# The Patriot

## POEM TEXT

I
It was roses, roses, all the way,
With myrtle mixed in my path like mad:
The house-roofs seemed to heave and sway,
The church-spires flamed, such flags they had,
A year ago on this very day.

II
The air broke into a mist with bells,
The old walls rocked with the crowd and cries.
Had I said, "Good folks, mere noise repels—
But give me your sun from yonder skies!"
They had answered, "And afterward, what else?"

III
Alack, it was I who leaped at the sun,
To give it my loving friends to keep!
Naught man could do have I left undone:
And you see my harvest, what I reap
This very day, now a year is run.

IV
There's nobody on the house-tops now—
Just a palsied few at the windows set;
For the best of the sight is, all allow,
At the Shambles' Gate—or, better yet,
By the very scaffold's foot, I trow.

V
I go in the rain, and, more than needs,
A rope cuts both my wrists behind;
And I think, by the feel, my forehead bleeds,
For they fling, whoever has a mind,
Stones at me for my year's misdeeds.

VI
Thus I entered, and thus I go!
In triumphs, people have dropped down dead.
"Paid by the World,—what dost thou owe
Me?"—God might question; now instead,
'Tis God shall repay: I am safer so.

## SUMMARY

There were roses upon roses, all along the street—roses mingled with myrtle, all jumbled up like crazy in the road before me. The roofs themselves seemed to rock back and forth, and the church towers flew so many bright flags they blazed like bonfires. This happened exactly a year ago today.

The sound of ringing bells was thick as a mist in the air, and the city's ancient walls shook with the crowd's happy shouts. If I'd said, "Kind people, all this noise is unpleasant—just give me the sun instead," they would have replied, "Sure! And what more can we do for you after that?"

But alas, I was the one who reached for the sun, to try to bring it back for my adoring countrypeople. I did every heroic thing a person possibly could. And now, exactly a year later, you can see the fruits of all my labors.

Now, there's nobody watching me from the roofs: just a few shaky old people looking out of their windows. That's because the best view today, everyone agrees, is right by the prison gates—or, even better, right at the foot of the gallows, I'd bet.

I walk in the rain, and—though they really didn't need to—my captors tied my wrists behind my back, so tightly the rope cuts into me. And I get the feeling that my forehead is bleeding; anyone who feels like it can throw a rock at me in vengeance for the crimes I committed this year.

I came into the city on these roads—and I'm leaving the same way! Right in the middle of triumphal parades like mine, people have fallen down dead. God might well ask me, "Since the world has given you this payment for your actions, what do you owe to me?" Now, *God* will be the one who pays me—and that's a much safer proposition than trusting in other people.

## THEMES

### THE FICKLENESS OF PUBLIC OPINION

"The Patriot" reflects on just how quickly—and unjustly—public opinion can change. The poem's speaker was once the man of the hour, honored as a great "patriot" and paraded in the streets for some heroic feat in service to his country. But now, exactly a year later, the very same people who cheered him throw rocks at him. The political winds have shifted, it seems, and the man so recently hailed as a hero is about to be executed as a traitor. This tale suggests that people's memories are short and that people themselves are often merciless. Public opinion, the poem implies, has a lot more to do with the emotion of the moment than with sincere feeling

or justice.

Comparing his two different marches through the city, the speaker marvels at just how much has changed over the course of a year—and at just how cruelly his fellow citizens are treating him now. Once a hero in a parade, he's now a convict being dragged to the gallows. His countrypeople, who once threw "roses" in his path, now hurl "stones" at him until his "forehead bleeds." They've clearly forgotten all his past good works, and they show no flicker of kindness to their former idol.

Because the poem never specifies what either the speaker's heroic act or his crimes were, this change in the citizens' behavior feels arbitrary. Both the crowd's adoration and their rage seem feverish and groundless. It doesn't seem as if these people are making reasoned judgments of the speaker's actions, but as if they're just getting caught up in the excitement of the moment. When they saw him as a hero, they'd have given him "the sun from yonder skies" if he asked for it; now that they see him as a villain, they do everything they can to hurt him, tying his wrists so tight the ropes "cut" him and ghoulishly jostling for the best view of the "scaffold" where he'll die.

