The Lost Leader

POEM TEXT

Just for a handful of silver he left us,
Just for a riband to stick in his coat—
Found the one gift of which fortune bereft us,
Lost all the others she lets us devote;
They, with the gold to give, doled him out silver,
So much was theirs who so little allowed:
How all our copper had gone for his service!
Rags—were they purple, his heart had been proud!
We that had loved him so, followed him, honoured him,
Lived in his mild and magnificent eye,
Learned his great language, caught his clear accents,
Made him our pattern to live and to die!
Shakespeare was of us, Milton was for us,
Burns, Shelley, were with us,—they watch from their graves!
He alone breaks from the van and the freemen,
—He alone sinks to the rear and the slaves!

We shall march prospering,—not thro' his presence;
Songs may inspirit us,—not from his lyre;
Deeds will be done,—while he boasts his quiescence,
Still bidding crouch whom the rest bade aspire:
Blot out his name, then, record one lost soul more,
One task more declined, one more footpath untrod,
One more devils'-triumph and sorrow for angels,
One wrong more to man, one more insult to God!
Life's night begins: let him never come back to us!
There would be doubt, hesitation and pain,
Forced praise on our part—the glimmer of twilight,
Never glad confident morning again!
Best fight on well, for we taught him—strike gallantly,
Menace our heart ere we master his own;
Then let him receive the new knowledge and wait us,
Pardoned in heaven, the first by the throne!

SUMMARY

Our leader abandoned us—just for a little money and a prize ribbon to wear on his coat. He got the one gift (high status) that the goddess of fortune denied us, but he lost all the virtues and talents she lets us devote to her as offerings. The people who could have given him gold gave him silver instead; they had so much, yet gave him so little. Meanwhile, we'd given him everything we had, even though it was humble copper! He would have accepted even worthless rags as gifts, if they'd been dyed royal purple (i.e., come from powerful people)! Those of us who had loved, followed, and praised him, basked in his gentle and wonderful nature, studied and grasped the clear and amazing language he produced, made him our example to live and die by! William Shakespeare came from common people like us; John Milton advocated for us; Robert Burns and Percy Shelley stood with us. All those other great poets are watching us approvingly from the afterlife! Our lost leader is the only one who deserts the forefront of the movement for freedom. He's the only one who creeps off to the back, joining the supporters of oppression!

Our movement will march on successfully, but not with his involvement. Verse might inspire us, but he won't be the one writing it. Significant action will be taken while he brags about his passivity. He'll keep recommending that kind of cowering passivity to the people whose aspirations the rest of us encouraged. Wipe his name from the record, then. Let the record show yet another unredeemable person, yet another task not done, yet another road not taken, yet another reason for devils to rejoice and angels to grieve, yet another evil done to humankind and offense done to God! Our lost leader is entering the nighttime (last phase) of his life. May he never rejoin us! If he did, he'd cause us doubt, hesitation, and pain. We'd feel compelled to give him false praise. He would represent gloomy decline, like dusk—he'll never again represent optimism and confidence, like dawn! We should keep fighting the good fight, since, after all, we told him to fight nobly. We should sooner take aim at our own character than try to control his. So let him find out the truth for himself and wait for us in the afterlife, where he'll be pardoned by God and hold an honored place in heaven!

THEMES

THE BETRAYAL OF IDEALS

"The Lost Leader" sharply criticizes a leader who has betrayed the ideals he once embraced. The poem mocks this "Leader" for selling out, deserting his followers, and abandoning the cause of human liberty. With great disappointment, it accepts the need to fight on without the "Leader," whose betrayal it considers permanent. (As Browning himself acknowledged, the poem is more specifically a thinly veiled portrait of William Wordsworth—a poet whose youthful radicalism Browning greatly admired, yet which gave way in

Wordsworth's later years to a more conservative politics.)

The poem casts the leader, a formerly great poet, as a Judas-like figure who's sold out his former ideals and betrayed his former comrades. The speaker describes him as a figure they once "loved" and "followed," whose "great language" put him in the company of Shakespeare, Milton, and other famous poets.

Unlike those poets, however, this leader gave up on the dream of liberty, deserting the pro-democracy "freemen" (including the speaker) who advocate for the oppressed masses. The poem accuses him of leaving the forefront of their movement in exchange for money and honors: a mere "handful of silver" (like the silver for which Judas betrays Jesus) and an honorary "riband" (ribbon). That is, the poem mocks him not only for selling out to the powerful but for selling out at a low price.

Now that the leader has abandoned their cause, the speaker treats *him* as a lost cause: an over-the-hill writer who will never again be in step with his times, much less the head of a movement. In the poem's harshest attack, the speaker abandons all allegiance to the leader, calling him a "lost soul" who's committed a "wrong [...] to man" and an "insult to God."

In fact, the speaker hopes the leader will "never come back to us," because he'd only cause his former followers "doubt, hesitation and pain." According to the speaker, the leader is in his life's "twilight"; his talent and ideals will never again represent a "glad confident morning." He's a hopeless case, and it's best to let him go.

As a stinging criticism of a public figure, "The Lost Leader" might seem intended to influence its subject—change the Leader's mind, politics, etc. Yet it refuses to make any appeal of that kind. It treats the Leader's betrayal as a done deal (at least in this lifetime) and thus seeks to go on without him.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-32

PERSISTENCE THROUGH DISAPPOINTMENT

Despite the speaker's bitter disappointment in the former "Leader," the poem contains an undertone of optimistic perseverance. As regrettable as the loss of this leader is, it's not fatal to the movement and ideals the speaker believes in. In other words, the *cause* isn't lost, and the poem urges fellow believers to keep fighting for freedom even as they lament the leader's desertion. It also candidly acknowledges how inspiring this leader once was and holds out the possibility of a heavenly reunion with the leader after the earthly struggle is done.

The poem is an expression of mourning for a leader's betrayal, but it's also a rallying cry to others to stay true to the cause. It reassures fellow believers that, even though the leader has broken from their ranks, other great poets "watch from their graves" with approval and support. It insists that their movement will continue "prospering" without the leader's help and suggests that other "Songs" might come along to inspire them; he just won't be the one writing them. It promises future heroic "Deeds," even if the leader's not the one doing them, and encourages true believers to "fight on well" in the Leader's absence.

Though the speaker doesn't expect or want the leader to rejoin the cause, they still seem to look up to the great man he *used* to be, and they imagine that a healing reunion will take place in the afterlife. The speaker recalls that they "loved" and revered him when he produced his "great language," which clearly still inspires them to some degree. The speaker ambiguously hints that the leader will someday "receive the new knowledge": come around to a better way of thinking, whether before or after he dies. Rather than damning the leader completely, the speaker imagines meeting him again in heaven, where he will be "Pardoned" and hold a place of honor.

