I know,
Since nothing all my love avails,
Since all, my life seemed meant for, fails,
Since this was written and needs must be—

"The Last Ride Together" begins *in media res*—that is, right in the middle of the action. Remembering the life-changing day that he proposed to his beloved, this dramatic monologue's speaker describes, not the proposal itself, but what happened afterward. To put it mildly: things didn't go as he'd hoped.

Listen to the speaker's anaphora as he recalls what he said to the woman who turned him down:

I said—Then, dearest, since 'tis so,
Since now at length my fate I know,
Since nothing all my love avails,
Since all, my life seemed meant for, fails,
Since this was written and needs must be—

Those repeated "since"s make all the ideas here seem related:

- The speaker is heartbroken, feeling that "all [his] life seemed meant for" has been an utter failure; his love for his "dearest" has been at the very center of his life.
- But he's also telling himself that this loss "needs must be": it's part of his "fate," something "written" in the stars that he could never have avoided.
- In other words: the speaker feels doomed to have loved intensely and unrequitedly. He's finally confronting this unchangeable truth.

All those "since"s also imply that the speaker is about to make some new decision based on this crushing realization. Readers

who are familiar with some of Browning's other dramatic monologues might feel a little bit nervous here: many of Browning's lovers, disappointed or otherwise, end up getting a touch murderous.

But this won't be a poem about a jealous rage, or even just about devastation and heartbreak. Instead, this poem's passionate, philosophical speaker will find meaning in his grief.

LINES 6-11

My whole heart rises up to bless
Your name in pride and thankfulness!
Take back the hope you gave—I claim
Only a memory of the same,
—And this beside, if you will not blame,
Your leave for one last ride with me.

After that long drumroll of anaphora, the speaker finally makes the declaration he's been building up to. Listen to his voice as he tells his beloved:

> My whole heart rises up to bless
> Your name in pride and thankfulness!

The highlighted enjambment above, running these lines smoothly into each other, makes this declaration of devotion feel spontaneous and sincere: it's as if the speaker can't help but overflow with love, even now that his beloved has turned him down. His love might have come to no "avail[]," but he can't help but keep on loving.

Of course, that feeling isn't uncomplicated, as the next lines suggest:

> Take back the hope you gave—I claim
> Only a memory of the same,

If the speaker's beloved gave him "hope," he must have felt like he had a chance she returned his affections—and so he might feel just a bit hard done by. But he's clearly making a noble effort to accept what he can't change, casting his rejection as the workings of "fate" rather than the result of his beloved's cruelty or fickleness. He also refuses to deny or reject his own persistent feelings. He intends to hang onto his "memory" of hope as if it were a precious old letter.

All of this suggests that the speaker feels his love wasn't wasted or foolish. His "pride and thankfulness" toward the person who has just rejected him makes it clear that he feels loving her has made his life better.

But before he relinquishes all his "hope" for good, he does have a final request: that his beloved will go for "one last ride" with him. All he desires, in other words, is to spend a little more time in her company.

This "ride" will become the very heart of the poem—but the speaker will never get too specific about it. It's not clear, for instance, whether the speaker and his beloved are going for a jaunt on horseback or an outing in a carriage. That intentional vagueness opens up the ride's symbolic possibilities: some of what the speaker will go on to say about this last ride will suggest that it might represent not just a last day together, but a final passionate embrace.

LINES 12-16

My mistress bent that brow of hers;
Those deep dark eyes where pride demurs
When pity would be softening through,
Fixed me a breathing-while or two
With life or death in the balance: right!

In these lines, the speaker remembers waiting in suspense while his beloved considered his suggestion that they go for "one last ride" together. Even now, telling this story from a distance, the speaker seems to have a crystal-clear memory of what this moment felt like.

His language here suggests that he's already memorized "those deep dark eyes" and "that brow of hers"—"those" eyes and "that" brow, features that couldn't possibly belong to anyone else. As he watches her consider whether to go riding with him, he seems to feel almost hypnotized, "fixed" in place by her gaze.

Perhaps that's partly because of the emotions he sees there:

> Those deep dark eyes where pride demurs
> When pity would be softening through,

Looking into his beloved's eyes, the speaker sees two emotions working against each other: the "pride" that would reject this offer of a last ride and the "pity" that might deign to accept it. This is a heady brew:

- The implication here is that this lady turned the speaker's proposal down out of "pride" in the first place: for one reason or another, she didn't see him as a fitting match. (Perhaps, for instance, he's from a lower social class than she, a very Victorian-era kind of problem.)
- And while "pity" would be preferable, it's also hardly what a sincere lover wants to see in their beloved's eyes under any circumstances.

Both of these feelings, in other words, might be hard ones for the speaker to watch as they move over his beloved's face. The spitting /p/ alliteration of "pride" and "pity" might give readers a hint of his pain.

The agonizing suspense of this moment makes "a breathing-while or two"—that is, the time it takes to draw a couple of breaths—seem to stretch out endlessly. The speaker feels that "life or death" hang "in the balance" for him: the chance at this

one last ride seems to be the only thing keeping him from utter despair.

But, finally, his suspense ends with one short, sharp word: "right!" The reader might imagine that, as "pity" triumphs, the speaker's beloved gives him a silent, decisive nod—and he feels that at least something has come "right." The word is his, not hers; all through this poem, she won't say a single thing aloud. Perhaps that silence also reflects the speaker's pain: the things she *did* say to the speaker before the poem began seem to have been too painful even for him to record.

LINES 17-22

The blood replenished me again;
My last thought was at least not vain:
I and my mistress, side by side
Shall be together, breathe and ride,
So, one day more am I deified.
Who knows but the world may end tonight?

As the speaker's beloved finally agrees to go for "one last ride" with him, he feels as if he's been released from suspended animation: his "blood replenishe[s him] again," as if his heart had briefly stopped while he waited for a reply. But at least this last hope hasn't been in "vain."

In this moment of relief, he lays out what he has to look forward to now. Listen to his assonance and alliteration here:

> I and my mistress, side by side
> Shall be together, breathe and ride,
> So, one day more am I deified.

The gentle, harmonious /m/, /i/, and /ee/ sounds in lines 19-20 help to elevate this description of a simple outing into a kind of sad music.

All the speaker really wants, he says, is to "breathe" alongside his beloved: just to be near her and alive. If he can have that, then he'll feel "deified"—that is, made into a god—for "one day more." The strong echoing sounds of "day" and "deified" give this powerful declaration even more punch, introducing an idea the speaker will dwell on later: that love, even unrequited love, can feel close to divine.

This "last ride" isn't everything the speaker wanted, then—but it is *something*. And, as he observes in what will be the first of many rhetorical questions: "Who knows but the world may end tonight?" In other words, if things *really* go well for him, maybe this last ride will also be his last act on earth.

This moment feels at once desperate, poignant, and dryly resigned. In suggesting that it would be fine with him if the world ended as soon as this ride did, the speaker makes it clear that he's not looking forward to the days that will come *after* this ride. He's got some small pleasure to relish now—but once it's over, he'll have to resign himself to the drawn-out agony of heartbreak.

However, there's also some gallows humor here. He's not suggesting that he might kill himself, or that the world *really* might end. He's just saying, as bravely as he can: *Well, here we go; this will be my last moment of real happiness for a very long time.*

LINES 23-26

Hush! if you saw some western cloud
All billowy-bosomed, over-bowed
By many benedictions—sun's
And moon's and evening star's at once—

Before the speaker and his beloved set out on their last ride, something wonderful happens—so wonderful that the speaker can't even describe it directly at first. Instead, he begins to build a stanza-long simile, hoping to capture just how powerful this moment felt to him.

First, he has to set the scene: "Hush!" he cries, asking readers to quiet down and pay special attention. That onomatopoeic "hush" softens the poem's whole atmosphere, making way for a vision of a "western cloud" sailing across the sky.

Listen to the way the speaker uses alliteration here:

> Hush! if you saw some western cloud
> All billowy-bosomed, over-bowed
> By many benedictions [...]

This profusion of big, round /b/ sounds evokes the "billowy," curvy shape of this imagined cloud—and its "bosom[]," or breast, suggests that all that billowing looks pretty feminine.

More than that, this cloud seems enchanted: those "many benedictions," or blessings, are all the lights of the sky at once. The "sun," the "moon," and the "evening star" (that is, the planet Venus) all seem to "bow" over this cloud, making it glow with celestial radiance.

This image combines the natural and the supernatural, personifying the forces of nature like gods and goddesses. The speaker is envisioning a scene that combines all the beauties of the natural world into something almost divine.

LINES 27-31

And so, you, looking and loving best,
Conscious grew, your passion drew
Cloud, sunset, moonrise, star-shine too,
Down on you, near and yet more near,
Till flesh must fade for heaven was here!—

The speaker has painted a picture of a divine cloud, glowing as if it were lit by the sun, the moon, and the "evening star" all at the same time. Now, he asks readers to step into the picture, imagining themselves looking at this miraculous vision, awe-struck and full of love for its beauty.