The poem thus suggests that it doesn't take more than a shift in the political winds—or a compelling enough spectacle—for the public to decide that a person who they once considered a patriot is really a traitor (or that a bad man is a hero, for that matter). That makes patriotism itself a dangerous game. If fickle public opinion, not real justice, sways the fates and beliefs of countries and their citizens, it's hard to know what being loyal to a country might even mean.

**Where this theme appears in the poem:**

- Before Line 1
- Lines 1-5
- Between Lines 5-6
- Lines 6-10
- Between Lines 10-11
- Lines 11-15
- Between Lines 15-16
- Lines 16-20
- Between Lines 20-21
- Lines 21-25
- Between Lines 25-26
- Lines 26-30

### HUMAN WEAKNESS AND DIVINE MERCY

"The Patriot" paints a melancholy picture of human frailty. While the poem's speaker was once considered a heroic "patriot," now he's being executed as a traitor—and the same people who once cheered for him fling rocks at his head, mindlessly swept up in their emotions. Then again, perhaps the speaker himself has changed. As he's led to his execution, he thinks of his "year's misdeeds," a phrase suggesting that he might have become just as villainous as he was once heroic. Human beings, the poem implies, are changeable and weak, and virtue is hard to find in this world. In the end, the poem suggests that only by turning to God can people hope to find real redemption and justice.

While the crowd's shift from adoration to hatred feels sudden and baseless, it's also quite possible that the once-heroic speaker himself has made a shocking change for the worse. Without giving specifics, he refers to his "year's misdeeds"—and hints that he might have gone a little power-crazy during his time as the man of the hour, ambitiously "leap[ing] at the sun" to capture even more glory. Just as the crowd can't be relied upon for mercy, heroes can't be relied upon for heroism.

It's a vanishingly rare human being, the poem thus suggests, who remains consistently good and just. And human frailty can tarnish the greatest victories. But that doesn't mean there's no hope in the world at all. At the end of the poem, the speaker feels it's "safer" to put himself in the hands of "God": God, perhaps, offers both an escape from the world's injustices and a chance for the speaker to be forgiven for whatever crimes he might have committed. The speaker's predicament might even mirror the Christian story of the Crucifixion, suggesting that he might find redemption through his suffering. God, the poem concludes, is the only source of real justice and real forgiveness; humans are often too changeable and weak to practice these virtues themselves.

**Where this theme appears in the poem:**

- Between Lines 10-11
- Lines 11-15
- Between Lines 15-16
- Lines 16-20
- Between Lines 20-21
- Lines 21-25
- Between Lines 25-26
- Lines 26-30

## LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

### LINES 1-5

*It was roses, roses, all the way,*
*With myrtle mixed in my path like mad:*
*The house-roofs seemed to heave and sway,*
*The church-spires flamed, such flags they had,*
*A year ago on this very day.*

"The Patriot" starts right in the middle of a vivid memory. Before telling the reader anything else, the speaker of this dramatic monologue begins:

It was roses, roses, all the way,

With myrtle mixed in my path like mad:

The very first image of the poem is of a wild jumble of flowers and fragrant leaves carpeting the street where the speaker walks. The intense epizeuxis of "roses, roses" suggests that there were nothing *but* roses as far as the speaker could see.

This luxurious, overwhelming vision is like something from a dream. And so is the imagery of the next lines:

The house-roofs seemed to heave and sway,
The church-spires flamed, such flags they had,

The whole city where the speaker walks, in other words, seems practically to be dancing. It even seems to be on fire, metaphorically "flam[ing]" with bright "flags." Everything is energy, color, and movement.

The sounds of the lines add to their intensity. Note the alliteration (of /m/ and /f/ sounds), assonance (of /ah/ and /ee/ sounds), and sibilance of lines 2-4:

With myrtle mixed in my path like mad:
The house-roofs seemed to heave and sway,
The church-spires flamed, such flags they had,

By now, this imagery—in combination with the poem's title, "The Patriot"—might clue readers in that what the speaker is remembering here is a victory parade: *his* victory parade. He's the "Patriot" of the title, and he must have performed some heroic service to his country. Now, that country wildly celebrates him.

And there is something *wild* about these celebrations—and perhaps a little dangerous. Those heaving roofs, bright spires, and carpets of roses are certainly festive. But buildings that "heave and sway" might be on the verge of falling; spires that burn, burn down; and carpets of red roses might also make the streets seem to run with blood.

