The Lost Mistress

POEM TEXT

1 All's over, then: does truth sound bitter
2 As one at first believes?
3 Hark, 'tis the sparrows' good-night twitter
4 About your cottage eaves!

5 And the leaf-buds on the vine are woolly,
6 I noticed that, today;
7 One day more bursts them open fully
8 —You know the red turns grey.

9 Tomorrow we meet the same then, dearest?
10 May I take your hand in mine?
11 Mere friends are we,—well, friends the merest
12 Keep much that I resign:

13 For each glance of the eye so bright and black,
14 Though I keep with heart's endeavor,—
15 Your voice, when you wish the snowdrops back,
16 Though it stay in my soul for ever!—

17 Yet I will but say what mere friends say,
18 Or only a thought stronger;
19 I will hold your hand but as long as all may,
20 Or so very little longer!

SUMMARY

It's all over, then. Can the truth really be as awful as it seems? Listen—the sparrows are chirping goodnight in the eaves of your cottage.

And look, the opening buds on the vines are showing off fuzzy new leaves—I noticed that, earlier. By tomorrow they'll be all the way open—but their red will inevitably fade to grey, you know.

Will we see each other tomorrow, like always, my dear? May I hold your hand? We'll just be friends now—well, except that even the least intimate acquaintances get to enjoy a lot that I have to give up:

Every time you glance at me with your shining dark eyes (even if I try my hardest to quiet my heart)—every time I hear your voice wishing the snowdrops would come back (though the sound touches my very soul)—

I'll still only say what a casual friend would say—or, at least, I'll only *think* something ever so slightly more intense. And I won't hold your hand longer than any other person might—well, maybe just a *tiny* bit longer!

THEMES

THE DIFFICULTY OF TRANSITIONING FROM ROMANCE TO FRIENDSHIP

"The Lost Mistress" explores the pain of lost love. In this dramatic monologue (a poem spoken in the voice of a particular character), a speaker says a pained goodnight to the woman who has just broken up with him. The lady wants to go on being friends, and while the the speaker is willing to try, he also has to admit that his own feelings won't just magically disappear. Love, this poem suggests, doesn't evaporate when a relationship ends—and moving from a romance into a friendship can be a tall order.

As the poem begins, the speaker is coming to terms with the shock of his failed romance. "All's over," and for the speaker at least, the breakup has come as an unwelcome surprise: the "truth" of this final parting sounds awfully "bitter" to his ears. In his suffering, the speaker feels as if the whole world around him is responding to his loss. He hears a sad farewell in "the sparrows' good-night twitter" and notices the "leaf-buds on the vine," which are about to "burst [...] open," a springy detail that hints this romance was never fully realized—it died before it even had a chance to bloom.

Such profound grief and pain make the lady's hope that they might stay friends feel rather challenging to the speaker. He suffers both from the certainty that he'll never stop loving this woman and from some veiled feelings of anger and bitterness. Though he accepts that he and his former lover will be "mere friends" and nothing more, he also knows that their relationship will be different from one between people who have *only* ever been friends. For him, being friends with this woman will always be complicated by his pleasure in her "eye so bright and black."

Perhaps he's also a little angry. The idea that he might one day hear his beloved wish for those snowdrops to return might symbolically suggest that he hopes she'll eventually want a second crack at the springtime of their love—one he might decide not to give her! She's wounded him with her rejection, and his pain will no doubt complicate their friendship.

Similarly, there might be an edge on his remark about the unopened "leaf-buds": "You know the red turns grey." Besides providing a symbolic image of new things withering (as their

relationship did), this line might be the speaker's subtle dig at his beloved, implying that her physical beauty can't last. The speaker, in other words, is torn between a persistent love for this lady and anger at her—difficult soil for a friendship to grow in!

Though the speaker is resigned to the new shape of this relationship, then, he knows that he can't be a neutral, pleasant friend—at least not right away. Even if his actions *appear* like the actions of a friend, the feeling behind them will be "a thought stronger," his grip on the lady's hand lingering "so very little longer" than another friend's might. The poem implies such difficulty is unavoidable. People can't just flip a switch on their feelings, and the road from romance to friendship might often be a rocky one.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-20

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

All's over, then: does truth sound bitter
As one at first believes?
Hark, 'tis the sparrows' good-night twitter
About your cottage eaves!