And then, he says, readers should imagine becoming "conscious" that:

> [...] your passion drew
> Cloud, sunset, moonrise, star-shine too,
> Down on you, near and yet more near,

As the speaker asks readers to imagine this miraculous cloud coming closer and closer, drawn to them by the sheer force of their "passion" for its beauty, his repetitions—polyptoton on the "cloud," "sun," "moon," and "evening star" of the previous lines—work like a disbelieving double-take. Not only are all these beauties stunning on their own, but they're also, impossibly, drawing "near and yet more near" (itself a moment of diacope that evokes the cloud's slow-but-sure movement).

And as this imagined cloud touches the earth, the speaker proclaims, the reader should think what it would feel like to be enveloped in such supernatural beauty. Touched by something so lovely, he says, one would feel as if "flesh must fade for heaven was here": in other words, as if one might die of bliss, leaving one's earthly body behind to be absorbed into paradise itself. The twinned alliteration of "flesh must fade for heaven was here," a pair of rougher /f/ sounds against a pair of breathy /h/ sounds, underscores a contrast between earth and heaven.

LINES 32-33

> *Thus leant she and lingered—joy and fear!*
> *Thus lay she a moment on my breast.*

The speaker has spent the first nine lines of this stanza building up the simile of a divine cloud descending from heaven to enwrap a passionate onlooker. Only now does that simile finally resolve, as the speaker at last reveals that he's been comparing that cloud-vision to what really happened to him:

> Thus leant she and lingered—joy and fear!
> Thus lay she a moment on my breast.

That whole long simile, in other words, was meant to evoke just how intensely moved he was when his beloved gave him a gentle hug before they set out on their ride.

By saving the big reveal until the end of the stanza, the speaker makes it clear that his passion for this woman is truly something special: he has to *build up* to the moment of this hug to communicate how much it meant to him. A whole awe-inspiring and sacred vision gets condensed into a single brief embrace—one which can't have lasted longer than a couple of those "breathing-while[s]" the speaker mentioned back in line 15. Think how different this moment would feel if the speaker had approached this simile the other way around!

Not just the structure of the simile, but its language suggests that the speaker feels his passion for his beloved as something holy. He doesn't just feel "joy" when she leans toward him, but "fear," as indeed you might if a divine cloud descended from heaven to embrace you. That combination of terror and transcendent bliss is outright sublime.

And listen to the way the sounds of this passage evoke the overwhelming, fearful pleasure of this embrace:

> Thus leant she and lingered—joy and fear!
> Thus lay she a moment on my breast.

All that alliteration suggest that this brief embrace felt, to the speaker, like a taste of eternal delight: those drawn-out /l/ sounds are indeed "linger[ing]" (and delicious). At the very least, the embrace has "lingered" in his memory; this moment seems to have become immortal for him, a vision he's spent a lot of time replaying in his mind since the day of that last ride.

This scene also hints that the speaker's "mistress" (which here just means "lady-love," without any connotations of infidelity) might have more complicated feelings about turning him down than she revealed at first. Clearly, there's genuine affection between the two of them.

LINES 34-36

> *Then we began to ride. My soul*
> *Smoothed itself out, a long-cramped scroll*
> *Freshening and fluttering in the wind.*

At last, the speaker and his beloved set out for their ride itself. In the wake of that divine embrace, it seems as if any mere horsey jaunt would be anticlimactic. But the speaker feels refreshed and relieved. Listen to his metaphor here:

> [...] My soul
> Smoothed itself out, a long-cramped scroll
> Freshening and fluttering in the wind.

This passage speaks of the deep relief of confessing (and hearing) the truth at last. The image of the speaker's soul as a "long-cramped scroll" suggests that, so long as the speaker has loved his "mistress" without telling her, he's felt painfully restrained. Even though he hasn't gotten the answer he wanted, there's relief in having it all out! His soul's message of love now flies like a banner behind him.

Here, readers might also think back to an earlier metaphor involving writing: fate's book, in which the speaker's disappointment was "written." Writing, in this poem, has now turned up twice as an image of unchangeable truths. Keep an eye out for what the speaker has to say about writing later on!

The metaphor of the scroll also does double duty: that image of the speaker's soul "freshening and fluttering" evokes not just emotional relief, but the physical pleasure of a ride. Out in the fresh, clean "wind," still glowing from his beloved's brief embrace, the speaker might feel relieved and restored in his body as well as his "soul." The /f/ alliteration of "freshening and

fluttering" itself evokes the flap of riding clothes in the breeze.

LINES 37-42

Past hopes already lay behind.
What need to strive with a life awry?
Had I said that, had I done this,
So might I gain, so might I miss.
Might she have loved me? just as well
She might have hated, who can tell!

Relieved by his confession, happy to "breathe and ride" alongside his beloved, the speaker nevertheless has a few nagging thoughts to swat away.

His "hopes" now very much in the "past," fading into the distance as he and his "mistress" ride on, the speaker asks himself a rhetorical question: "What need to strive with a life awry?" In other words, there's no point in trying to wrestle the past into a different shape. He'll never know if things would have gone better or worse for him if he had "said that" or "done this": his "fate," as he put it in the first stanza, is "written and needs must be."

Of course, this is the kind of thing he wouldn't need to tell himself if part of him *weren't* wondering what could have been. His voice here suggests how he's trying to cope with his futile fretting:

> Had I said that, had I done this,
> So might I gain, so might I miss.

These two parallel lines (and their internal anaphora) make it sound as though he's swiping his hands left and right, batting at doubts as if they were mosquitoes.

But perhaps this method is only working so well. Listen to his next question—a far less rhetorical one:

> Might she have loved me? just as well
> She might have hated, who can tell!

That quavering question must be haunting him—so much so that he has to push it away with the hyperbolic declaration that his beloved (who seems to at least *like* him) might "just as well" have "hated" him if he'd behaved differently.

These lines, then, present the speaker as a man beginning to grapple with a new emotional and philosophical dilemma. While it's true that he can never know if things could have gone differently, and wise of him to tell himself to leave that idea alone, he can't stop himself from wondering.

LINES 43-44

Where had I been now if the worst befell?
And here we are riding, she and I.

Trying to convince himself that there's no way of knowing whether his proposal might have gone better if he'd done something differently, the speaker asks another rhetorical question, trying to hearten himself: "Where had I been now if the worst befell?"

In other words, the situation in which he finds himself is far from the worst he can imagine. His beloved might have turned him down, but she evidently cares for him at least a little. Besides that blissful hug, the speaker gets this "one last ride."

Take a look at the way the speaker says so:

> Where had I been now if the worst befell?
> And here we are riding, she and I.

Up until now, the speaker has been telling this story as if it takes place in the past. Now, for just a moment, he switches into the present tense.

On the one hand, that makes sense: for most of this stanza, he's been reporting the thoughts he had during this ride. But there might be more to this switch. Later on, the idea that this ride is *still going on* in some sense will become important.

For now, readers might compare this immediate present-tense moment to the speaker's back-and-forth over whether he might have done something differently. Thinking about what might have been, these lines suggest, can only uselessly distract from what *is*—what's happening right this very moment.

LINES 45-49

Fail I alone, in words and deeds?
Why, all men strive and who succeeds?
We rode; it seemed my spirit flew,
Saw other regions, cities new,
As the world rushed by on either side.

The speaker has just resolved to stay in the present and not torment himself with thoughts about what might have been. But he still can't help himself from dipping into consoling rhetorical questions again. This time, he's interested not just in his own disappointments, but in all the world's disappointments.

He's not the only person who's failed in "words and deeds," he observes: "Why, all men strive and who succeeds?" In other words, *nobody* gets precisely what they hoped for, precisely what they wanted.

A different kind of thinker than this speaker might say that this sounds like sour grapes: surely people *do* get what they want from time to time? But this speaker is an idealist. Even when people achieve their greatest hopes, he suggests, that fulfillment can never be everything they dreamed. Imagination is always going to outpace reality.

This thought captures his fancy as he rides on. Take a look at his simile here:

We rode; it seemed my spirit flew,
Saw other regions, cities new,
As the world rushed by on either side.

The idea that nobody ever achieves exactly what they hoped for seems strangely *enlivening* to this speaker; it gives his "spirit" metaphorical wings! And it transforms the world, too. Maybe the "other regions, cities new" he pictures here are just the same landscape he's been riding through, seen in a new light.

This latest rhetorical question, in other words, seems to have struck him with the force of an epiphany.

LINES 50-55

I thought—All labor, yet no less
Bear up beneath their unsuccess.
Look at the end of work, contrast
The petty done, the undone vast,
This present of theirs with the hopeful past!
I hoped she would love me; here we ride.

The speaker seems to find it consoling to reflect that the whole world struggles with broken dreams, failure, and imperfection. Here, he repeats the idea to himself a couple of times, as if looking at it from all different angles. "All labor," he says, all strive—and all are forced to "bear up" when their plans don't work out.

Take a look at the way he uses parallelism and chiasmus to structure his internal argument here:

Look at the end of work, contrast
The petty done, the undone vast,

Those two commands—"look" and "contrast"—make the speaker sound as if he's delivering a lecture, trying to talk the audience around to his point of view. And the chiasmus of "the petty done, the undone vast" turns the "undone vast" (that is, the huge bulk of aims that aren't achieved) into a distorted reflection of the "petty done" (the paltry little things people *can* do).