Even taken at face value, there's something not just joyful, but manic in all these festivities: roses running "all the way" through a city street is an awful lot of roses. There's a kind of crazed excess here, not just deeply-felt happiness or victory.

From the beginning, then, as the speaker remembers the day of his greatest triumph, there's a little foreshadowing here. The city might be wildly celebrating the speaker at the moment, but perhaps all is not well.

And the closing line of the stanza warns readers that something may well have changed since this parade. It was "a year ago on this very day" that the speaker made his procession over those roses, and these celebrations are only a memory now.

## LINES 6-7

*The air broke into a mist with bells,*
*The old walls rocked with the crowd and cries.*

As stanza 2 begins, the speaker is still reminiscing about the day of his victory parade. Here, he introduces an even more dreamlike metaphor:

The air broke into a mist with bells,

The air is so thick with the sound of ringing bells that the sound itself seems to become visible. It's a moment of vivid synesthesia that suggests the speaker might have felt almost dazed with joy, overwhelmed by the sheer scale of the celebration.

And that seems pretty reasonable: this city has clearly gone all out to honor the speaker. Being the center of such a celebration would be enough to make anyone feel a little dazed. Again, there's a touch of foreshadowing here: the image of a "mist" in particular suggests that the speaker might not have been seeing altogether clearly on this joyful day.

In line 7, the people cheering the speaker on make their first direct appearance. So far, it's seemed as if the city *itself* were celebrating: the "house-roofs" are dancing, the "church-spires" are flying brilliant flags. But now, the speaker remembers:

The old walls rocked with the crowd and cries.

At last, readers get a glimpse of the "crowd" that makes the walls rock and the roofs heave: everyone in the city seems to have come out to cheer the speaker. Those "old walls" also paint a picture of a venerable old city, perhaps a European one; this might be the capital of a country with some history.

Note how the sharp alliteration and consonance of "rocked"/"crowd"/"cries" makes the line itself seem louder. Note, too, that for all these details of the celebrations, the poem carefully doesn't mention exactly what the speaker's all-important heroic act *was*. All readers gather is that it was somehow "patriot[ic]," a service on behalf of the whole country. That vagueness is going to be important a little later.

## LINES 8-10

*Had I said, "Good folks, mere noise repels—*
*But give me your sun from yonder skies!"*
*They had answered, "And afterward, what else?"*

By now, readers might well have the sense that the day of the speaker's victory parade was at once overwhelmingly festive and a little bit *too much*; there's some manic, excessive energy in these images of a celebrating city. The speaker, looking back on this day, seems to get that feeling himself. Not only was the city just a touch too excited, but the speaker himself also seemed a touch too puffed up.

Consider his hyperbole in the imagined dialogue here:

> Had I said, "Good folks, mere noise repels—
> But give me your sun from yonder skies!"
> They had answered, "And afterward, what else?"

In other words, in retrospect, the speaker feels sure that if he'd asked the crowds to give him the sun itself, they'd only have said, *Of course! And what MORE can we do for you after that?*

Again, there's something at once grand and dangerous about that eager acceptance of an impossibility. The speaker, believing he could *ask* for the sun, seems puffed up with hubris, seeing himself as a god who could *hold* the sun; the crowds, willing to *give* the sun (and more!), seem downright delusional.

Listen to the speaker's lordly tone in those lines. "'Good folks, mere noise repels'" is an awfully patronizing way to respond to a whole city's cries of adoration. Clearly, as he looks back on this day, the speaker sees himself as both a triumphant victor and a delusional egotist.

But this story, as ample foreshadowing has suggested, isn't going to end in the speaker holding the sun itself in his hands. Even the rhymes hint that there's more to come. The poem's relatively unusual cinquains (that is, stanzas of five lines apiece), with their ABABA rhyme scheme, make each stanza feel suspenseful, as if it's still waiting for a final B rhyme. This story, the rhymes suggest, isn't over yet.

## LINES 11-12

> *Alack, it was I who leaped at the sun,*
> *To give it my loving friends to keep!*

At the beginning of stanza 3, the foreshadowing of the previous stanzas comes to a head in a single word: "Alack." This cry of distress suggests that, whatever has changed in the year between the speaker's victory parade and his present-day reminiscences, it hasn't been pretty.

Here, the speaker reflects on one regret in particular: he himself ended up "leap[ing] at the sun," trying to capture a kind of power that's really beyond any one person. His motives were generous: he wanted to give that sun to his "loving friends." But perhaps he still leaped just a little too high.