"The Lost Mistress" is a dramatic monologue, a poem spoken in the voice of a particular character. In this case, that character is a guy who's just been dumped, and he's addressing the "mistress" (that is, the girlfriend) of the title—his former lover.

"All's over, then," the speaker begins, seemingly resigned to the fact that he and his lady friend will be parting ways. Yet a second later, he asks if "truth sounds bitter / As one at first believes," suggesting that he's struggling to accept that the romance is over. Clearly, this wasn't a mutual decision.

He then addresses the woman directly, saying:

> Hark, 'tis the sparrow's good-night twitter
> About your cottage eaves!

The imagery here reveals the poem's setting: the speaker is standing outside this woman's cottage. It's evening, and the birds are chirruping as they fly to their nests under the overhang of the roof. Heard through the speaker's miserable ears, the sparrows' cheery chatter seems sad: he is also saying "good-night," but much less enthusiastically. This poem will be the tale of a man trying to come to terms with an unwanted farewell, not altogether succeeding.

The poem is built from five quatrains (or four-line stanzas) that follow a simple ABAB rhyme scheme. The consistent perfect rhymes make the last words of lines stand out, emphasizing key words and ideas. The *bitter / twitter* rhyme, for example, highlights the juxtaposition between the birds' pleasant trilling and the speaker's dejected mood.

Browning uses accentual meter for this poem, meaning that lines contain a set number of stressed syllables, but those stresses can appear anywhere in the line: the poem doesn't stick to any one metrical foot (like the da-DUM of an iamb or the DUM-da-da of a dactyl). In this poem, odd lines use four stressed syllables, while even lines use three. Here's how that sounds in the first stanza:

> All's over, then: does truth sound bitter
> As one at first believes?
> Hark, 'tis the sparrows' good-night twitter
> About your cottage eaves!

This simple, conversational form captures the speaker's pure blindsided grief—and will also suggest, as the poem goes on, that he's working hard to conceal big, tempestuous emotions about his breakup.

LINES 5-8

And the leaf-buds on the vine are woolly,
I noticed that, today;
One day more bursts them open fully
—You know the red turns grey.

As if lingering on the doorstep, looking for excuses not to leave yet, the speaker draws his ex-girlfriend's attention to other bits of natural beauty around her cottage. He observes, for instance, that "the leaf-buds on the vine are woolly," and that he "noticed that, today"—words that suggest he might have "noticed that" in a much happier mood, before he knew how bad a day he was about to have.

Back then, he observed that those buds were about to pop: they'd "open fully" within another day. This imagery conjures up a picture of a lively springtime world. Symbolically speaking, it also suggests that the speaker's romance with this lady was much too brief—in the speaker's eyes, anyway. Their love, his attention to these buds hints, didn't have a chance to blossom; given a little more time, perhaps it would have reached its full potential.

Thinking of those little leaves—and with a bitter edge to his tone—the speaker warns his former lover: "You know the red turns grey." In other words, the young leaves (bright red when they first emerge) will eventually shrivel and die. The speaker is clearly feeling cynical in this moment. His vision of the new buds dying is a gloomy reminder that everything eventually withers, that nothing beautiful can last—love least of all.

In his pain, the speaker might even be meanly suggesting that the lady's own beauty and vitality (and thus, perhaps, her opportunities to find another suitor) are at their zenith, and will

soon begin to fade and "turn grey" like everything else. It's almost as if he's urging her to reconsider lest she come to regret her decision.

LINES 9-12

Tomorrow we meet the same then, dearest?
May I take your hand in mine?
Mere friends are we,—well, friends the merest
Keep much that I resign:

In the third stanza, the speaker asks the woman if they'll "meet the same" the following day. This implies that they plan to go on being friends; their romance may have ended, but they will see each other the next day just as they always do. At the same time, the question has an edge to it. The speaker knows that, even if they meet again tomorrow, things definitely won't be "the same" between them.

He follows up the first question with a second, asking if he can hold her hand. It isn't clear whether he's asking if he can hold her hand one last time as they say goodbye, or if he's wondering whether it will be appropriate for him to take her hand tomorrow, when they are just friends. Either way, the question feels loaded.