No one's "present," the speaker concludes, ever lives up to their "hopeful past"—and as this moment of polyptoton stresses, he's the living proof:

I hoped she would love me; here we ride.

Note that, once again, the "ride," the most immediate and important fact to this speaker, is in the present tense.

Here at the midpoint of the poem, pause for a second and take a look at the rhyme scheme:

- Every stanza starts with a pair of couplets, rhymed AABB (in this stanza, "deeds"/"succeeds" and "flew"/"new").
- From that steady beginning, readers might at first expect the whole stanza to be written in rhymed couplets. But instead, the speaker introduces a new C rhyme (here, "side") and leaves it dangling on its own.
- Then he uses another couplet, DD ("less"/"unsuccess")...
- ...Only to break in with a surprising triplet, three rhymes in a row, EEE ("contrast"/"vast"/"past").
- Then and only then does he return to that C rhyme, closing it off with a partner at last ("ride").

This complex pattern, readers will note, elegantly underscores what the speaker is saying about perfect dreams and imperfect realities. The rhymes here set out to make readers expect couplets, rhymes that travel in pairs like lovebirds—but then everything goes peculiar, and that poor C rhyme is separated from its partner.

LINES 56-60

What hand and brain went ever paired?
What heart alike conceived and dared?
What act proved all its thought had been?
What will but felt the fleshly screen?
We ride and I see her bosom heave.

Gaining momentum, the speaker introduces the sixth stanza with a powerful series of rhetorical questions. The anaphora here makes the speaker sound like an orator trying to drive home a serious point:

What hand and brain went ever paired?
What heart alike conceived and dared?
What act proved all its thought had been?
What will but felt the fleshly screen?

Each of these questions asks something similar: *who ever achieved all that they dreamed they might?* And each rhetorically answers itself: *no one!*

But take a look at the specific language here:

- Calling up the failures of "hand" and "heart," the speaker metaphorically suggests that people's *efforts* and *feelings*, respectively, are inevitably stymied.
- The more literal thwarted "act" suggests that *results* in general are always lesser than they were in "thought," too.

The final entry in this catalog of disappointments might be the most sweeping. When the speaker remarks that everyone's "will" is thwarted by the "fleshly screen," he suggests that the

world isn't just disappointing because people's "act[s]" can never live up to their dreams. There's also the little problem of mortality. "Flesh" is a "screen" between people and perfection both because no living, fleshly mortal is perfect, and because all living people die!

In other words, these questions suggest, perfection is a matter for heaven—the land beyond the "fleshly screen"—not for earth.

On the other hand, he's already presented his beloved as a nigh-on divine figure: when she hugged him, remember, he felt as if a supernaturally beautiful cloud had descended upon him and "heaven" was, not far away beyond the border of death, but "here."

And for that matter, flesh itself has some consolations. As soon as he's finished making his catalog of earthly failures, he turns to look at his beloved again, once more in the present tense:

> We ride and I see her bosom heave.

Besides hinting that this "last ride" might be read as a symbol for more passionate kinds of exercise, that heaving bosom both supports and contradicts the speaker's big point:

- On the one hand, it suggests tantalizing and impossible sexual desire—and perhaps emotional pain, too. If the beloved's chest is "heav[ing]," she might either be breathing hard from exercise or trying not to cry.
- On the other, the speaker doesn't even need to spell out how perfectly beautiful he finds this sight.

Standing alone, seemingly disconnected from the lines before and after, this image suggests an overflow of love and desire almost too painful to speak.

LINES 61-66

There's many a crown for who can reach.
Ten lines, a statesman's life in each!
The flag stuck on a heap of bones,
A soldier's doing! what atones?
They scratch his name on the Abbey stones.
My riding is better, by their leave.

The sight of his beloved's "heav[ing]" chest drives the speaker on to even more philosophical reflections. Sure, he continues, the world is full of the metaphorical "crown[s]" of victory, for those who can "reach" out and take them. But even the people who earn some measure of glory or success will always be thwarted by death in the end.

Take a look at the images he uses here, which range from piteous to macabre:

> Ten lines, a statesman's life in each!
> The flag stuck on a heap of bones,
> A soldier's doing! what atones?
> They scratch his name on the Abbey stones.

All the efforts of great politicians, warriors, and heroes, these lines suggest, shrink down to almost nothing once these people are dead: their whole lives are reduced to "ten lines" in a history book, a flag planted in dry bones, a name inscribed on a wall in Westminster Abbey. Even the verbs the speaker uses here are scoffing and dismissive: that flag gets unceremoniously "stuck" into the bonepile, that name gets haphazardly "scratch[ed]" into the stones.

To sum up this stanza's argument, then:

- No human effort comes even close to achieving the perfection of dreams.
- And even remarkable achievements are inevitably shriveled by death; the grandest heroism fades into a ghost of itself once the hero is dead.

With these sweeping thoughts in mind, the speaker comes to this conclusion:

> My riding is better, by their leave.

There's something a little tongue-in-cheek about the casual phrasing here: that "by their leave" is the 19th-century equivalent of a modern "if you ask me" (with undertones of "no offense"). But the speaker's point is serious. In a world determined to thwart all of one's best efforts, he decides, the only thing to do is to enjoy moments of bliss as they come.

No kind of recognition or glory, the speaker decides, can "atone" for the final insult of death—so one might as well try to soak up life's driblets of happiness, however imperfect, rather than striving for the impossible. Perhaps this also sheds some light on the reason that the speaker keeps referring to his "ride" and his "riding" in the present tense.

These are grand, wide-ranging philosophical conclusions to reach on the back of one romantic disappointment. And that suggests just how deep and world-shaking the speaker's disappointment feels.

LINES 67-71

What does it all mean, poet? Well,
Your brains beat into rhythm, you tell
What we felt only; you expressed
You hold things beautiful the best,
And pace them in rhyme so, side by side.

Having declared that there's no reason to strive for glory in an imperfect and death-haunted world, the speaker begins considering a specific *kind* of glory: artistic triumph. In this stanza, he turns suddenly to an imagined "poet" and asks him: what's the point of your writing, as compared to my riding?

He begins by painting a portrait of this poet and his aspirations:

- This man's "brains beat into rhythm," the speaker says: his very thoughts take the form of verse, as if his poet-hood were involuntary.
- He manages to "tell / What we felt only," putting deep feeling into words.
- And he has a philosophy: he "hold[s] things beautiful the best." In other words, he values beauty above all—perhaps even taking an ethical position on the matter, like John Keats's Grecian urn.

To this speaker, poets are people dedicated to capturing deep feeling and deep beauty—a capital-R Romantic perspective on the matter.

The next line hints at a further poetic task. Not only do poets "hold things beautiful the best," they "pace them in rhyme so, side by side."

The highlighted language here might sound familiar: the speaker and his "mistress" were also "side by side" when they rode out together back in line 19. That diacope subtly suggests that part of what poets are trying to do is to capture *experience*, too: to preserve the kinds of glorious moments that the speaker has already described.

And that makes sense: this is, after all, a poem! But the speaker's next observations will ironically suggest that he sees some insurmountable limitations in the very art form he speaks through.

LINES 72-77

'Tis something, nay 'tis much: but then,
Have you yourself what's best for men?
Are you—poor, sick, old ere your time—
Nearer one whit your own sublime
Than we who have never turned a rhyme?
Sing, riding's a joy! For me, I ride.

The poet's ability to capture and preserve moments of deep emotion, the speaker goes on, isn't nothing; indeed, "'tis much." But writing poetry about "things beautiful" doesn't mean that poets get to lead beautiful *lives*.

Still addressing the imagined poet, the speaker asks him: "Have you yourself what's best for men?" The question, it turns out, is rhetorical: this poet, "poor, sick," and "old ere [his] time," is certainly not leading the "best" of all lives. His fate, like his calling, sounds pretty archetypally Romantic: the speaker might again be thinking of a poet like Keats, who died in poverty and obscurity at the age of only 25.

The life the poet leads, in other words, can't come anywhere close to his "own sublime"—that is, to the ideal beauties he sings and celebrates. These lines might also hint that even the poet's *work* can't quite hit the heights he aspires to, either: poets, like everyone else, have to suffer the reality that no "act prove[s] all its thought had been," that their poetry will never be as perfect as they might have hoped.

Poets might *seem* to have a deeper insight into beauty and truth than most, the speaker thus concludes—but in reality, they're no closer to perfection than those of us "who have never turned a rhyme."

The speaker thus concludes, with a flourish (and some stylish polyptoton):

> Sing, riding's a joy! For me, I ride.

In other words: *keep your poems about riding; I prefer the real thing.*

The alert reader will note that there's something more than a little ironic about that declaration: as a character in a poem, this speaker can only ever "ride" on the page!

This witty stanza thus doubles back on itself. Certainly it's true, as the speaker says, that poets don't lead easier lives than anyone else, and don't reach their own standards of perfection any more reliably—quite the contrary. But this passage might lead readers to reflect that an imperfect art form might be the best possible way to capture an imperfect life.