This metaphor (and the symbolism of the sun, which often represents strength, triumph, and majesty) suggests that the speaker was trying to capture some kind of superhuman glory—perhaps the kind of power that would make every day feel like a lavish victory parade.

But again, there's something rather vague about this image. Just as the speaker never tells readers exactly what heroic act his victory parade was celebrating, he never mentions exactly how he "leaped at the sun." While there are hints that some kind of hubris might have been involved—some attempt to gain or to hold onto power, for instance—the speaker never spells it out.

Heading toward the second half of the poem, take a moment to listen to the meter in these lines. This poem uses accentual tetrameter, which means that each line uses four strong stresses, but doesn't stick to any one metrical foot (such as an iamb or a trochee). Here's how the poem uses this meter in lines 11-12:

> Alack, | it was I | who leaped | at the sun,
> To give | it my lov- | ing friends | to keep!

Because of the mixture of feet here (anapests and iambs, to be specific), the speaker's voice sounds natural, as if he's musing to himself. But those four pounding beats per line also give this passage (and the whole poem) a kind of drumbeat urgency. There's a lot of drama in this meter!

## LINES 13-15

> *Naught man could do have I left undone:*
> *And you see my harvest, what I reap*
> *This very day, now a year is run.*

The speaker has told readers this much: he made the mistake of trying to "leap[] at the sun," to capture some mighty victory for the sake of his "loving friends" in the city. *How* he did this remains a mystery. Now, he makes this even more ambiguous statement:

> Naught man could do have I left undone:

There's more than one way to read these words:

- Perhaps the speaker means that he's performed every possible heroic act, giving his whole life to the kind of patriotic service for which he was celebrated in that fateful parade.
- Or perhaps the speaker means he's done *everything*—the good and the bad. He might have been just as big a villain, in other words, as he was a hero.

One thing is certain: nothing good has come of all the speaker's acts, be they noble or terrible. Ever since the speaker cried "Alack," readers have known that the speaker's life now is very different than it was "a year ago on this very day" when he was honored as a hero. But these purposely ambiguous lines mean it's very hard for the reader to judge whether the unpleasant metaphorical "harvest" the speaker is about to "reap"—that is, the consequences he's about to face—are *deserved* or not. That ambiguity will play an important part in the tale the rest of the poem is about to tell.

The speaker seems to want his reader to pay particular attention here. Directly addressing his readers as "you," he emphatically repeats language from the first stanza:

> And you see my harvest, what I reap

This very day, now a year is run.

In other words, the speaker seems to be asking his reader to pay particular attention to what they're about to "see," doing a little compare-and-contrast between "this very day" and the "very day" of his victory parade, only a year before.

## LINES 16-20

*There's nobody on the house-tops now—*
*Just a palsied few at the windows set;*
*For the best of the sight is, all allow,*
*At the Shambles' Gate—or, better yet,*
*By the very scaffold's foot, I trow.*

"This very day" a year ago, the speaker was making his triumphant way through an adoring, flower-strewn city. Now he's in those exact same streets—but he's on his way to his own death. Once a hero, he's now a pariah, and he's about to be publicly executed.

Take a look at his imagery in the first couple of lines here:

There's nobody on the house-tops now—
Just a palsied few at the windows set;

Where once the "house-roofs seemed to heave and sway" under the sheer weight of cheering crowds, now there are only a few shaky, elderly people in the windows. This image paints an eerie picture of sickly old folks peering down like ghosts. But it also suggests something even more macabre: even people too old and sick to leave the house want to be wheeled to the window to watch the speaker meet his doom.

Everyone else, of course, has hurried down to the "Shambles' Gate"—a loaded place to watch an execution from, considering that a "Shambles" is an old word for a slaughterhouse. The "best of the sight," the best view, can be had either there or "by the very scaffold's foot," right at the edge of the platform where the speaker will be killed.

In other words, with horrific irony, the very crowd that once cheered the speaker is now flocking to his execution as if it were the year's best party—*exactly* a year after his victory parade. And this whole poem has been narrated from the speaker's slow march to his own death.