In short, the speaker avoids the mistake they accuse the leader of making: urging people to "crouch" in passive hopelessness rather than "aspire" to better things. They mourn the decline of an inspiring figure but don't treat it as the end of the world, or even an excuse to quit the march toward progress.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 9-14
- Lines 17-20
- Lines 29-32

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

Just for a handful of silver he left us,
Just for a riband to stick in his coat—
Found the one gift of which fortune bereft us,
Lost all the others she lets us devote;

Lines 1-4 dive straight into the speaker's attack on the "Lost Leader," accusing the leader of wrongdoing without identifying him or explaining the situation that led to this seeming betray. This abrupt opening conveys the force of the speakers' emotions, as if they (note the plural "us" in line 1) are so indignant that they don't have time to explain everything.

Browning also skimps on explanation because the poem alludes to people and events that most of his readers were already familiar with. As he acknowledged, "The Lost Leader" was intended as a criticism of his fellow poet William Wordsworth:

- In his youth, Wordsworth had been considered a leader among radical writers and intellectuals

supporting the cause of democracy in Europe.
- As he aged, he grew more conservative, started defending the British monarchy, and finally accepted the job of Poet Laureate from the Queen herself.

Thus, Browning's speaker accuses the "Leader" of betraying his cause for a little "silver" (money) and a ceremonial "riband" (ribbon). The silver here alludes to the "thirty pieces of silver" for which Judas betrays Jesus in the Bible.

Lines 3-4 expand on the theme of selling out, setting up an antithesis between social status and artistic integrity:

> Found the one gift of which fortune bereft us,
> Lost all the others she lets us devote;

In other words, the leader (Wordsworth) has gained the "one gift" that fate (personified as the goddess of "fortune") denied his former comrades: recognition by the establishment. In the process, however, he's lost all the other gifts that fortune lets writers "devote" to her as offerings: inspiration, talent, and so on. In a terrible tradeoff, he's now a successful public figure but a washed-up artist.

These opening lines establish the dactylic meter that will continue throughout the poem. Dactyls are metrical feet consisting of a stressed syllable followed by two unstressed syllables: "DUM-da-da." Each line contains four such feet (usually with one or two syllables trimmed off the last foot), so the poem is set in dactylic tetrameter:

> Just for a | handful of | silver he | left us,
> Just for a | riband to | stick in his | coat—

Dactylic verse is unusual in English and creates a forceful, galloping rhythm—appropriate to the hard-charging tone of this poem, which seems to rush forward and hurl accusations.

Both the meter and the anaphora of the first two lines (the repeated "Just for a") place strong emphasis on the word "Just." This is a way of emphasizing how little the leader sold out for: *just* a bit of money and a ribbon!

LINES 5-8

> *They, with the gold to give, doled him out silver,*
> *So much was theirs who so little allowed:*
> *How all our copper had gone for his service!*
> *Rags—were they purple, his heart had been proud!*

The poem consists of two stanzas of 16 lines each, which can be subdivided into four rhyming quatrains. Each quatrain forms a fairly cohesive unit. That is, some kind of noticeable shift (in subject and/or syntax) takes place every four lines.

The second of these units (lines 5-8) draws a contrast between:

- What the leader gained (and didn't gain) by selling out
- What he once gained by staying true to his followers

Lines 5-6 indicate, through antithesis, that the leader (i.e., William Wordsworth) sold himself out for a low price. The people who bought his loyalty "doled him out silver" when they could have given him "gold."

The verb "doled [...] out" sounds dry and emotionless in this context, suggesting that the silver was coldly *distributed* rather than given in heartfelt tribute. The leader's rich supporters (i.e., the monarchy that awarded Wordsworth the job of Poet Laureate) could have given him "So much," yet they gave him "so little"—and he took it.

In doing so, he turned his back on the ordinary people who supported his "service" (work). They had only "copper" (small coins, limited resources) to give him, but they still gave everything they could, and they did so with sincere admiration. (Picture a devoted reader spending their hard-earned pennies on a book by their favorite author.)

Unfortunately, the leader cared much more about official status and recognition. According to the speaker, he would have been "proud" to accept mere "Rags" from the powerful, so long as those rags were "purple"—a color traditionally associated with royalty.

Both lines 7 and 8 are somewhat hyperbolic. The followers didn't literally spend "all" their money supporting the leader, and it's probably not true that the leader would have accepted royal rags with pride. (Rags would make a pretty confusing gift.) The speaker is exaggerating to make a point: the followers gave everything they could to the leader, but their support mattered less to him, in the end, than a tiny bit of royal recognition.

LINES 9-12

> *We that had loved him so, followed him, honoured him,*
> *Lived in his mild and magnificent eye,*
> *Learned his great language, caught his clear accents,*
> *Made him our pattern to live and to die!*

Lines 9-12 contain the poem's only praise for the leader (with the exception of the faint praise in the last line). Of course, these lines are wistful and bittersweet, because the leader has betrayed his followers. Still, they establish the genuine admiration—even reverence—the speaker once felt for the leader.

In a series of parallel phrases, the speaker establishes that they once "loved," "followed," and "honoured" the leader, basking in his "mild and magnificent" gaze (and, by extension, his gentle but awe-inspiring personality). The speaker also praises the leader's "great language" and "clear accents" (alluding to the poetic diction and cadences of William Wordsworth, the poet "The Lost Leader" is based on). The speaker faithfully "Learned" this language and "caught" its meaning, as if studying under a

great teacher or prophet. In fact, the speaker adopted the leader as a role model to follow to the end: "Made him our pattern to live and to die!"

The sound effects in this passage reflect the intensity of the speaker's former admiration. Alliterative /l/, /m/, and /c/ sounds ("loved"/"Lived"/"Learned"/"language"/"live," "mild"/"magnificent"/Made," "caught"/"clear"), as well as the assonance in "followed" and "honoured," elevate the language, making it more musical and overtly poetic. The emphatic sounds and parallel structure—plus the exclamation point in line 12—make the speaker's praise sound fervent, suggesting how fiercely the speaker once devoted themselves to the leader's personality, language, and ideas.

LINES 13-16

Shakespeare was of us, Milton was for us,
Burns, Shelley, were with us,—they watch from their graves!
He alone breaks from the van and the freemen,
—He alone sinks to the rear and the slaves!

In lines 13-16, the speaker compares and contrasts the leader (William Wordsworth) with four other great poets in the English-language tradition: William Shakespeare (1564-1616), John Milton (1608-1674), Robert Burns (1759-1796), and Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822).

On the surface, this is a flattering comparison: mentioning the leader in the same breath as these legends implies that the leader is one of the greatest poets of all time. But the speaker also draws an unflattering contrast, suggesting that the leader's conservative, royalist politics have set him at odds with these writers. The speaker asserts that Shakespeare, Milton, Burns, and Shelley sided with "us"—meaning ordinary people, supporters of democracy, or both:

- "Shakespeare was of us": Shakespeare was born into fairly modest circumstances. His family wasn't wealthy or aristocratic, and he never attended university. Although his personal politics are unknown, his plays often presented royalty in a critical light.
- "Milton was for us": Milton was a prominent liberal thinker who advocated for freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and republican government.
- "Burns, Shelley were with us": Burns and Shelley were considered political radicals in their time. Shelley's staunch opposition to the clergy and aristocracy got him in political trouble in England.