LINES 78-82

And you, great sculptor—so, you gave
A score of years to Art, her slave,
And that's your Venus, whence we turn
To yonder girl that fords the burn!
You acquiesce, and shall I repine?

The speaker isn't done with his catalog of artistic disappointments yet. Now, he turns to observe the career of a "great sculptor"—and to point out a whole new kind of futility and failure.

This sculptor, the speaker imagines, wasn't just dedicated to art: he was a "slave" to capital-A "Art," a figure personified like a goddess. What's more, he gave her "a score of years"—20 years of his life.

The result of all this humble (and humbling) labor is a "Venus"—a statue of the Roman goddess of love, beauty, and sex. It's presumably a pretty lovely statue, too, if this sculptor is "great." But even the most beautiful statue of the most beautiful goddess, the speaker points out, pales in comparison to "yonder girl that fords the burn": that is, a perfectly ordinary pretty girl crossing a stream. Given the choice to stare at one or the other, he knows which he'd pick (and even presumes to say what "we" pick, what everyone would pick).

Once again, then, the speaker insists that not only can art never quite capture life, it's also perpetually *outdone* by life. Imperfect, mortal flesh and blood will always have a greater power, no matter how beautiful one's statue is. The image of the "girl that fords the burn" drives the point home with

symbolism: that ever-flowing "burn" suggests that this girl is, unlike the statue, participating in the onrush of life and time.

That's a particularly pungent argument to make to a sculptor. One of the oldest arguments in favor of sculpture is that it's the most *immortal* kind of artwork, capable of outlasting not just people but whole civilizations. To this speaker, however, such chilly immortality can't compare to the flesh-and-blood loveliness of life.

But the rhetorical question he introduces here suggests that he's not rejecting art outright:

> You acquiesce, and shall I repine?

In other words: *You, sculptor, agree to sacrifice your life to your art—and do I feel bad about that?* Not really, it seems. Though the speaker feels he'd always follow a "girl" over a stony "Venus," that doesn't mean the Venus (or the effort that went into making her) was worthless. Just as the speaker said to the poet, "'Tis something, nay 'tis much."

LINES 83-88

What, man of music, you grown gray
With notes and nothing else to say,
Is this your sole praise from a friend,
"Greatly his opera's strains intend,
But in music we know how fashions end!"
I gave my youth; but we ride, in fine.

Rounding out his critique of the arts, the speaker concludes with a picture of an unfortunate "man of music," who seems to have lived a life of even deeper disappointments than the poet and the sculptor:

- He, like those other artists, is old before his time, "grown gray" in service to his craft.
- But he also has "nothing else to say" beyond his "notes": he seems *restrained* by his art form.
- And his rewards are even paltrier than those of the other two artists. His not-especially-friendly-sounding "friend" remarks that his music "intend[s]" (or strives) for greatness—but then, we all "know how fashions end" in music! The implication is that this composer's "opera" will be forgotten before long.

In other words: the musician suffers not just from a difficult life and perpetual artistic disappointment, but from *neglect*. A person who gives their whole life to art enjoys absolutely no guarantees that their work will be understood and appreciated!

The speaker's assessment of the musician's life feels even more crushing than his judgments of the poet and sculptor. Perhaps that's because music, with its immediate influence on people's emotions, has often been considered one of the most powerful and sublime of art forms. But while great music might feel heavenly and transporting, the speaker argues, great *musicians* are no less subject to failure and disappointment than anyone else.

As this stanza ends, the speaker once more returns to his "ride." At the end of the last stanza, he seemed defiant, telling the poet: "Sing, riding's a joy! For me, I ride." But listen to his changed tone here:

> I gave my youth; but we ride, in fine.

Like the sculptor, like the poet, like the musician, the speaker feels he has sacrificed his "youth" to his art. In his case, of course, the art was love. And art and love, these words suggest, might have a lot in common:

- Both demand intense, humbling dedication.
- Both aspire to something great: a perfect beauty, a glimpse of the divine.
- Both often fall short of those aspirations.
- And both will eat up one's "youth" in an instant.

When the speaker concludes, "but we ride, in fine," it thus seems as if he's reaching for a final consolation. Turning away from dreams of perfection and back toward what "needs must be," he both loses something and gains something: he accepts that these moments with his flesh-and-blood beloved are the best he can hope for on earth.

LINES 89-93

Who knows what's fit for us? Had fate
Proposed bliss here should sublimate
My being—had I signed the bond—
Still one must lead some life beyond,
Have a bliss to die with, dim-descried.

Completing his overview of life's many and inevitable disappointments, failures, and losses, the speaker broadens his view to include not just this life, but the next.

Another angle on earthly limitations, he suggests, is that people can only know so much about "what's fit for us"—that is, what's in our best interests. Perhaps some divine intelligence greater than his has denied him the utter "bliss" of requited love for the good of his soul: if he can't have what he wants now, he'll have something to hope for from heaven.

This idea might be the coldest comfort of all! Think about it: the speaker is saying that requited love *would* have been heaven itself, the absolute best thing he could possibly imagine. These lines suggest that he's felt perfection within his reach—and that it's been denied him.

His tone here suggests just how stiff he's trying to keep his upper lip:

[...] Had fate
Proposed bliss here should sublimate
My being—had I signed the bond—
Still one must lead some life beyond,

Notice the contrast in language here:

- First, the speaker imagines a "bliss" that would "sublimate his being"—a phrasing that recalls the "joy and fear" he felt when his beloved merely hugged him back in line 32. If his lady had loved him back, he would have felt transported, "deified," elevated to heaven.
- But his tone changes when he says, "Still one must lead some life beyond." That formal "one" feels dry and resigned; it's rather like he's saying, "Of course, one still has to do one's chores."

But the point he's making is serious and deeply felt. Maybe, he goes on, people need a "bliss to die with" that's only "dim-descried"—that is, a vision of perfection that's *beyond* what they can achieve or imagine on earth, right on the edges of their inner vision. As Browning himself famously put it in another poem: "a man's reach should exceed his grasp / Or what's a heaven for?"

But the fact that the speaker repeats the word "bliss," using it to describe both what he could have had on earth and what he hopes to have in heaven, suggests that he has a pretty good sense of what his "bliss to die with" would look like.

LINES 94-99

This foot once planted on the goal,
This glory-garland round my soul,
Could I descry such? Try and test!
I sink back shuddering from the quest.
Earth being so good, would Heaven seem best?
Now, Heaven and she are beyond this ride.

Perhaps, the speaker has reflected, not getting what one wants on earth leaves one something to hope for from heaven. As the stanza goes on, the speaker explores this new idea through a series of metaphors. Take a look at how he imagines requited love here:

This foot once planted on the goal,
This glory-garland round my soul,

Here, an imagined requited love returned seems like a divine *achievement* and *reward* at the same time: it's both a "goal" the speaker worked hard to reach and a "glory-garland," a wreath of celebratory flowers, wrapped around his very soul. There is indeed something heavenly about this framing: heaven, too, is both a "goal" and a reward.

If he'd achieved that kind of "bliss" in this life, then, could he still "descry" something even greater in the next? If "Earth" had given him such a sublime reward, could "Heaven" still "seem best?"

The very thought makes him "sink back shuddering" in awe and terror—a moment of onomatopoeia that suggests he's *feeling* this question, not just abstractly musing on it. And there truly is something grand and fearful in these ideas.

All through this poem, the speaker has insisted that his love makes his beloved seem *divine*. She was a goddess-like enchanted cloud, inspiring "joy and fear"; her mere proximity makes what could have been an agonizing final "ride" into something that makes life worth living. The speaker's adoration of his beloved, in other words, does seem to bring heaven to earth, redeeming pain and transforming it into pleasure.

And the thought of what it would feel like if she loved him back might thus seem almost too sweet to bear, more than one person could handle. Remember, back in the third stanza, the speaker felt about ready to die of bliss when this lady merely *hugged* him.

But perhaps the idea that "heaven" itself can be "here" on earth feels *dangerous*. Being "deified," made into a god by love, might be too much for any mortal to take on. This speaker, clearly a person who believes in God and an afterlife, might well shrink from taking on godlike powers himself.

Again, there's a sense that this might be cold comfort. But at least the speaker can say this: like Dante's Beatrice, the speaker's beloved will remain part of a vision of "Heaven" for him, something "beyond this ride" that he can "quest" for all his life.

LINES 100-104

And yet—she has not spoke so long!
What if heaven be that, fair and strong
At life's best, with our eyes upturned
Whither life's flower is first discerned
We, fixed so, ever should so abide?

As the final stanza begins, the speaker has built himself some elaborate consolations for his broken heart:

- He's reminded himself that life is full of disappointments, imperfections, and failures (death perhaps the greatest among them).
- He's suggested that love, like art, might be worth pursuing in spite of it all.
- And he's argued that it might be for his own good that his love wasn't returned on earth: this leaves him some "bliss" to hope for in heaven.