## LINES 21-25

*I go in the rain, and, more than needs,*
*A rope cuts both my wrists behind;*
*And I think, by the feel, my forehead bleeds,*
*For they fling, whoever has a mind,*
*Stones at me for my year's misdeeds.*

Back in stanza 3, the speaker told the reader: "you see my harvest," the consequences of his actions. Now, he paints a terrible picture of that harvest. He's tied up, bleeding, stumbling through the streets, and minutes from his execution.

Listen to the sounds he uses in these lines:

I go in the rain, and, more than needs,
A rope cuts both my wrists behind;

That rough /r/ alliteration feels as cutting as those ropes and invites readers to really imagine his pain.

That pain is clearly both emotional and physical. The plaintive words "more than needs" suggest just how hard done by the speaker feels. It's not enough that he's being dragged to his death, he's also been shamed and hurt, and tied up like a criminal.

Tied up like this, he's also helpless. He can only guess that his "forehead" is wounded "by the feel" of the trickling blood; he can't even raise a hand to wipe it away.

Worst of all, that blood comes from a wound inflicted by his fellow citizens—those very "loving friends" whom he worked so hard for. Take a look at his phrasing here:

For they fling, whoever has a mind,
Stones at me for my year's misdeeds.

That casual "whoever has a mind"—that is, "whoever feels like it"— again suggests that this is just another kind of party for the people of the city. It was fun to throw roses in the speaker's path a year ago; now, it's fun to hurl rocks at him.

And, importantly, that reference to the speaker's "misdeeds" remains as mysterious as the nature of his original heroic act. For all the reader knows, the speaker committed no real crime at all. The crowd's speedy flip from manic adoration to sadistic cruelty suggests that it's the tide of public opinion, more than the speaker himself, that has changed over the course of this single year.

## LINES 26-27

*Thus I entered, and thus I go!*
*In triumphs, people have dropped down dead.*

As the final stanza begins, the speaker makes the terrible irony of his situation plain in one line:

Thus I entered, and thus I go!

The anaphora here seems to set two pictures up next to each other: the glorious victor, and the degraded convict. Both walked through the same streets; both drew a crowd; both were, in fact, exactly the same guy. Everything is the same, and everything is horribly different—and it's only taken a "year" and a shift in the political tides to bring this change about.

The speaker goes on:

In triumphs, people have dropped down dead.

The word "triumphs" here might have both its common meaning—"victories"—and a more precise one. A "triumph" was originally a Roman victory parade, a grand procession that showed off the victor's might and glory, rather like the one the speaker enjoyed in the poem's first stanzas. But such triumphs, the speaker knows now, are fraught with peril. And note how the thudding alliteration of "dropped down dead" evokes the speaker's doom.

All these ideas suggest that the speaker, on his way to the grave, has understood something deep and terrible about the nature of public opinion. Crowds, he knows now, don't have long memories: the overpowering emotion of the moment, more than any kind of rational reflection, rules mobs. And any city, any country, can become a mob, given the right push.

This sheds a new light on the poem's title. What could it possibly mean, the poem asks, to be a "Patriot," when what a country stands for and believes seems so unstable? Browning gave this poem the cynical subtitle "An Old Tale," suggesting that this kind of fickleness is nothing new, but a grim old part of human nature.

### LINES 28-30

*"Paid by the World,—what dost thou owe*
*Me?"—God might question; now instead,*
*'Tis God shall repay: I am safer so.*

In the poem's final lines, the speaker introduces some dialogue—and with it, a new theme. Look at the way the speaker uses enjambment to delay the reveal of who, exactly, is saying these words:

> "Paid by the World,—what dost thou owe
> Me?"—God might question; [...]

Here, the speaker imagines God's voice offering him forgiveness; paraphrased, these words might mean something like, "Since the world has punished you, what more do you owe Me?" The enjambment means that the word "Me" lands hard, forcefully turning the reader's attention away from the cruel world and toward the divine.

And the speaker does still seem to have some faith that God is just, even if people aren't. Perhaps he's even trying to find some redemption in his own suffering. His story—in which he's first cheered in the streets, then hauled off to his execution—bears a more than passing resemblance to the Christian story of the Crucifixion.

It's also possible, of course, that the speaker really did commit some terrible "misdeeds." But even so, he finds some ultimate comfort in the thought that "God shall repay" whatever debt he owes. God, in his eyes, is as just and merciful as humanity is weak and fickle—and it's "safer" by far, the speaker concludes, for people to put themselves in God's hands than to try to achieve any kind of permanent "triumph" on earth.