The speaker claims that these poets "watch from their graves" as their country's political struggles continue. By implication, they approve of the speaker's pro-democracy views and disapprove of the leader's (Wordsworth's) conservatism. "He alone" among these great poets, according to the speaker, has deserted the "van" (vanguard, forefront) of social progress and slipped off to the "rear." He alone has abandoned the "freemen" (supporters of freedom/democracy) and joined the "slaves" (here meaning people who willingly submit to oppression). Accumulating parallel clauses, insistent anaphora ("He alone [...] He alone"), and multiple exclamation points drive home the speaker's indignation.

In drawing this contrast, the speaker is taking aim at a famous poet's pride, perhaps hoping to make him sweat his legacy as a writer. Milton was a major influence on Wordsworth; Shakespeare and Burns also influenced him; Shelley was one of the younger Romantics influenced *by* Wordsworth. By alluding to them in this context, the speaker implies that the "leader's" politics make him a disappointment to his heroes and followers alike.

LINES 17-20

We shall march prospering,—not thro' his presence;
Songs may inspirit us,—not from his lyre;
Deeds will be done,—while he boasts his quiescence,
Still bidding crouch whom the rest bade aspire:

Building on the "van"/"rear" metaphor of the previous lines, lines 17-20 imagine a revolutionary "march" toward social progress. The speaker takes a more optimistic, yet still pointed, tone, insisting that this pro-freedom movement is doing perfectly well without its former leader.

Using parallelism and abrupt caesuras (marked by dashes), the speaker effectively says: *We'll keep fighting and thriving—but not with him. Songs might inspire us—but not his. Action will be taken—while he does nothing and continues to discourage everyone we're trying to encourage.* The syntax seems to turn on the leader the way the leader turned on his movement.

Line 18 is another clear indication that the leader is a poet (William Wordsworth). The "lyre" was the stringed instrument played by ancient Greek bards as they sang their poetry, and it's still symbolically associated with poetry in general.

The speaker suggests that new "Songs" (poems) may come along to "inspirit" (inspire) the movement, but the leader won't be the one writing them anymore. As lines 19-20 indicate, the leader has traded his former radical activism for a proud "quiescence," meaning passivity or inactivity.

Worse, he's discouraging others from taking action. He's "bidding" (urging) ordinary people to "crouch" (cower) under oppression—unlike "the rest" of his onetime comrades and fellow writers, who have urged people to "aspire" to freedom. Once again, antithesis sharpens the contrast between the leader and his former allies.

LINES 21-24

Blot out his name, then, record one lost soul more,
One task more declined, one more footpath untrod,
One more devils'-triumph and sorrow for angels,

One wrong more to man, one more insult to God!

Having described the leader's fall from grace, the speaker now unleashes their angriest condemnation yet. Apostrophizing the rest of the freedom movement, or maybe history in general, the speaker demands:

> Blot out his name, then, record one lost soul more [...]

In other words, forget the leader: wipe his name from memory and treat him as irredeemable. (Notice that he's a "Lost Leader" in more than one sense: his followers have lost his leadership, and he's also a "lost soul" or hopeless sinner.)

The condemnation doesn't stop there. Using anaphora ("One [...] more") and parallel clauses, the speaker pronounces a series of harsh judgments on the leader. The leader has turned down an important moral and intellectual "task"; he's missed a crucial opportunity (left a "footpath untrod" or road untraveled); he's caused a "devils'-triumph" and a "sorrow for angels" (caused the forces of evil to gloat and the forces of goodness to grieve); he's "wrong[ed]" humankind and "insult[ed]" God. His betrayal, the speaker suggests, is a done deal and deserves to be "record[ed]" in the annals of history.

The vehement repetitions of this passage express both bitterness and frustration. Though the speaker is encouraging perseverance in the leader's absence, these lines acknowledge that the leader's betrayal has come at great cost.

LINES 25-28

Life's night begins: let him never come back to us!
There would be doubt, hesitation and pain,
Forced praise on our part—the glimmer of twilight,
Never glad confident morning again!

Lines 25-28 feature an extended metaphor comparing the leader's life—and declining vitality, optimism, etc.—to the progression from morning to night.

According to the speaker, "Life's night" is beginning for the leader; that is, he's in the final phase of his life and career. (The implied subject of the poem, William Wordsworth, turned 75 the year the poem was published.) His writing, politics, and overall presence now evoke "the glimmer of twilight" rather than the "glad confident morning" they once represented. In other words, he carries an aura of gloom and decline. He will "Never [...] again" recover his morning-like quality: he'll never again seem fresh, youthful, optimistic, invigorating, etc.

As a result, the speaker, while resenting the leader's betrayal, hopes he'll "never come back to us!" Even if the leader had a political change of heart and rejoined his former comrades, he wouldn't inspire them. He'd only cause them "doubt, hesitation and pain." They would feel pressure to give him "Forced praise"; they wouldn't honestly believe he was helping their movement or writing as well as he used to.

These lines may be an allusion to a famous passage in which Wordsworth himself linked morning, youth, and the enthusiastic spirit of radical politics. Recalling his impressions of the French Revolution in "The French Revolution as it Appeared to Enthusiasts at its Commencement" (1809), he wrote:

> Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
> But to be young was very heaven!

Browning seems to suggest that the "dawn" of Wordsworth's youth is long gone, and it's not coming back.

LINES 29-32

Best fight on well, for we taught him—strike gallantly,
Menace our heart ere we master his own;
Then let him receive the new knowledge and wait us,
Pardoned in heaven, the first by the throne!

The final lines of the poem make a kind of peace with the leader's betrayal. The speaker encourages others in the freedom movement to keep fighting the good fight without their leader, suggests the leader will eventually understand things better than he currently does (whether in this life or the next), and even claims that the leader will "wait" for his former followers in heaven—where he'll be "Pardoned" and hold a place of honor.

These lines register an emotional shift from the angry condemnation that came earlier in the stanza. Though the speaker believes the leader has gone over to the side of evil ("One more devils'-triumph," etc.), the speaker also understands that the leader has grown old (entered his "twilight" years) and acknowledges that he did amazing things in his youth. Since the speaker seems to feel pity for the leader, the poem treats him mercifully in the end, suggesting that God will not only pardon him but invite him to sit "first by the throne" of heaven. Meanwhile, the leader will "receive the new knowledge"—absorb and accept the values the speaker and his movement are fighting for—one way or the other; he'll have some kind of revelation before or after death.