In other words, as he and his "mistress" gallop along, he's found ways to frame his pain: by fitting it into a larger philosophy of

life, by giving himself something to dream of. Resigned to his sad fate, he's also able to find meaning in it. Arguing to himself that fleeting moments of pleasure are the best one can hope for in this world, he just keeps coming back to the immediate bittersweet joys of his "ride"—a word he's repeated in one form or another at the end of every stanza since the fourth.

But as the final stanza begins, something new happens, heralded by these words: "And yet." Perhaps, he realizes, one can have one's earthly cake and eat heavenly cake, too:

> What if heaven be that, fair and strong
> At life's best, with our eyes upturned
> Whither life's flower is first discerned
> We, fixed so, ever should so abide?

These complicated lines build up like a drumroll. The speaker is asking, in essence: what if heaven's joys aren't *better* or *different* than earth's, they're just *endless*?

The metaphor the speaker uses here speaks to the role that *time* plays in this new picture of heaven. He presents "life's best," its most perfect moments, as "life's **flower**"—an image that at once suggests beauty and brevity. Flowers, after all, bloom only for a very brief time before they wither and fade.

For that reason, miraculous immortal flowers have long been a symbol of heavenly love, from Dante's white rose to Praetorius's "rose e'er blooming" to Ben Jonson's "rosy wreath." With his "eyes upturned," the speaker seems to feel he's catching a glimpse of such a flower on this very ride.

And notice what drives the speaker to this reflection:

> And yet—she has not spoke so long!

His beloved's *silence* leads him to imagine that heaven might just be earthly love and earthly joy, deathlessly preserved. Heaven, as another poet once put it, is a place where nothing ever happens: speech, after all, requires time, but silence is timeless.

LINES 105-110

> *What if we still ride on, we two*
> *With life forever old yet new,*
> *Changed not in kind but in degree,*
> *The instant made eternity—*
> *And heaven just prove that I and she*
> *Ride, ride together, forever ride?*

In the first half of this stanza, the speaker had an epiphany: heaven might not be full of *different* joys than earth, just ones that don't end. In other words, heaven's bliss is "changed not in kind but in degree" from earth's: the same, but eternal! As the poem gallops to its conclusion, the speaker rolls that idea around in awe.

Remember, ever since the "ride" itself began, the speaker has returned and returned to the words "ride" and "riding"—and each of those moments of polyptoton has been in the present tense. That choice now comes into relief. Perhaps, the speaker reflects, heaven is eternally in the present tense: "life forever old yet new," "the instant made eternity."

He asks one final question, then. What if:

> [...] heaven just prove that I and she
> Ride, ride together, forever ride?

The language of that very last line does precisely what it describes. The epizeuxis of "**ride**, **ride**" draws the ride out; the chiasmus of "**ride**, ride together, forever **ride**" makes this ride into a snake biting its own tail, starting afresh as soon as it ends.

The poem thus ends on a moment of blissful pain or painful bliss. Heaven, to this speaker, is simply being forever near the one he loves, suspended in an eternal present with her. As he's all too well aware, he can never have that on earth. But this imperfect world has nonetheless given him a glimpse of "life's flower" in his time of greatest need.

SYMBOLS

THE LAST RIDE

The final ride that the speaker and his beloved share might subtly symbolize sex.

When the speaker and his beloved go out for their final jaunt together (perhaps on horseback, perhaps in a horse-drawn carriage), the poem's language evokes not just chaste galloping, but sexual passion. Besides the ways in which the rhythms of riding might evoke sex, the speaker pays a lot of physical attention to his riding partner—for instance, noting that her "bosom heave[s]" as they go.

The poem thus becomes both the story of a disappointed love, and—understatedly—a vision of a last passionate embrace.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 11:** " Your leave for one last ride with me."
- **Lines 19-20:** "I and my mistress, side by side / Shall be together, breathe and ride,"
- **Line 34:** "Then we began to ride."
- **Line 44:** " And here we are riding, she and I."
- **Line 55:** " I hoped she would love me; here we ride."
- **Line 66:** " My riding is better, by their leave."
- **Line 77:** " Sing, riding's a joy! For me, I ride."
- **Line 88:** " I gave my youth; but we ride, in fine."
- **Line 99:** " Now, Heaven and she are beyond this ride."
- **Lines 105-110:** "What if we still ride on, we two / With

> life forever old yet new, / Changed not in kind but in degree, / The instant made eternity— / And heaven just prove that I and she / Ride, ride together, forever ride?"

POETIC DEVICES

METAPHOR

The poem's metaphors bring the speaker's reflections on art, love, and disappointment to life, making abstract ideas tangible.

For a guy who has some serious doubts about the uses and effects of poetry, this speaker sure likes using writing as a metaphor for truth and revelation. For instance:

- In the first stanza, the speaker describes his unrequited love as something that was "written and needs must be." In other words, it's inscribed in the metaphorical book of Fate—a book that no human being can alter.
- But simply expressing his love makes the speaker feel as if his very "soul" is "smooth[ing] itself out" like "a long-cramped scroll." The words of love in his heart, in other words, have been rolled up in a tight, secret bundle for so long that it feels "freshening" and relieving just to speak them aloud, even if they haven't had the effect he hoped for.

In both of these instances, writing and reading are associated with either facing or telling a great truth. That association between writing and truth gets even stronger when the speaker imagines a poet "pac[ing]" his beautiful rhymes "side by side"—a metaphor in which writing becomes horseback riding, which is exactly what the speaker and his beloved are doing! Even the language here repeats the speaker's description of himself and his beloved "side by side" as they set out for their ride.

All these writerly metaphors suggest that, even if the *speaker* is dubious that writing can get anywhere near capturing reality, the poet who's writing *about* this speaker thinks otherwise.

The speaker is also fond of metaphorical flowers:

- The "glory-garland" in line 95 suggests that requited love feels both like a great victory and like being wreathed in countless beautiful, fragrant blooms. (Too bad for him, then, that his love is *un*requited.)
- And in line 103, the rewards of heaven are portrayed as "life's flower." Here, the speaker is imagining that earthly pleasures, which are as lovely and temporary as flowers, might be immortalized in heaven: there, he hopes, such blossoms will never wither. (Here he might be borrowing from the great Italian poet Dante, who famously imagines the souls in heaven forming one huge white rose.)

But such heavenly rewards are a long way off for this speaker. For now, he's stuck down on earth, where even the metaphorical "crown" of victory rarely lives up to anyone's hopes, and the "fleshly screen" of mortality and human weakness cuts even the greatest triumphs short.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** " Since this was written and needs must be—"
- **Lines 34-36:** "My soul / Smoothed itself out, a long-cramped scroll / Freshening and fluttering in the wind."
- **Line 59:** "What will but felt the fleshly screen?"
- **Line 61:** "There's many a crown for who can reach."
- **Line 71:** " And pace them in rhyme so, side by side."
- **Lines 78-79:** "you gave / A score of years to Art, her slave,"
- **Lines 94-95:** "This foot once planted on the goal, / This glory-garland round my soul,"
- **Lines 102-103:** "with our eyes upturned / Whither life's flower is first discerned"

SIMILE

A long, complex simile in the third stanza captures the speaker's sense that his love brushes right up against the divine.

When the speaker's beloved rejects him, it seems like it's not because she has no feelings for him at all. Agreeing to go for "one last ride" with him, she leans over and gives him a gentle hug. To him, this brief embrace is a practically cosmic event—and he says so in cosmic language. Listen to all the celestial bodies he evokes here:

> Hush! if you saw some western cloud
> All billowy-bosomed, over-bowed
> By many benedictions—sun's
> And moon's and evening star's at once—

In other words, he sees his beloved as a divine cloud supernaturally illuminated by every light in the sky: the sun, the moon, and the planet Venus (often called the "evening star" because it's the first and brightest body to appear in the western sky at sunset) all make this cloud glow with their "benedictions," or blessings. The image suggests an all-encompassing celestial beauty, as well as meaningfully alluding to ancient mythology: Venus, after all, was the goddess of love.

Better yet, this luminous cloud seems to be leaning down from heaven itself to embrace the speaker. Only after the speaker paints an elaborate picture of this cloud drawing so close that he feels as if he might die from joy does he finally wind up his stanza-long simile:

Thus leant she and lingered—joy and fear!
Thus lay she a moment on my breast.

By holding off on telling readers what's *literally* happening until the end of the stanza, the speaker builds up a thunderhead of sacred passion behind the image of this brief embrace. His love is so overwhelming that it becomes sublime, capable of inspiring both "joy" and "fear" in the same instant.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 23-33:** "Hush! if you saw some western cloud / All billowy-bosomed, over-bowed / By many benedictions—sun's / And moon's and evening star's at once— / And so, you, looking and loving best, / Conscious grew, your passion drew / Cloud, sunset, moonrise, star-shine too, / Down on you, near and yet more near, / Till flesh must fade for heaven was here!— / Thus leant she and lingered—joy and fear! / Thus lay she a moment on my breast."
- **Line 47:** "it seemed my spirit flew,"

RHETORICAL QUESTION

The poem's rhetorical questions strike a balance between world-weariness, desperation, and quiet hope, giving the speaker his philosophical, melancholy tone.