The speaker goes on:

> Mere friends are we,—well, friends the merest
> Keep much that I resign:

No sooner does he utter the words "Mere friends are we" than he interrupts himself at that strong dashed caesura, contradicting his own words, admitting that they won't *ever* be "mere friends" in the way that people who have never been romantically involved might be. For even the "merest," most casual friends would get to enjoy things about this lady's company that will bring the speaker pain, to "keep" pleasures that he'll have to "resign" (or give up). The couple can't just erase their history together.

Note the use of repetition and chiasmus in these lines as well:

> **Mere friends** are we,—well, **friends** the **merest**

Diacope (the repetition of "friends") and polyptoton (the repetition of "mere" / "merest") emphasize the woman's wish to remain friends, a wish the speaker apparently wants to grant her. Yet the chiasmus that flips "Mere friends" into "friends the merest" suggests that, while the speaker accepts the breakup, he also will never feel about her the way that people who are purely friends do. Instead, their relationship will exist in some in-between place; they'll be friends, but their friendship will be complicated by his desire for her.

LINES 13-16

For each glance of the eye so bright and black,
Though I keep with heart's endeavor,—
Your voice, when you wish the snowdrops back,
Though it stay in my soul for ever!—

The speaker goes on to describe the things he'll supposedly "resign" (or let go of) now that the relationship is ending: his pleasure in "each glance" of this woman's "eye so bright and black," for instance. Once again, though, the speaker contradicts himself, saying that even though he is letting go of the lady's enchanting beauty, he will "keep with heart's endeavor." He *means* that he'll "endeavor" (or strive) not to love her, with all his heart—but the ambiguous language he chooses also suggests that deep down, he'll continue to love and desire her. His "heart's endeavor" might always be to love her.

He likewise says he must let go of her "voice," which he imagines "wish[ing] the snowdrops back." Those snowdrops (little white flowers that bloom in early spring) play into the poem's symbolism, in which new buds suggest the fragile beauty of love. The speaker's delight in the sound of his beloved wishing for those snowdrops might also be a veiled desire that she will someday change her mind and want to go back to the springtime of their love—that bright beginning brimming with hope.

There's a darker possibility here, too. His longing to hear her wishing for those springy snowdrops might also be a longing to get the emotional upper hand, to have an opportunity to turn *her* away and see how *she* likes it.

Either way, it's evident that their relationship as friends is going to be far from simple!

LINES 17-20

Yet I will but say what mere friends say,
Or only a thought stronger;
I will hold your hand but as long as all may,
Or so very little longer!

The last stanza rises to a crescendo of ill-concealed pain. Listen to the speaker's repetition and parallelism as he paints his complicated portrait of what this friendship will look like now that the romance has ended:

> Yet **I will say** what **mere friends say**,
> **Or** only a thought stronger;
> **I will hold** your hand but as long as all may,
> **Or** so very little longer!

The speaker repeats the phrase "mere friends" from earlier, once again drawing attention to what the woman has asked of him. Diacope on the word "say" emphasizes that the speaker will *behave* as a friend, though his thoughts, feelings, and motivations might not quite match up with his words and actions.

The parallel phrases "I will say" and "I will hold" become

declarations of the speaker's public intentions: he'll behave himself impeccably. But the anaphora on "or" in the alternating lines complicates that picture. He'll *say* what friends say; *or*, he'll say ordinary stuff while *thinking* something quite different. He'll hold her hand just as long as a friend would; *or*, maybe he'l cling just a fraction of a second longer.

Put simply: the parallelism in this stanza highlights the contrast between how the speaker plans to *behave* and how he *feels*. Clearly the speaker anticipates being in love with this woman for some time to come, but if he hopes to have any kind of relationship with her, he has to keep those feelings to himself.

Note the use of understatement all through this final stanza. The speaker doesn't tell this woman that he'll be hopelessly longing for her love, nor does he come out and say that he's bitterly angry and disappointed and hoping she'll come to her senses. Instead, he only says that he might, every once in a while, *ever so slightly* overstep what a mere friend might say or do.

But this very understatement suggests so much more. In reality, the speaker is struggling to imagine moving from a romantic relationship to pure friendship. Such sudden and unwanted journeys, this poem suggests, are bound to be a little rocky.

SYMBOLS

SPRING

The signs of spring the speaker notices around him—the fresh red leaf buds, the snowdrops, the twitter of sparrows—symbolize love's beauty and fragility.