Given all this, the speaker urges his comrades to "fight on well" and "strike gallantly": that is, keep fighting honorably for their ideals, just as they "taught" (or tried to teach) the leader to do. "Menace our heart ere we master his own" is a slightly ambiguous phrase, but it suggests that part of fighting honorably is not fighting too viciously. The freedom movement should challenge ("Menace") their own behavior and character before they try to "master" (control or destroy) the leader's. In other words, there's no point in bashing the leader any more than the speaker already has. (An earlier version of this line read "Aim at our heart ere we pierce through his own," which more clearly expresses the preference for turning criticism inward over criticizing the leader too destructively.)

Alliteration helps highlight the contrast between "menac[ing] our heart" and "master[ing]" the leader's, and it ties together the phrase "new knowledge" as well. The poem ends with a final rhyme and exclamation point, providing a ringing sense of closure as the speaker goes out on an inspiring note.

SYMBOLS

SILVER, GOLD, AND COPPER

In the first stanza of the poem, silver, gold, and copper evoke concepts related to money, such as bribery and tribute. With reference to the leader (Wordsworth), they symbolize the price of his integrity and ideals.

The speaker says that the leader left his followers "for a handful of silver": a pointed allusion to Judas betraying Jesus for 30 pieces of silver. The speaker also accuses the leader of selling out to people (i.e., royalty) who *could* have given him "gold." That gold could be taken literally, but it also stands for true riches and power, as opposed to the lesser "silver" the leader settled for. Not only did the leader sell out, he sold out cheap, suggesting he never valued his ideals very highly in the first place.

The speaker adds that the leader's followers (people who admired and supported his writing) had given him "all our copper [...] for his service." Here, copper (small coins) represents humble financial resources. In other words, the followers didn't have much, but they gave their leader all they could—not to buy his loyalty but to pay heartfelt tribute.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Just for a handful of silver he left us,"
- **Lines 5-7:** "They, with the gold to give, doled him out silver, / So much was theirs who so little allowed: / How all our copper had gone for his service!"

MORNING AND NIGHT

In lines 25-28, morning and night symbolize the beginning and end of life, respectively. They also evoke the beginning and end of the leader's writing career, of his power as a public figure, and so on.

According to the speaker, "Life's night" has begun for the leader, whose youthful radicalism, energy, and talent have all but burned out. He's past his prime and entering the "twilight" phase of his life and career. He will never again represent the "glad confident morning" that he seemed to promise as a young idealist. For his former followers, he's no longer a symbol of hope and progress but a symbol of disappointment and decline.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 25-28:** "Life's night begins: let him never come back to us! / There would be doubt, hesitation and pain, / Forced praise on our part—the glimmer of twilight, / Never glad confident morning again!"

POETIC DEVICES

METAPHOR

The poem contains a number of metaphors, including some images that walk the line between literal and metaphorical.

For example, the "silver," "gold," and "copper" in the opening lines have a partly literal and partly figurative meaning. They suggest that the leader *literally* received some monetary payment for selling out (i.e., in accepting the title of Poet Laureate, Wordsworth did receive a small salary). But the "silver" is less a description of actual coinage than an allusion to the silver Judas accepted in return for betraying Jesus. Thus, the silver has a metaphorical or even symbolic quality: it suggests bribe money, or the price of one's integrity.

- Similarly, "gold" and "copper" stand for riches and meager financial means, respectively; they're part of a contrast between the high status of the leader's new patrons and the humble status of his old friends.
- The "riband" in line 2 could also be a metaphor, but if Wordsworth really did receive some kind of honorary decoration to wear as Poet Laureate, it might be more of a metonym. That is, the prize ribbon might stand in for something it's closely associated with: the leader/poet's new status. Similarly, the "eye" in line 10 is more of a synecdoche than a metaphor: the mildness and magnificence of the leader's gaze is *part* of his *overall* mild and magnificent qualities.

Most of the metaphors in the poem are fairly conventional:

- "The van" and "the rear" in lines 15-16—meaning the *vanguard* and the *rear guard* of an army or movement—stand, respectively, for people who are at the forefront of change/progress and people who are lagging behind. (It's an old spatial metaphor, like *ahead of the curve* and *behind the curve*.)
- "Lyre" in line 18 is a conventional metaphor for the poet's art. (Ancient bards used to sing their poetry while playing harp-like instruments called lyres.)
- "Blot out his name" (line 21) means "Forget him" as if erasing his name from memory, while "footpath untrod" draws a familiar comparison between a

missed opportunity and a road not traveled.

Finally, "Life's night begins," "the glimmer of twilight," and "glad confident morning" (lines 25 and 27-28) form an extended metaphor for the phases of the leader's life. He is now in his later, declining years—the *twilight* of his powers—and will never recover the vibrant, *morning*-like optimism of his youth. (The target of "The Lost Leader," William Wordsworth, was 75 years old when Browning published the poem.)

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "handful of silver"
- **Line 5:** "They, with the gold to give, doled him out silver,"
- **Line 7:** "How all our copper had gone for his service!"
- **Line 15:** "the van"
- **Line 16:** "the rear"
- **Line 18:** "not from his lyre;"
- **Line 21:** "Blot out his name"
- **Line 22:** "one more footpath untrod"
- **Line 25:** "Life's night begins"
- **Lines 27-28:** "the glimmer of twilight, / Never glad confident morning again!"

HYPERBOLE

Although the poem is intended as a sincere accusation, it sometimes uses hyperbole for effect. For example, line 7 claims that the leader's admirers had given "all our copper [...] for his service," meaning that they'd given all their limited financial resources to support his career. Alternatively, it might mean they *would have been willing* to give all their resources. Either way, it's not a literal claim; it's an exaggerated way of saying how loyally they had supported the leader.

Line 8 also sounds hyperbolic. It claims that the leader would have been proud even to receive "Rags" as gifts from his aristocratic supporters, as long as they were dyed royal "purple" (and could therefore serve as a status symbol). Again, the speaker is exaggerating to make a point—the point being that the leader is shallow, vain, and easily bought off.

Other lines in the poem are at least arguably hyperbolic, whether or not the poet intended them that way. Lines 15-16 seem to suggest that the "Leader"(i.e., Wordsworth) is the only great English-language poet who has ever opposed the cause of democracy. This is a debatable, if not exaggerated, claim. (No one knows exactly what Shakespeare's politics were, for example.) Line 23 alleges that the leader's betrayal made devils gloat and angels grieve. Perhaps Browning sincerely believed this as a matter of religious conviction, but it could also be taken as a deliberate overstatement—a way of cursing out the poem's target!

Where Hyperbole appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** "How all our copper had gone for his service! / Rags—were they purple, his heart had been proud!"
- **Lines 15-16:** "He alone breaks from the van and the freemen, / —He alone sinks to the rear and the slaves!"
- **Line 23:** "One more devils'-triumph and sorrow for angels,"

ANAPHORA

The poem is full of repetition, including the special form of repetition called anaphora. In fact, the poem begins with this device, repeating "Just for a" at the beginning of the first two lines:

> Just for a handful of silver he left us,
> Just for a riband to stick in his coat—

The anaphora (along with the poem's dactylic meter—more on that the Meter section of this guide) places emphasis on "Just," stressing how little the leader sold out for. Here and throughout the poem, the repetition also conveys a sense of indignation, as the speaker fires off criticism after criticism.