The first of the poem's many rhetorical questions appears in line 22, after the speaker has rejoiced over his opportunity to take "one last ride" with the lady who's turned him down. That ride in itself will be a joy, he says—and "Who knows but the world may end tonight?" There's obvious pain behind these words. In saying, essentially, "Maybe I'll get lucky and this ride will be my last act on earth!", the speaker makes it clear that all his days that come *after* this ride are going to hurt like crazy.

But as his ride goes on, his rhetorical questions begin to feel more resigned and philosophical. When he asks, "What need to strive with a life awry?" for instance, the question suggests that he's willing to accept his fate: people's perspectives are too limited, he says, for anyone to know what might happen if they'd acted differently, so there's no point exhausting oneself with hypotheticals.

For that matter, the speaker isn't alone in his fate: "Why, all men strive and who succeeds?" he asks. The answer to that one is clear: *nobody*, in his view, ever achieves exactly what they hoped for, even people luckier in love than he.

In fact, if his beloved *had* loved him back, he continues, it might have ultimately been bad for him: "Earth being so good, would Heaven seem best?" Being rejected, in other words, gives him some perfection to hope for in the afterlife.

That argument sounds an awful lot like cold comfort. And the speaker undermines it a bit himself in the poem's final stanza, when he asks if "heaven" might actually just be the earthly bliss of being near his lover, only stretched out into "eternity":

What if we still ride on, we two
With life forever old yet new,
Changed not in kind but in degree,
The instant made eternity—
And heaven just prove that I and she
Ride, ride together, forever ride?

This last rhetorical question sums up all the poem's conflicted feelings about love, triumph, and eternity. Sure, these final lines suggest: being disappointed on earth might leave one something to hope for in heaven. But can't earthly pleasure feel so overpowering that it's hard to imagine anything better? Here, paradise isn't about the "kind" of pleasure, but the "degree": life's most crushing imperfection isn't in the quality of joy it offers, but the fact that such joy can't last forever.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Line 22:** " Who knows but the world may end tonight?"
- **Line 38:** " What need to strive with a life awry?"
- **Lines 41-43:** "Might she have loved me? just as well / She might have hated, who can tell! / Where had I been now if the worst befell?"
- **Lines 45-46:** "Fail I alone, in words and deeds? / Why, all men strive and who succeeds?"
- **Lines 56-59:** "What hand and brain went ever paired? / What heart alike conceived and dared? / What act proved all its thought had been? / What will but felt the fleshly screen?"
- **Lines 63-64:** "The flag stuck on a heap of bones, / A soldier's doing! what atones?"
- **Line 67:** "What does it all mean, poet?"
- **Lines 72-73:** "'Tis something, nay 'tis much: but then, / Have you yourself what's best for men?"
- **Lines 74-76:** "Are you—poor, sick, old ere your time— / Nearer one whit your own sublime / Than we who have never turned a rhyme?"
- **Line 82:** " You acquiesce, and shall I repine?"
- **Line 89:** "Who knows what's fit for us?"
- **Line 98:** "Earth being so good, would Heaven seem best?"
- **Lines 101-104:** "What if heaven be that, fair and strong / At life's best, with our eyes upturned / Whither life's flower is first discerned / We, fixed so, ever should so abide?"
- **Lines 109-110:** "And heaven just prove that I and she / Ride, ride together, forever ride?"

ALLUSION

A few subtle allusions enliven the speaker's reflections on the relationship between dreams and realities.

When the speaker notes that all a great "soldier's doing" amounts to is a "flag stuck in a heap of bones," he concedes that the soldier might, if he's lucky, also get his name "scratch[ed]" into the "Abbey stones." The capital "A" there makes it likely the speaker means Westminster Abbey, the famous church where British heroes are often commemorated. But even such an august monument, to the speaker, doesn't seem like a sufficient reward for a soldier's sacrifice. He'd rather go on living his life than die nobly in order to be remembered.

He's not too keen on seeking artistic glory, either:

- When he addresses a "great sculptor," he tells him that his "Venus"—that is, his statue of the Roman goddess of love, sex, and beauty—is very nice and all, but that no one will keep looking at her as soon as an ordinary pretty girl wanders past.
- That allusion to "Venus"—who represents the absolute pinnacle of loveliness—suggests that the speaker sees ideals as all well and good, but unattainable in real life: it's better to pursue a flesh-and-blood lady than to become a "slave" to perfection in "Art."

And when the speaker rhetorically asks a "poet" whether all his questing for a "sublime" ideal of beauty has made his life any better than the next guy's, he sounds pretty sure it hasn't:

- The specific details he gives of this imagined poet—that he "hold[s] things beautiful the best," but is himself "poor, sick, old ere [his] time"—make the poet sound a lot like an archetypal young Romantic.
- In fact, the speaker might be hinting at one Romantic in particular: poverty, illness, and an abiding belief in beauty all sound an awful lot like index entries in the biography of John Keats, one of Browning's heroes.
- This subtle allusion might thus underscore the irony of these lines: Browning certainly stands by the value of poetry, even if his speaker doesn't!

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 65:** "They scratch his name on the Abbey stones."
- **Lines 69-70:** "you expressed / You hold things beautiful the best,"
- **Line 74:** "poor, sick, old ere your time"
- **Line 80:** "that's your Venus"

PARALLELISM

Parallelism allows the speaker to explore his philosophy on life and love from many angles, as if he were turning a crystal around to look at all of its sides.

One strong example appears at the very beginning of the poem:

> I said—Then, dearest, since 'tis so,
> Since now at length my fate I know,
> Since nothing all my love avails,
> Since all, my life seemed meant for, fails,
> Since this was written and needs must be—

The anaphora on "since" here connects all of these similar-but-different ideas: that the speaker was in love, that his love was the center of his life, that his beloved has rejected him, and that this disappointment is his unavoidable fate.

The repeated phrasing also works like a drumroll: *"since" all of this is true*, the reader wonders, *what's going to happen?* The speaker's conclusion—that he still feels nothing but "pride and thankfulness" in his love for the woman who turned him down—comes as a touching surprise (especially considering the far less gallant behavior of lovers in a lot of Browning's other dramatic monologues).

Something similar happens when the speaker reflects on the inevitable gap between hopeful dreams and imperfect reality:

> What hand and brain went ever paired?
> What heart alike conceived and dared?
> What act proved all its thought had been?
> What will but felt the fleshly screen?

In this instance, anaphora introduces a series of rhetorical questions that all say essentially the same thing: *When did anyone ever achieve exactly what they dreamed of?* The repeated phrasing here also suggests a repeated *problem*: time and time again, people's achievements fall short of their ideals.

The speaker makes that point even clearer when he spends a stanza questioning a couple of artists:

> And you, great sculptor—so, you gave
> A score of years to Art, her slave,
> [...]
> What, man of music, you grown gray
> With notes and nothing else to say,

This moment of parallelism suggests that the speaker could go on making the same point about every kind of artist there is: none of them, he suggests, will ever achieve all they hoped for either in their art or in their lives.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "since"
- **Line 2:** "Since"
- **Line 3:** "Since"
- **Line 4:** "Since"
- **Line 5:** "Since"
- **Line 12:** "that brow"

- **Line 13:** “Those deep dark eyes”
- **Line 32:** “Thus”
- **Line 33:** “Thus”
- **Line 39:** “Had I,” “had I”
- **Line 40:** “So might I,” “so might”
- **Line 52:** “Look at,” “contrast”
- **Line 56:** “What”
- **Line 57:** “What”
- **Line 58:** “What”
- **Line 59:** “What”
- **Line 68:** “you tell”
- **Line 69:** “you expressed”
- **Line 72:** “'Tis,” “'tis”
- **Line 78:** “And you, great sculptor”
- **Line 83:** “What, man of music,”
- **Line 89:** “Had”
- **Line 91:** “had”
- **Line 94:** “This”
- **Line 95:** “This”
- **Line 101:** “What if”
- **Line 105:** “What if”

REPETITION

In addition to the use of parallelism and anaphora, other kinds of repetitions help to conjure up the speaker's intense emotions.

One of the most noticeable kinds of repetition across the poem is the polyptoton on the word "ride": the speaker and his beloved "ride" or are "riding" in nearly every single stanza. What's more, those word almost always appear in each stanza's final line, making it feel as if the speaker's thoughts wander away and then come back to what he's doing: riding. It's almost as if he keeps getting carried away by his sad reflections, only to recall himself to the pure pleasure of being beside his "mistress," right this very instant.

That effect feels especially strong in the poem's last line, where the speaker imagines that heaven might be nothing more than an eternity in which he and his beloved "Ride, ride together, forever ride."

- Two flavors of repetition work in tandem here: the intensifying epizeuxis of "Ride, ride" and the chiasmus that means the line both begins and ends with the word.
- These repetitions conjure up the speaker's vision of paradise: a ride with his beloved that's both sublimely pleasurable and endless.