As the speaker leaves his beloved's cottage, the sight and sound of cheerful springtime life adds insult to the injury of his breakup. All this bright foliage and birdsong only reminds him that the springy promise of love between him and this lady is lost. The twittering sparrows, to his ears, seem only to be saying "good-night." And the almost-open "leaf-buds," still the fresh red of new leaves not yet exposed to the sun, only remind him that, inevitably, "the red turns grey." He's clearly not just talking about a natural phenomenon here: this is a symbolic image of the passion between him and his beloved, once so promising, now so dead.

For that matter, the image of the fading leaves might be a bitter warning that any *future* love the woman experiences will also fade, as will her transient beauty. Perhaps the speaker is showing some spite here, warning his former lover that she's making a mistake by leaving him: youth and youthful passion won't last forever!

There might be something similar going on when the speaker imagines the sweet sound of the lady's voice "wish[ing] the snowdrops back." Someday, the image symbolically suggests, the lady might long for the spring of their love as much as the speaker does—or so the speaker hopes.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "Hark, 'tis the sparrows' good-night twitter"
- **Line 5:** "And the leaf-buds on the vine are woolly,"
- **Line 8:** "—You know the red turns grey."
- **Line 15:** "Your voice, when you wish the snowdrops back,"

POETIC DEVICES

REPETITION

Repetition emphasizes the speaker's difficulty in dealing with the end of his relationship. In lines 11-12, for instance, he says:

> Mere friends are we,—well, friends the merest
> Keep much that I resign:

The bitter diacope on "friends" evokes the speaker's unhappiness with this new state of affairs. He clearly wants to be more than *friends*. Besides, as his polyptoton on "mere" and "merest" stresses, even the most casual of friends get to enjoy pleasures that now only cause him pain, like the flash of this lady's bright black eyes. People who really are *just* friends have an advantage over him in that they aren't carrying around memories of love.

The speaker returns to this language again in line 17:

> Yet I will say what mere friends say,

Here, wearily, he echoes his earlier sentiment; he will play the part of a mere friend, even if secretly his "thought[s]" regarding this woman are just a *touch* "stronger" than a friend's would be. His diacope on the word "say" stresses that, in action if not in feeling, he'll abide by the lady's wishes—but the repetition also calls up his bleakly unhappy (and perhaps faintly sarcastic) voice for the reader: *What will I say? Oh, only what mere friends say, of course, nothing more, never!*

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 11:** "Mere friends," "friends," "merest"
- **Line 17:** "say," "mere friends," "say"

PARALLELISM

Parallelism shapes the tone of the final stanzas, evoking the speaker's struggle to accept being "mere friends."

Listen, for instance, to the anaphora in lines 14 and 16:

> For each glance of the eye so bright and black,
> Though I keep with heart's endeavor,—
> Your voice, when you wish the snowdrops back,
> Though it stay in my soul for ever!—

That repeated "though" draws attention to the speaker's interjected thoughts—the contradictory feelings he has when he imagines how he'll react to this woman's "eye[s]" and "voice" now that he's supposedly "mere friends" with her. Though he claims he's prepared to "resign" (or let go of) her "bright and black" eyes and the sound of her voice, he admits that they will continue to inspire devotion in him. Memories of his love for her will "stay in [his] soul for ever."

The parallelism in the final stanza underscores that idea:

> Yet I will but say what mere friends say,
> Or only a thought stronger;
> I will hold your hand but as long as all may,
> Or so very little longer!

The repetition of "I will" stresses that the speaker will *act* like a friend—"say what mere friends say," "hold [the lady's] hand" as long as a friend would. But the anaphora on "or," like the earlier anaphora on "though," qualifies those plans: he might do these things *just the tiniest bit* more intensely than "mere friends" might.

Overall, then, parallelism makes it abundantly clear how torn the speaker is about trying to stay friends with the lady he still loves!

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Line 14:** "Though"
- **Line 16:** "Though"
- **Line 17:** "I will"
- **Line 18:** "Or"
- **Line 19:** "I will"
- **Line 20:** "Or"

UNDERSTATEMENT

In the poem's final stanza, the poet uses understatement to imply how difficult it is going to be for the speaker to act like he's "mere friends" with this woman he loves. The speaker declares:

> Yet I will but say what mere friends say,
> Or only a thought stronger;
> I will hold your hand but as long as all may,
> Or so very little longer.