Anaphora pops up again in lines 15-16 (with the repetition of "He alone" at the beginning of successive lines) and throughout lines 22-24 (with the repetition of "One [...] more"/"one more" at the beginning of successive clauses). Lines 22-24 are an example of anaphora with variations, as the speaker twice inserts a noun ("task," "more") in the middle of the repeated phrase. Lines 22-24 also vividly illustrate how anaphora can express emotion, as the speaker's fury and frustration with the "Lost Leader" build to a fever pitch—culminating in the accusation that the leader's betrayal is "one more insult to God!"

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Just for a"
- **Line 2:** "Just for a"
- **Line 15:** "He alone"
- **Line 16:** "He alone"
- **Line 22:** "One," "more," "one more"
- **Line 23:** "One more"
- **Line 24:** "One," "more," "one more"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration occurs frequently in the poem and serves multiple purposes. At times, it adds to the poem's musicality, reinforcing the rhythm of the dactylic meter. Notice, for example, how alliteration occurs in the same (metrically stressed) positions in lines 3 and 4 ("Found"/"fortune"; "Lost"/"lets"):

> Found the one | gift of which | fortune be- | reft us,

Lost all the | others she | lets us de- | vote;

Elsewhere, alliteration helps suggest or emphasize the meaning of a line. For instance, alliteration bridges the two adjectives in "mild and magnificent eye" (line 10), highlighting a connection where a contrast might otherwise exist. The leader's (former) personality was "mild" *even though* it was "magnificent"; in other words, the leader was gentle despite being imposing, awe-inspiring, etc. In general, the heavy alliteration in lines 9-11 ("Loved"/"lived"/"Learned"/"language," "mild"/"magnificent," "caught"/"clear") adds a kind of lushness to the one passage in which the speaker praises the leader.

Alliteration also helps draw out the meaning of line 30, which juxtaposes the /m/ words "Menace" and "master" as part of an antithesis. The general sense of this line is that the speaker ought to challenge (menace) their *own* character before trying to control (master) the *leader's*. They'd rather let him discover the "new knowledge" (another alliterative phrase) for himself than force it on him in a bullying way.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "Found," "fortune"
- **Line 4:** "Lost," "lets"
- **Line 5:** "gold," "give"
- **Line 8:** "purple," "his heart had," "proud"
- **Line 9:** "loved"
- **Line 10:** "Lived," "mild," "magnificent"
- **Line 11:** "Learned," "language," "caught," "clear"
- **Line 17:** "prospering," "presence"
- **Line 19:** "Deeds," "done"
- **Line 27:** "praise," "part," "glimmer"
- **Line 28:** "glad"
- **Line 30:** "Menace," "master"
- **Line 31:** "new knowledge"

ASSONANCE

The poem doesn't rely heavily on assonance, but the device does add musicality and emphasis to a few key moments.

For example, short /i/ assonance adds a bit of punch to the disdainful image in line 2: "Just for a riband to stick in his coat." In line 5, the assonance (and internal rhyme) between "gold" and "doled"—both metrically stressed words—helps highlight the subtle *contrast* between the verbs "give" and "doled." To "dole [something] out" is to give it in an obligatory or official way as opposed to a kind or heartfelt way; you might say that an employer doles out your pay, but you wouldn't say that your best friend doles out your birthday gift.

In line 9, the assonance linking "followed" and "honoured" adds emphasis to the parallel phrases that accumulate in praise of the leader. In line 21, the shared /o/ vowel in "record," "soul," and "more"—combined with a slight variation in the meter—draws attention to an important phrase about the leader. He's not only "Lost" from the speaker's movement, he's one more "lost soul" in a world full of evil. Assonance also ties together the phrase "Life's night" in line 25 and links "fight" with the related verb "strike" in line 29.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "riband," "stick in his"
- **Line 5:** "gold," "doled"
- **Line 9:** "followed," "honoured"
- **Line 21:** "record," "soul more"
- **Line 25:** "Life's night"
- **Line 29:** "fight," "strike"

ANTITHESIS

Antithesis pops up frequently in the poem, as the speaker uses parallel or inverted grammatical structures to draw contrasts between images and ideas. Look at lines 3-6, for example:

> Found the one gift of which fortune bereft us,
> Lost all the others she lets us devote;
> They, with the gold to give, doled him out silver,
> So much was theirs who so little allowed:

These four lines include three direct contrasts. The leader "found the one gift," but "lost all the others." The people who had "gold to give" instead "doled him out silver." (Notice that the grammatical structure here is inverted or chiasmic, since "dole out" is synonymous with "give." They had *gold* to *give*, but they *gave silver* instead.) The rich and powerful had "So much," but allowed "so little."

Later, the parallel clauses of lines 13-14 juxtapose poets who were "of us," "for us," and "with us." These might be read as antitheses that draw out subtler contrasts—not outright *oppositions* but *variations* on a theme.

Most of the poem's antitheses, however, *do* contrast opposite things. For example, lines 15-16, set in grammatical parallel, contrast the "van and the freemen" (i.e., the progressive forefront of society, consisting of freedom-lovers) with the "rear and the slaves" (i.e., the regressive rear guard of society, consisting of people who accept oppression). Line 20 contrasts the leader "bidding [the masses] crouch" in obedience with voices who "bade [the masses] aspire" to freedom. Line 23 contrasts the "triumph" of "devils" with the "sorrow" of "angels," implying that the leader's betrayal has been a victory for evil.

Finally, in line 30, the speaker states that the leader's former followers should "Menace our heart ere we master his own." This line is a bit ambiguous, but it implies something like: "We should criticize *ourselves* before we try to control *him*." Or perhaps: "We should challenge *our* character before seeking to destroy *his* character." Regardless, it's clearly using grammatical

parallelism to draw a contrast.

Where Antithesis appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "Found the one gift of which fortune bereft us, / Lost all the others she lets us devote;"
- **Lines 5-6:** "They, with the gold to give, doled him out silver, / So much was theirs who so little allowed:"
- **Lines 13-14:** "Shakespeare was of us, Milton was for us, / Burns, Shelley, were with us,"
- **Lines 15-16:** "He alone breaks from the van and the freemen, / —He alone sinks to the rear and the slaves!"
- **Line 20:** "Still bidding crouch whom the rest bade aspire:"
- **Line 23:** "One more devils'-triumph and sorrow for angels,"
- **Line 30:** "Menace our heart ere we master his own;"

PARALLELISM

The poem is loaded with grammatical parallelism, some of which takes the form of anaphora or sets up antithesis. (These specific devices are covered elsewhere in the guide.) In general, parallelism adds to the insistent tone of the poem: its quality of indignant protest and accusation.

Look at lines 9-11, for example, in which the speaker recalls how much they'd loved the leader who betrayed them:

> We that had **loved him so, followed him, honoured him,**
> **Lived in his mild and magnificent eye,**
> **Learned his** great language**, caught his** clear accents
> [...]