There's a similar kind of blissful repetition in the poem's powerful third stanza, when the speaker imagines his beloved approaching him like a heavenly cloud:

> Hush! if you saw some western cloud
> All billowy-bosomed, over-bowed
> By many benedictions—sun's
> And moon's and evening star's at once—
> And so, you, looking and loving best,
> Conscious grew, your passion drew
> Cloud, sunset, moonrise, star-shine too,
> Down on you, near and yet more near,

The diacope and polyptoton here feel overwhelming: it's as if the speaker takes a second, awestruck look at all these beauties as they draw closer and closer to him, hardly able to believe what's happening.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 11:** “ride”
- **Line 15:** “breathing”
- **Line 19:** “side by side”
- **Line 20:** “breathe,” “ride”
- **Line 23:** “cloud”
- **Line 25:** “sun's”
- **Line 26:** “moon's,” “star's”
- **Line 29:** “Cloud,” “sunset,” “moonrise,” “star”
- **Line 30:** “near,” “near”
- **Line 34:** “ride”
- **Lines 39-40:** “Had I said that, had I done this, / So might I gain, so might I miss.”
- **Lines 41-42:** “Might she have loved me? just as well / She might have hated,”
- **Line 44:** “riding”
- **Line 55:** “ride”
- **Line 60:** “ride”
- **Line 66:** “riding”
- **Line 71:** “side by side”
- **Line 77:** “riding's,” “ride”
- **Line 88:** “ride”
- **Line 93:** “descried”
- **Line 96:** “descry”
- **Line 99:** “ride”
- **Line 105:** “ride”
- **Line 110:** “Ride, ride,” “ride”

IRONY

In the poem's ironic seventh stanza, the poem wittily reflects on the uses and limitations of art.

Having observed that the imperfect world always disappoints those who strive for greatness, the speaker turns to an imagined poet and remarks that this poor guy's efforts to reach his "own sublime"—that is, his own ideal of beauty—never quite hit the mark in real life. This poet, the speaker says, may well "tell / What we felt only," putting deep feeling into words and bringing "things beautiful" to life. But the poet's writing can't

make his *actual* life any better.

In fact, life as a poet is full of trials. The poet the speaker addresses is "poor, sick," and "old ere [his] time": in other words, he's the very picture of a starving artist (and perhaps one modeled on John Keats, one of Browning's favorites). All his efforts to capture beauty don't bring him "nearer one whit" (or one little bit closer) to happiness or fulfillment.

The obvious irony here is that the speaker is *in* a poem, being written *by* a poet. There's thus something tongue-in-cheek about this stanza; Browning is poking bittersweet fun at himself, his fellow artists, and their difficult lives.

But perhaps the irony here also undercuts the speaker's skepticism. If life, as the speaker claims, always falls short of perfection, then perhaps writing imperfect poetry about one's imperfect life is one of the best ways to capture the truth (if not the "sublime")!

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- **Lines 67-77:** "What does it all mean, poet? Well, / Your brains beat into rhythm, you tell / What we felt only; you expressed / You hold things beautiful the best, / And pace them in rhyme so, side by side. / 'Tis something, nay 'tis much: but then, / Have you yourself what's best for men? / Are you—poor, sick, old ere your time— / Nearer one whit your own sublime / Than we who have never turned a rhyme? / Sing, riding's a joy! For me, I ride."

ENJAMBMENT

The poem doesn't use much enjambment, but when the device does appear it reflects the speaker's bursts of emotion.

As the poem begins, the speaker lines up a bunch of declarations of defeat, all end-stopped: "Since nothing all my love avails, / Since all, my life seemed meant for, fails," etc. That slow, stately beginning gives these sudden enjambments a feeling of new energy:

> My whole heart rises up to bless
> Your name in pride and thankfulness!
> Take back the hope you gave—I claim
> Only a memory of the same,

These enjambed lines make it sound as if the speaker is hastening to assure his beloved that his feelings for her won't change even though she's turned him down: he'll preserve both his gratitude to her and his "memory" of hoping that she might love him back. By speeding these lines along, the enjambments here encourage readers to reflect that plenty of spurned lovers *wouldn't* retain such energetic affection for their beloveds. Enjambment, here, helps to characterize the speaker as a passionate and loyal man.

And take a look at how enjambment works in lines 34-36:

> Then we began to ride. My soul
> Smoothed itself out, a long-cramped scroll
> Freshening and fluttering in the wind.

Here, enjambment mimics what these lines describe: a bunch of separate lines become one passage, "smooth[ly]" unfurling. By matching the shape of the poem to the speaker's metaphor, these enjambments again help readers to feel their way into the speaker's experience.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 6-7:** "bless / Your"
- **Lines 8-9:** "claim / Only"
- **Lines 13-14:** "demurs / When"
- **Lines 23-24:** "cloud / All"
- **Lines 24-25:** "over-bowed / By"
- **Lines 25-26:** "sun's / And"
- **Lines 28-29:** "drew / Cloud"
- **Lines 34-35:** "soul / Smoothed"
- **Lines 35-36:** "scroll / Freshening"
- **Lines 41-42:** "well / She"
- **Lines 50-51:** "less / Bear"
- **Lines 52-53:** "contrast / The"
- **Lines 68-69:** "tell / What"
- **Lines 75-76:** "sublime / Than"
- **Lines 78-79:** "gave / A"
- **Lines 80-81:** "turn / To"
- **Lines 89-90:** "fate / Proposed"
- **Lines 90-91:** "sublimate / My"
- **Lines 102-103:** "upturned / Whither"
- **Lines 109-110:** "she / Ride"

ALLITERATION

Powerful, plentiful alliteration gives this poem music, emotion, and force.

The third stanza, in which the speaker explores an extended simile comparing his beloved to a divine and luminous cloud, provides all kinds of good examples. Take a look at its first few lines:

> All billowy-bosomed, over-bowed
> By many benedictions—

All those round /b/ sounds mimic the smooth "billow[s]" of cloud the speaker conjures up here, and give this dreamy, enchanted vision the music of a spell.

And that effect only gets stronger at the end of the stanza:

> Till flesh must fade for heaven was here!—
> Thus leant she and lingered—joy and fear!
> Thus lay she a moment on my breast.

Here, two strong alliterative moments in a row—the /f/ of "flesh must fade" and the breathy /h/ of "heaven was here"—strengthen the contrast between the earthly, "flesh[ly]" world and the cloudy, airy joy of "heaven." Then, a long, luxuriant /l/ sound makes the speaker's one embrace with his beloved feel deliciously drawn-out.

There's some similar heady alliteration in the speaker's choice to accept this "last ride" as the most he can hope for:

> I and my mistress, side by side
> Shall be together, breathe and ride,
> So, one day more am I deified.

Besides giving these lines some musical emphasis, alliteration here draws special attention to the powerful idea that being in his beloved's company for one more "day" feels, to the speaker, like nothing less than being "deified," made into a god.

Note that we've only highlighted a small sampling of the poem's copious alliteration here: there's plenty more to find!

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "now," "length," "know"
- **Line 3:** "nothing," "love"
- **Line 4:** "life"
- **Line 10:** "beside," "blame"
- **Line 11:** "leave," "last"
- **Line 12:** "bent," "brow"
- **Line 13:** "deep dark," "pride"
- **Line 14:** "pity"
- **Line 18:** "last," "least"
- **Line 19:** "my mistress"
- **Line 20:** "be," "breathe"
- **Line 21:** "day," "deified"
- **Line 23:** "saw some"
- **Line 24:** "billowy-bosomed," "bowed"
- **Line 25:** "benedictions"
- **Line 27:** "looking," "loving"
- **Line 29:** "sunset," "star"
- **Line 31:** "flesh," "fade," "heaven," "here"
- **Line 32:** "leant," "lingered"
- **Line 33:** "lay"

ASSONANCE

Assonance, like alliteration, makes this poem poignantly musical.

For instance, listen to the echoing sounds in these lines from the second stanza:

> I and my mistress, side by side
> Shall be together, breathe and ride,
> So, one day more am I deified.

Each of these lines leans on a new vowel sound: the long /eye/ in line 19, the long /ee/ in line 20, and the long /ay/ in line 21. "Day" and "deified" are even more closely connected through those alliterative /d/ sounds. All in all, then, assonance helps the speaker's last grasp at the pleasures of his beloved's company to sound like a slow, sad song.

Note that we've only highlighted a small sample of the poem's assonance here—there's much, much more to find.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "since 'tis"
- **Line 3:** "nothing," "love"
- **Line 4:** "my life"
- **Line 5:** "this," "written," "needs," "be"
- **Line 8:** "gave," "claim"
- **Line 11:** "leave," "me"
- **Line 13:** "eyes," "pride"
- **Line 14:** "pity"
- **Line 15:** "Fixed"
- **Line 16:** "life," "right"
- **Line 18:** "thought," "not"
- **Line 19:** "I," "my," "side," "side"
- **Line 20:** "be," "breathe"
- **Line 21:** "day," "deified"

VOCABULARY

'Tis (Line 1, Line 72) - An old-fashioned way of saying "it is."

At length (Line 2) - At last, finally.

Nothing all my love avails (Line 3) - In other words, "my love has come to nothing."

Mistress (Line 12) - Girlfriend, beloved. (There's no sense of an illicit romance here!)

Demurs (Line 13) - Declines, turns down.

Fixed me (Line 15) - Stayed still, looking at me; stared at me.