In other words, he's going to behave exactly as one would expect a friend to behave—or, well, *almost*. Instead of coming right out and saying that he will love this woman until the end of time and never, ever get over her (which would no doubt end their fragile friendship, and also just be an embarrassing thing to admit), he downplays his feelings: he'll only hold her hand a "very little longer," think of her with "only a thought stronger" than most of her buddies.

This understatement makes him sound much more gracious and forgiving than he actually feels. In reality, he is pretty hurt and pretty lovelorn. But he doesn't allow his former lover to see this, perhaps to protect her, perhaps to protect himself. His understatement lets the reader in on his true feelings even as he tries to conceal them.

Where Understatement appears in the poem:

- **Lines 17-20:** "Yet I will but say what mere friends say, / Or only a thought stronger; / I will hold your hand but as long as all may, / Or so very little longer!"

IMAGERY

The poem's imagery helps to bring the setting and the speaker's feelings to life.

In lines 3-4, the speaker tells the woman he is parting with to listen to "the sparrows' good-night twitter" as they fly home to their nests under the eaves of her house. Their "good-night" echoes his goodbye, but while he is "bitter" with disappointment at having to let their romance go, the birds are chirruping happily. This juxtaposition highlights his misery. Spring is generally associated with newness and beginnings, but the speaker's romance is over and gone.

The speaker also points out the "woolly," fuzzy leaf-buds on the "vine" that are getting ready to bloom, saying that "one day more" will "burst them open fully." Their not-quite-openness symbolically suggests that the speaker feels his romance with this woman has likewise not quite blossomed; she's breaking it off before it's had a chance to reach its full potential. He warns her that "the red" of these cute little buds inevitably "turns grey," suggesting that whatever (or possible whomever) she is leaving him for can't last, that all passion eventually fades. The images here reflect his heartbroken cynicism, and might even hint that he's feeling a bit vindictive: his vision of greying leaves could also be a warning to his former lover that her own beauty will one day fade.

But he's still under her spell, despite agreeing to be nothing more than "mere friends." The "glance of [her] eye so bright and black," he says, will never fail to touch his very "soul"—an image that presents this lady, with her dark darting eyes, as herself a springy, birdlike, poignantly lovely figure.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "Hark, 'tis the sparrows' good-night twitter /

About your cottage eaves!"
- **Line 5:** "And the leaf-buds on the vine are woolly,"
- **Lines 7-8:** "One day more bursts them open fully / —You know the red turns grey."
- **Line 13:** "For each glance of the eye so bright and black,"

VOCABULARY

Mistress () - "Mistress" here just means "girlfriend"—not "married lover," as a modern reader might assume!

Hark (Line 3) - An exclamation meaning "Listen!"

'Tis (Line 3) - A contraction of "it is."

Eaves (Line 4) - The part of the roof that overhangs the walls of a house.

Mere (Line 11, Line 17) - Just, only. The speaker is saying that he and this woman will be just friends, and nothing more. *Merest* is a superlative of *mere*, so it means the slightest amount possible: just barely friends.

Resign (Line 12) - Let go of, give up.

Endeavor (Line 14) - Striving, effort.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Lost Mistress" is one of Browning's trademark dramatic monologues: poems written in the voice of a particular character. In this case, that character is a guy who's just been dumped—and while he's crestfallen, he's taking it a lot better than some of Browning's other characters might.

The poem is built from five quatrains (or four-line stanzas) with a singsong ABAB rhyme scheme. This simple form mirrors the speaker's simple grief and bewilderment at his loss—but also contains (and perhaps attempts to conceal) some complex feelings. Knowing he wants to preserve his relationship with his former lover, the speaker also confesses he's not sure his feelings will burn off just like *that*. The poem's unpretentious shape captures the speaker's quiet, unhappy certainty that he'll go on loving even when he'll have to keep that love under wraps.

METER

The poem is written in accentual meter, meaning that though lines contain a specified number of stresses, the stressed and unstressed beats don't follow a set pattern. Generally speaking, the odd lines in this poem contain four stressed syllables, while the even lines contain three. Here's how that sounds in the first stanza:

All's over then: does truth sound bitter
As one at first believes?
Hark, 'tis the sparrows' good-night twitter
About your cottage eaves!