As verb phrase after verb phrase piles up, you can hear the speaker's wounded disappointment. *After we did this, that, and the other thing for you*, the speaker seems to be saying, *look what you did to us!* You can hear a similar tone of protest in the next lines:

> Shakespeare **was of us**, Milton **was for us**,
> Burns, Shelley, **were with us** [...]

Again, the speaker seems to be building a case against the leader, parallel clause by parallel clause. *This poet, that poet, and this other poet supported us, so how could you betray us?*

Lines 17-19 combine parallelism with caesuras (punctuated by dashes) to create a series of sharp reversals. Three times over, the speaker suggests that the pro-freedom movement will survive and thrive—no thanks to the former leader. Nearly all the poem's parallelism has this kind of piling-on effect, as if the grammar itself is trying to bury the leader's reputation.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Line 6
- Lines 9-12
- Lines 13-14
- Lines 15-16
- Lines 17-19
- Line 20
- Lines 21-24
- Line 30

ASYNDETON

As the poem stacks up its many parallel phrases and clauses, it rarely includes coordinating conjunctions such as "and" or "but" where they would normally go. This kind of omission is called asyndeton. Readers can see this in action in lines 3-4, for example, where "but" or "yet" would normally link the two halves of the antithesis: "Found the one gift [...] *but* lost all the others." Omitting this conjunction makes the contrast more concise and dramatic.

The device appears again in lines 9-12, where it makes the grammar itself ambiguous. Normally, readers would expect an "and" *somewhere* in this sentence—between "followed him" and "honoured" him, "caught his clear accents" and "Made him our pattern," or both. Instead, it's as if the speaker is so caught up in their disappointment and indignation that they don't have time to bother with conjunctions (or normal grammar).

Similarly, one might expect "and"s in lines 13-14—"Shakespeare was of us, Milton was for us, *and* Burns *and* Shelley were with us"—but the poet omits them. There's also an omitted "and" in line 24 and an omitted "but" between lines 27 and 28. In general, these omissions speed up the rhythm of the poem, which already has a driving, forceful quality thanks to its dactylic meter. The overall effect is one of unrelenting vehemence.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "Found the one gift of which fortune bereft us, / Lost all the others she lets us devote;"
- **Lines 9-12:** "We that had loved him so, followed him, honoured him, / Lived in his mild and magnificent eye, / Learned his great language, caught his clear accents, / Made him our pattern to live and to die!"
- **Lines 13-14:** "Shakespeare was of us, Milton was for us, / Burns, Shelley, were with us,"
- **Line 24:** "One wrong more to man, one more insult to God!"
- **Lines 27-28:** "the glimmer of twilight, / Never glad confident morning again!"

APOSTROPHE

The poem contains a possible example of apostrophe in lines 21-24, as it addresses an unknown figure:

> Blot out his name, then, record one lost soul more [...]

It's unclear who the speaker is telling to "Blot out" the lost leader's name, then "record" the failure his betrayal represents. The speaker might be addressing history in the abstract, calling for the leader's (Wordsworth's) name to be wiped off the historical record.

Alternatively, the speaker, who speaks in the plural ("We"), could be addressing like-minded comrades—other "freemen" and former followers of the leader. Even in this case, however, those other followers aren't literally present; the speaker is addressing them rhetorically, via apostrophe.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Lines 21-24:** "Blot out his name, then, record one lost soul more, / One task more declined, one more footpath untrod, / One more devils'-triumph and sorrow for angels, / One wrong more to man, one more insult to God!"

ALLUSION

The poem is full of literary and religious allusions. First and foremost, it alludes to the career of the British Romantic poet William Wordsworth (1770-1850), the man it portrays as a "Lost Leader." (Browning claimed the portrait was slightly fictionalized but admitted Wordsworth was the inspiration for the poem.)

The speaker laments the way Wordsworth developed from a young, radical, anti-establishment poet into an elder conservative and Poet Laureate of the establishment. It criticizes Wordsworth for "bidding crouch whom the rest bade aspire"—that is, urging ordinary people to passively obey their leaders while other voices urged them to rise up and fight for democracy. Browning may be alluding, here, to Wordsworth's poem "The Warning" (1835), which urges the masses to show "meekness" and "forbearance" rather than revolutionary passion.

Browning believed Wordsworth had sold out, so the poem's speaker accuses the "Leader" of betraying his cause for a "handful of silver"—like the biblical Judas, who betrayed Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. But instead of damning the leader to hell, the speaker respects him enough to suggest that he'll be "Pardoned in heaven," where he'll hold an honorary place as "the first by [God's] throne."

The poem also alludes to four other famous UK poets: William Shakespeare, John Milton, Robert Burns, and Percy Bysshe Shelley. The juxtaposition of these poets with the "Leader" is both flattering and unflattering. The speaker is suggesting that the leader's talent placed him in the company of these other giants (two of whom, Burns and Shelley, had been Wordsworth's contemporaries, but all of whom were dead by the time Browning wrote the poem). However, the leader's politics have set him odds with these writers. In abandoning the cause of freedom, he's also parted company with the great poets who would normally be his peers.

According to the poem's plural speaker—who seems to speak, here, on behalf of the common people—Shakespeare "was of us": a commoner who rose in social status through his artistic talent alone. Milton "was for us": an advocate of free speech and republican government, considered a liberal thinker for his time. Burns and Shelley "were with us": strong opponents of monarchy who supported radical and revolutionary movements. By contrast, Wordsworth, the "Lost Leader," has "left us" to seek the favor of the aristocracy.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "Just for a handful of silver he left us, / Just for a riband to stick in his coat—"
- **Lines 13-14:** "Shakespeare was of us, Milton was for us, / Burns, Shelley, were with us,—they watch from their graves!"
- **Line 20:** "Still bidding crouch whom the rest bade aspire:"

VOCABULARY

Riband (Line 2) - An obsolete variant of "ribbon," here meaning an honorary ribbon to be worn on the coat.

Fortune (Line 3) - Fate (here personified as a goddess).

Bereft (Line 3) - Robbed or deprived.

Devote (Line 4) - Give in offering, as to a god or goddess.

Doled (Line 5) - Paid or handed out.

Service (Line 7) - Good work on behalf of others (here referring to the leader's writing and activism).

Accents (Line 11) - Cadences or other distinctive features of language.

Pattern (Line 12) - Model, as in a role model to be imitated.

Van (Line 15) - The *vanguard* or forefront of a movement.

Freemen (Line 15) - Advocates of freedom (here implying opponents of aristocracy and supporters of democracy).

Slaves (Line 16) - "Slaves" here does not mean literally enslaved people, but rather people who oppose liberty and remain willingly subservient to power.

Prospering (Line 17) - With great success.

Inspirit (Line 18) - Inspire or fill with high spirits.

Lyre (Line 18) - A stringed instrument used by ancient Greek bards and conventionally associated with poetry.