A breathing-while (Line 15) - For the space of a breath.

Replenished (Line 17) - Refilled, restored.

Vain (Line 18) - Futile, hopeless.

Deified (Line 21) - Made into a god.

Billowy-bosomed (Line 24) - Puffing out (perhaps rather like a woman's breast).

Over-bowed by many benedictions (Lines 24-25) - In other words, "bent worshipfully over by many beings that want to offer blessings and gifts."

Awry (Line 38) - Out of order, not going as planned.

Befell (Line 43) - Happened.

Petty (Line 53) - Piddling, pathetically small.

Conceived (Line 57) - Dreamed up an idea.

Fleshly screen (Line 59) - In other words, the limitations of mortality. The speaker means that here on earth where our bodies are made of flesh, nothing's perfect!

Bosom (Line 60) - Breast, chest.

Ten lines, a statesman's life in each! (Line 62) - In other words: "it only takes ten lines in a history book to sum up a great politician's whole life."

Atones (Line 64) - Makes amends for, makes up for.

Abbey (Line 65) - The speaker may here mean Westminster Abbey, one of England's most important churches and the home of many memorials to notable people.

By their leave (Line 66) - While this old-fashioned phrase means something like "if they don't mind," the connotation is more like our modern "if you ask me."

Nay (Line 72) - No.

Ere (Line 74) - Before.

Sublime (Line 75) - In this context, this word means "an ideal, the height of perfection."

Fords the burn (Line 81) - Crosses the stream.

Acquiesce (Line 82) - Accept or agree (perhaps a little reluctantly).

Repine (Line 82) - Fret.

Strains (Line 86) - Passages of music.

In fine (Line 88) - Finally, in short.

Sublimate (Line 90) - Make sublime, transform into something better.

Signed the bond (Line 91) - Signed the contract. Here, the speaker might mean this figuratively (in that he could have made some agreement with fate) or literally (in that he and his beloved could literally have signed a marriage contract).

Dim-descried (Line 93) - Only faintly visible, just barely perceived.

Glory-garland (Line 95) - Here, the speaker is imagining that requited love would have felt like being wreathed in flowers, like someone who has achieved something tremendous.

Abide (Line 104) - Keep going, stay the same.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Last Ride Together" uses one of Browning's favorite forms: the dramatic monologue. In this poem, as in many of his others, Browning takes on the voice of a character as if he were an actor; in this case, he plays a philosophical, disappointed lover.

He also invents a new stanza form for this lover's voice. The poem is built from 10 stanzas of 11 lines apiece, all with a consistent rhyme scheme. These off-kilter stanzas, with their odd number of lines, reflect the poem's interest in the world's imperfections and consolations: while the stanzas don't fall into an easy, familiar pattern, they also have their own strange harmony and order.

METER

"The Last Ride Together" is mostly written in iambic tetrameter: that is, its lines are built from four iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm. Here's how that sounds in lines 1 and 2:

I said— | Then, dear- | est, since | 'tis so,
Since now | at length | my fate | I know,

All those swinging da-DUMs feel fitting for a poem that's about both love and a "ride" on horseback or in a carriage: the pounding rhythm here could mimic either a heart or hoofbeats.

But this poem doesn't stick to that rhythm steadily throughout. While every line is in four-beat tetrameter, the poem introduces all sorts of different feet. Listen to what happens in lines 21-22, for instance:

So, one | day more | am I | deified.
Who knows | but the world | may end | tonight?

- Line 21 introduces a spondee: two strong stresses right next to each other, DUM-DUM. That means that the words "one day more" are all stressed, giving the speaker's voice its passionate urgency. The dactyl (DUM-da-da) of "deified" also gives the line some extra punch.
- Line 22, in comparison, sounds quieter and more thoughtful, with all its stresses to the backs of the feet. But the anapest of "but the world" adds an extra syllable, packing more into the line, and perhaps helping the speaker to sound quietly desperate as he reflects that, if he's lucky, this horseback ride might be his last act on earth!

RHYME SCHEME

The surprising rhyme scheme of "The Last Ride Together" runs like this in each stanza:

AABBCDDEEEC

This pattern, as it gains momentum and comes to strange halts, reflects the speaker's own emotional predicament. Here's an example of how that works in the first stanza:

- As the poem begins, readers might start to think that it's going to use steady rhymed couplets,

traveling in pairs like doves: "so" / "know," "avails" / "fails."
- But then, a single C rhyme pops up out of nowhere—and doesn't find a partner! (Readers might smell a metaphor for the speaker himself there...)
- Instead, the poem returns to a couplet—then introduces a surprising triplet, "claim" / "same" / "blame," which makes it feel as if the poem is building up some extra momentum, a head of steam.
- Only at the end of the stanza does the C rhyme finally conclude: "me" comes along to match with "be" from way back in line 5.

In other words, the rhyme scheme raises readers' expectations of some kind of familiar poetic order, only to break them over and over again—just as, in the speaker's view, the world never quite lives up to anyone's hopes.

But this off-kilter rhyme scheme, like the speaker, still finds an odd harmony in the end. That dangling C rhyme always meets its match eventually, even if it's not in a predictable place—and the speaker, disappointed in his hopes of marriage, still feels that simply being near his beloved is as close to heaven as he can get.

SPEAKER

The speaker of this dramatic monologue is heartbroken. Disappointed in love when his beloved turns down his proposal, he feels that "all [his] life seemed meant for" has come to nothing. But he's not letting that make him bitter. Equal parts idealistic and realistic, this lover decides that, since he can't have what he wants, he's simply going to enjoy every last second he gets to spend in his beloved's company—and to hope that heaven might one day reward him with a version of their "last ride together" that stretches out into eternity.

This lover's reflections on life's combination of disappointments and sublime delights mark him out as a true romantic. While he knows that life never really lives up to people's hopes and dreams, he's also pretty sure that merely being near the woman who rejected him is as close as any mortal could get to heaven.

SETTING

The setting doesn't come up too much in "The Last Ride Together": all readers know is that the speaker and his beloved are out for a horseback ride somewhere. While there are a few hints that the poem takes place in Browning's own England—for instance, the mention of a capitalized "Abbey" that seems likely to be Westminster—it doesn't really matter when or where these events take place. The poem is dealing with problems that are the same for everyone, everywhere: love is sometimes unrequited, hearts sometimes break, and the world generally falls a little short of our dreams.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Robert Browning (1812-1889) was a great Victorian writer—and one quite unlike those around him. Considered a minor poet for most of his early career, Browning became famous toward the end of his life for his wild dramatic monologues: theatrical poems spoken in the voices of characters from murderous Italian dukes to good-hearted 16th-century soldiers. The philosophical, reflective, passionate speaker of "The Last Ride Together" is one of the sweeter figures in these monologues, standing apart from a gallery of scoundrels.

Many of Browning's contemporaries didn't quite know what to do with his poetry, which—with its experimental rhythms and sometimes earthy language—rarely conformed to the elegant standards of his time. Many suggested that he'd make a better novelist than a poet. Even Oscar Wilde, a great Browning enthusiast, couldn't resist quipping that "[George] Meredith is a prose Browning, and so is Browning." The Modernist poets of the early 20th century, though, admired Browning's poetry for the very strangeness and narrative vigor that put so many of the Victorians off.

Browning's greatest influence was, without question, his beloved wife, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, whose poetry he deeply admired. This literary duo critiqued and championed each other's work for 14 happy years of marriage. But like many Victorian writers, Browning also followed in the lyrical and imaginative footsteps of the earlier Romantic poets. As a young man, he particularly respected Shelley as both a poet and a radical political thinker.

While Browning was ahead of his time in many ways, more and more writers and thinkers learned to admire and appreciate his work as the 19th century rolled into its final years. His reputation has only grown since his death.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

While the speaker of "The Last Ride Together" isn't altogether sure that poetry-writing is the best way to spend one's life, his philosophy on love doesn't seem so distant from Browning's own. Browning was a deeply romantic man, and he lived out one of literature's most touching love stories.

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. In order to defy Mr. Barrett, the couple had to elope; they left England for Italy in 1846. Outraged, Elizabeth's father disinherited her.

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

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Aloud — Listen to a reading of the poem. (https://youtu.be/IV8IXNI8qTU)
- A Brief Biography — Learn more about Browning's life and work via the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/robert-browning)
- Browning's Legacy — Learn more about how Browning rose to acclaim at the end of his life—and read novelist Henry James's witty remarks on Browning's tomb. (https://www.bl.uk/learning/langlit/poetryperformance/browning/josephinehart/aboutbrowning.html)
- Browning Remembered — Read a celebration of Browning on the bicentenary of his birth and learn how he continues to influence poetry today. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/may/07/robert-browning-bicentenary)
- Images of Browning — Explore the National Portrait Gallery's collection of Browning portraiture, which reflects the story of both his literary life and his great romance with fellow poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning. (https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/person/mp00603/robert-browning)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ROBERT BROWNING POEMS

- Home-Thoughts, from Abroad
- How they Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix
- Life in a Love
- Meeting at Night
- My Last Duchess
- Porphyria's Lover
- The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church
- The Lost Leader
- The Patriot

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