Accentual meter allows the poem to feel natural and conversational, not too formal. The speaker is meant to be addressing his lost love, after all, not an audience.

RHYME SCHEME

While accentual meter keeps the poem from sounding too formal, a simple rhyme scheme gives it some sad music. That rhyme scheme looks like this:

ABAB

The poem uses only perfect rhymes, so the words and images that appear at the ends of lines really pop. Browning clearly chose these rhymes carefully:

- In the first stanza, for instance, *bitter / twitter* pointedly juxtaposes the speaker's unhappiness with the jubilant birdsong all around him.Spring has just begun, but inside, he's enduring the bitter winter of heartbreak.
- And in the third stanza, *dearest / merest* emphasizes the difference between how the speaker really feels and how he is now expected to behave.

SPEAKER

"The Lost Mistress" is a dramatic monologue, meaning that the poem is told from the perspective of a character who *isn't* the poet; these poems are most often addressed to another character. In this case, the speaker is someone whose relationship with a woman he loves has just come to an end. He is standing outside her house bidding her "good-night," knowing that in the morning, he'll have to act as if they've never been anything more than friends. It's clear from the speaker's mix of grief, bitterness, and longing that he isn't the one who ended the romance. He is trying to accept the change, but he knows it will be a while before he can look at his former lover without harboring secret hopes that they'll get back together.

SETTING

The poem takes place at the door of a cottage, where the speaker—a fellow whom the cottage's owner has just dumped—wishes his ex-lover an unhappy goodbye. Painfully, the birds around him are "twitter[ing]" happily and "leaf-buds" are about to "burst[] open": it is spring. The cheery newness of the season throws the speaker's misery into relief. It might be spring around him, but it's winter in his heart.

When the speaker pictures his former lover someday "wish[ing] the snowdrops back," then, there's a hint of symbolism in the air: he's imagining, not just that she might long for the literal flowers to bloom, but that she might someday regret the romance she nipped in the bud.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

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

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

Browning's poetry wasn't all theatrical murder and greed, though. He also wrote tenderly about heroism, homesickness, and heartbreak. "The Lost Mistress" fits into this latter mode, with the speaker exploring the difficulty of letting go of love while trying to maintain a friendship. And while the speaker of this poem isn't twisted or villainous as those in some of Browning's more famous titles, he still proves himself a complex and contradictory character. As such, "The Lost Mistress" is one more proof of Oscar Wilde's claim that Browning was "a creator of character" on a level with Shakespeare himself.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Robert Browning was considerably luckier in love than the unfortunate speaker of this poem. A passionate man, 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 run away; they left England for Italy in 1846. (Perhaps they rather enjoyed this: in eloping to Italy, they were following in the footsteps of two of their literary heroes, Mary and Percy Shelley.) 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

- A Brief Biography — Visit the Poetry Foundation's website to learn more about Robert Browning's life and career. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/robert-browning)
- Dramatic Romances and Lyrics — Flip through a digitized copy of Browning's Dramatic Romances and Lyrics, in which "The Lost Mistress" was originally published. (https://books.google.com/books?id=Lc20LPRmJKIC&newbks=1&newbks_redir=0&prints
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to a reading of the poem. (https://youtu.be/n6Eg1VTu56g)
- Browning's Legacy — Read an essay celebrating the bicentenary of Browning's birth and learn how Browning continues to influence poetry today. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/may/07/robert-browning-bicentenary)
- Browning's Influence — Read an article about Browning's influence on the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas—as discovered through Thomas's jottings on the back of an envelope. ("The Lost Mistress" was one of the poems that Thomas singled out!) (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/nov/03/dylan-thomas-list-robert-browning-poems-envelope)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ROBERT BROWNING POEMS

- A Face
- Among the Rocks
- A Toccata of Galuppi's
- Confessions
- Home-Thoughts, from Abroad
- How they Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix

- Life in a Love
- Love in a Life
- Meeting at Night
- My Last Duchess
- Porphyria's Lover
- Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister
- The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church
- The Laboratory
- The Last Ride Together
- The Lost Leader
- The Patriot
- The Pied Piper of Hamelin

HOW TO CITE

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