Quiescence (Line 19) - Inactivity or passivity.

Bidding/Bade (Line 20) - "Bidding" (past tense "bade") means urging someone to do something.

Crouch (Line 20) - Hunker down or cower. (Here, the word metaphorically suggests suffering oppression without fighting back.)

Blot (Line 21) - Cross out as if with an inkblot; wipe off the record.

Untrod (Line 22) - Not walked on or traveled over (as in a road not taken).

Devils'-triumph (Line 23) - A victory for evil; an occasion for devils to rejoice.(In some printings, this word reads *devil's-triumph*, with the apostrophe before the "s"—implying that the leader himself was a triumphant devil, or perhaps *the* Devil.)

Gallantly (Line 29) - Nobly, bravely, and/or chivalrously.

Ere (Line 30) - An archaic synonym of "before."

Master (Line 30) - Dominate or gain control over.

Wait (Line 31) - A variant of "await" or "wait for."

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Lost Leader" follows an unusual and technically demanding form:

- It consists of two stanzas of 16 lines each, which can be subdivided into quatrains (four-line stanzas) that rhyme on the second and fourth lines. (The opening quatrain of each stanza also rhymes on the first and third lines.)
- The poem's meter is based on a foot called a dactyl (one stressed syllable followed by two unstressed syllables), creating a rhythm that is propulsive and relentless, practically charging forward as it hurls insults at the "Leader" (and brags about moving on without him). (More on the poem's meter in the next section of this guide.)
- And, finally, the odd-numbered lines end on an unstressed syllable (something called a "feminine ending") while the even-numbered lines end on a stressed syllable.

These formal choices allow for some vivid effects:

- The contrast between unstressed, unrhymed endings (in most of the odd-numbered lines) and stressed, rhymed endings (in the even-numbered lines) causes the rhymes to land a little more forcefully.
- This effect makes the corresponding zingers more forceful as well, as in lines 4, 8, 16, 20, 24, and 28. (In fact, the speaker tends to hold back their best zingers until the end of each quatrain.)
- On the other hand, this same effect makes the tonal shift in the final line more poignant: for once, instead of mockery, the speaker offers mercy.

METER

"The Lost Leader" uses an uncommon and difficult meter called dactylic tetrameter. A dactyl is a metrical foot consisting of one stressed syllable followed by two unstressed syllables (think "DUM-da-da"). A line of dactylic tetrameter contains four such feet, so its rhythm goes: "DUM-da-da, DUM-da-da, DUM-da-da, DUM-da-da."

Let's see how this pattern maps onto the first two lines:

> Just for a | handful of | silver he | left us,
> Just for a | ribband to | stick in his | coat—

Notice that the last foot in each line is a bit abbreviated: in line 1, it's missing a final expected unstressed syllable, while in line 2, it's missing both unstressed syllables. The term for a metrical line that's missing one or more syllables is "catalectic." This pattern continues throughout the poem, so the meter can most fully be described as *catalectic dactylic tetrameter*. (Try saying that three times fast.)

The lines can also be thought of as alternating between "feminine endings" and "masculine endings"; that is, the odd-numbered lines end on an unstressed syllable, whereas the even-numbered lines end on a stressed syllable.

Dactylic meter is uncommon in the English language, whose natural rhythms fit more easily into other patterns (such as iambic or trochaic meter). Making it flow smoothly takes a lot of ingenuity. Browning manages to follow this difficult pattern pretty strictly throughout the poem. (He does include occasional variations; for example, line 11 is missing an unstressed syllable in the second foot: "Learned his great | language, | caught his clear | accents." Also, lines 9 and 29 are *not* catalectic: they contain four complete dactylic feet.)

Why might Browning have chosen this unusual meter? The dactylic rhythm has a driving, forceful, almost galloping quality. It adds vehement emphasis to the poem's attacks on the "Lost Leader," while also evoking the strong forward momentum of the followers fighting on without him (as in lines 17-19 and 29). Combined with the ABCB rhyme scheme, it could also be described as having a sing-song quality—which, in context, sounds mocking and relentless.

RHYME SCHEME

For the most part, the poem follows a simple rhyme scheme in which every other line rhymes. This scheme is extended over two stanzas of 16 lines each. However, there's an added wrinkle: the first four lines of both stanzas rhyme ABAB instead of ABCB. Thus, the full scheme for each stanza looks like this:

ABABCDEDFGHGIJKJ

These regular rhymes add punch to the poet's takedown of the "Lost Leader." They sound even punchier because, for the most part, the rhyming lines are those that end on a stressed syllable rather than those that end with unstressed syllables.

The exception to this rule comes in lines 1, 3, 17, and 19, which have feminine endings (end on unstressed syllables) and *also* rhyme. Why does Browning add this wrinkle? Why doesn't he continue the ABAB pattern throughout the poem?

Rhyming on feminine endings is trickier than rhyming on masculine endings because you're rhyming across multiple syllables (e.g., "left us"/"bereft us") rather than one (e.g., "coat"/"devote"). Continuing an ABAB rhyme scheme throughout this particular poem, with its alternating feminine and masculine endings and unusual dactylic meter, would have been exceptionally hard to pull off—and might have ended up sounding hopelessly artificial. Instead, Browning gives readers just a taste of an ABAB scheme (possibly as a way of grabbing their attention at the start of each stanza) before settling into a pattern that's a bit less demanding.

SPEAKER

The speaker of the poem is a plural "us," a group of "followe[rs]" who are bitterly disappointed in their former leader.

These followers once "loved" and "honoured" their leader so passionately that they "Made him our pattern to live and to die!"—in other words, saw him as a model to live and die by. They revered his "great language," which they saw as worthy of comparison to some of the greatest poets in English: William Shakespeare, John Milton, Robert Burns, and Percy Bysshe Shelley. They saw him as an ally in the cause of liberty, a leader of "freemen" urging the masses to "aspire" rather than suffer under oppression.

Now, however, they see him as a terrible sellout. They mock him for having abandoned his supporters "for a handful of silver," like Judas betraying Jesus. They see him as more interested in cozying up to powerful benefactors (such as those associated with royal "purple") than in serving the common people or the cause of political freedom. In fact, they resent him for encouraging the masses to "crouch," or cower under their oppressive leaders. They want to "Blot out his name" from history, or perhaps their own hearts. They don't even want him to rejoin their movement, because they believe he will "Never [...] again" recover his idealism, talent, and relevance. On the other hand, they seem to believe that, on the basis of his former greatness, he will be "Pardoned in heaven, the first by [God's] throne!"

From the time of its first publication, "The Lost Leader" was widely recognized as a portrait of the poet William Wordsworth. In his early career, Wordsworth had been considered a radical progressive and an advocate for democracy over monarchy. As he aged, however, he walked back his pro-democracy stance and accepted the title of Poet Laureate from the English monarchy.

Many former admirers, including Browning, were outraged by his turn toward conservatism. The speaker of "The Lost Leader," therefore, speaks for readers and writers disappointed in Wordsworth—or any progressive leader who ends up betraying their people.

SETTING

"The Lost Leader" doesn't describe a clear physical setting. It speaks within, and on behalf of, a group that it imagines as "march[ing]" forward, and as having a front and a back (a "van" and a "rear").

However, since these marchers run the gamut from "freemen" to "slaves" (here meaning, respectively, those who fight oppression and those who submit to it), it's clear that the march is really a metaphor for all of society. The speaker imagines this society as advancing toward greater liberty, albeit without the former "Leader's" help.

Similarly, the "night," "twilight," and "morning" described in lines 25-28 are metaphors for phases of life. In the last line, the speaker imagines a Christian "heaven," complete with God's "throne," but this doesn't tell us much about the poem's earthly location.

However, as a thinly veiled portrait of the poet William Wordsworth, containing subtle references to 19th-century English politics, the poem is in some ways inseparable from its historical setting. It accuses the "Leader," Wordsworth, of betraying advocates for democracy ("freemen"), including his readers, fellow writers, and others suffering under royal rule. It alludes to other famous UK poets—including Wordsworth's contemporaries Robert Burns and Percy Shelley—whose enlightened politics the speaker believes the "Leader" has strayed from. Though the poem never calls out Wordsworth by name or mentions the UK explicitly, it contains enough references of this kind that it wouldn't quite make sense in any other context.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Since it was first published in November 1845, in Robert Browning's collection *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics*, "The Lost Leader" has been generally understood as an attack on William Wordsworth.

Wordsworth (1770-1850), an elder contemporary of Browning (1812-1889), was arguably the most famous and influential English poet of his generation. Along with his friend Samuel Taylor Coleridge, he kicked off the Romantic movement in English literature with the publication of their joint poetry collection *Lyrical Ballads* (1798). The Romantic poets, including Wordsworth, often explored the relationship between humankind and nature, the tension between reality and imagination, and forms of belief that parted from traditional religion.

Wordsworth was especially interested in writing about ordinary people and personal experience, as opposed to aristocratic and epic subjects. In a preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, he wrote that he aimed to portray "situations from common life" (rather than events from myth, history, and previous literature), employing "language really used by men" (rather than fancy poetic diction). This commitment to ordinary language and experience reflected his youthful commitment to democratic ideals; he hoped his poetry would appeal to the general public, not just the privileged classes.

As Wordsworth grew older, however, he became increasingly conservative. By 1818, he had walked back his pro-democracy stance in favor of a "softened feudalism." His poem "The Warning" (1835), a likely catalyst for Browning's attack (see lines 19-20), urges ordinary people to show "meekness" and "forbearance" rather than rising up against their aristocratic rulers. In 1843, he accepted the role of British Poet Laureate, a title conferred by the Queen herself. (The position comes with a small salary, hence the "handful of silver" mentioned in "The Lost Leader.") For Browning, this was the last straw: a sign that Wordsworth had fully joined the establishment and would never again be an ally, much less a leader, of pro-democracy forces.

Browning's poem thus denounces the former "Leader" for turning on his followers: the "freemen" (advocates for democracy) whose politics he had once shared. It also alludes to several other major UK poets: William Shakespeare (1564-1616), John Milton (1608-1674), Robert Burns (1759-1796), and Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822). All of these writers were dead by the time the poem was published, but all of them, Browning implies, would have been equally disappointed in Wordsworth.

The poem never mentions Wordsworth by name, but Browning acknowledged, a bit sheepishly, that Wordsworth was its target. (The two poets didn't know each other well; Browning was over 40 years younger, and he published "The Lost Leader" when Wordsworth was a 75-year-old national celebrity.) Though he claimed he had fictionalized his portrait slightly, he admitted that he'd used the "venerable personality of Wordsworth as a sort of painter's model." He had also criticized Wordsworth in previous writings, such as his long poem *Sordello*, but "The Lost Leader" made the object of his scorn more recognizable than ever.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Wordsworth was born and came of age in a Britain ruled by King George III, whose turbulent reign, troubled personal life, and declining mental health prompted some British subjects to challenge the authority and legitimacy of the monarchy. As a child, Wordsworth lived through the American Revolution that divided the United Kingdom from the United States. As a young man visiting France, he witnessed—and passionately supported—the French Revolution (1789-1799), which overthrew the French monarchy for a time.

In his early writing career, he advocated for democracy through his prose and sought to reach ordinary people—not just the upper classes—through his poetry. Considered a political radical and a literary innovator, he inspired such younger firebrands as Percy Shelley (mentioned in Browning's poem), a fellow Romantic who fiercely opposed monarchy and organized religion.

By his late 40s, though, Wordsworth had performed a political about-face, becoming a traditionalist and Tory conservative. His turn away from democratic ideals infuriated many contemporaries, including Browning, who had looked up to him as an icon. When Browning contrasts "freemen" and "slaves" in the poem (lines 15-16), these terms roughly mean "people who believe in freedom" and "people who submit to oppression"—or, in the context of 19th-century England, "supporters of democracy" and "supporters of monarchy." Basically, "The Lost Leader" accuses Wordsworth of selling out to the nation's royal oppressors.

Wordsworth never did revert to his old radical ideals, and he died in 1850, five years after "The Lost Leader" was published. His response to the poem, if any, is unknown. Browning later called the poem a product of "hasty youth" and softened its language in reprints, but he never retracted the attack.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Wordsworth's Politics — More on William Wordsworth's shifting political views, as lamented in "The Lost Leader." (https://www.newstatesman.com/uncategorized/2020/04/radical-lessons-william-wordsworth-250-years-

jonathan-bate-biography-review)

- More Browning Resources — Browse more Browning-related media at the Internet Archive. (https://archive.org/search.php?query=%28%28subject%3A%22Browning%2C%20Robert%22%20OR%20subject%3A%22Robert%20Browning%22%20OR%20creator%3A%22Browning%2C%20Robert%22%29%20AND%20mediatype%3A%28texts%29%29)
- A Source for the Poem — Read "The Warning," a political poem by William Wordsworth that appears to have motivated Browning's attack. (https://books.google.com/books?id=9YZDAQAAMAAJ&pg=PA363&lpg=PA363&dq=wordsworth+%22the+warning%22+LIST,+the+winds+of+March+are+flowers+shrink,+afraid+of+showing&source=bl&ots=FIKgiln_O8&sig=ACfU3U0_xJIknPLi1nAsJ0rcqeQZUB7niQ&hl=en&sa=X&
- The Poem's Target — A brief biography of the poem's target, William Wordsworth, with context on the change in his political views. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/william-wordsworth)
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to a reading of "The Lost Leader." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SC6QO9sZL58)
- About the Poet — More on Robert Browning's life and work, via the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/robert-browning)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ROBERT BROWNING POEMS

- Home-Thoughts, from Abroad
- How It Strikes a Contemporary
- Life in a Love
- Meeting at Night
- My Last Duchess
- Porphyria's Lover

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