## SYMBOLS

### THE SUN

The sun, in this poem, is a symbol of unattainable glory.

As he remembers his celebratory parade a year ago, the speaker feels sure that, if he'd asked the adoring crowds to present him with the sun itself, they would have done it. A moment later, he laments that he "leaped for the sun" himself. Giddy with triumph, the speaker believed for a moment that he could even make the sun his own.

This image might put readers in mind of Icarus, the figure from classical mythology who used artificial wings to escape a prison—only to die when he flew too close to the sun, melting the wax that held his feathers together.

In reaching for the sun, the speaker seems to want something that no person gets on earth: lasting, unshakeable glory. But, impossibly high and impossibly bright, the sun is the kind of prize that people just can't reach—and it's by "leap[ing]" for the symbolic sun that the speaker falls.

**Where this symbol appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 8-10:** "Had I said, "Good folks, mere noise repels— / But give me your sun from yonder skies!" / They had answered, "And afterward, what else?"'"
- **Lines 11-12:** "Alack, it was I who leaped at the sun, / To give it my loving friends to keep!"

## POETIC DEVICES

### IRONY

"The Patriot" is built on a foundation of irony. As the poem begins, the speaker looks back to "a year ago on this very day," inviting readers to pay special attention to the contrast between *then* and *now:*

- A year ago, the speaker was the absolute toast of the town, a hero who could do no wrong. The whole "city" came out to celebrate his victory, ringing bells and strewing flowers as he made a triumphant parade through the streets.
- Now, the speaker is taking the exact same path. But *this* time, he's being treated as a villain and a pariah. Before, he was a hero; now, he's on his way to his execution.

The bitter irony here is that what was once a "triumph," a victory parade, is now the scene of his utter defeat. And the crowd seems equally excited for a celebration or an execution,

suggesting that public opinion is often driven more by unthinking (and overpowering) emotion than by reason.

**Where Irony appears in the poem:**

- Before Line 1
- Lines 1-5
- Between Lines 5-6
- Lines 6-10
- Between Lines 10-11
- Lines 11-15
- Between Lines 15-16
- Lines 16-20
- Between Lines 20-21
- Lines 21-25
- Between Lines 25-26
- Lines 26-30

## IMAGERY

The poem's imagery dramatizes the speaker's fall from grace, helping readers to feel both his glory and his defeat.

At the beginning of the poem, the speaker paints a picture of his triumphant parade: a day of joyful noise, light, and color:

- The speaker remembers that the streets he traveled were positively heaped with flowers, piles of "roses" and "myrtle" making a fragrant carpet for him to walk over.
- Not only the people, but the city itself seems to dance: the "house-roofs," crowded with partiers, themselves appear to "heave and sway," and the very walls "rock[] with the crowd and cries."
- And the air is so full of ringing bells that the speaker remembers the sound as a visible "mist."

To put it briefly, the whole world seems caught up in wild celebration. The imagery here makes it clear just how *total* the speaker's triumph felt to him at the time; even the air he breathed felt as if it were honoring him.

But now, exactly a year later, there's "nobody on the house-tops" to cheer as the speaker makes his way to his execution. The only people in the buildings are the "palsied few"—a handful of shaky, elderly people—who aren't strong enough to get out there and watch the speaker's death up close. This image of who *is* at the windows, besides providing an eerie picture of haggard old faces gazing down, also invites readers to imagine the vast, silent crowds of former hero-worshipers who have now left their homes to gather "by the very scaffold's foot."

**Where Imagery appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 1-4:** "It was roses, roses, all the way, / With myrtle mixed in my path like mad: / The house-roofs seemed to heave and sway, / The church-spires flamed, such flags they had,"
- **Lines 6-7:** "The air broke into a mist with bells, / The old walls rocked with the crowd and cries."
- **Lines 16-17:** "There's nobody on the house-tops now— / Just a palsied few at the windows set;"

## HYPERBOLE

Moments of hyperbole suggest just how giddy with triumph (and how full of hubris) the speaker once was.

The speaker feels certain that, back on the day of his victory parade if he'd asked the adoring crowds to present him with the "sun from yonder skies," they'd have done it in a heartbeat. No glory, in other words, seemed out of his reach that day—and everyone loved him enough to do the impossible for him without thinking twice about it.

In other words, everyone was feeling more than a little delusional! The sun can't be hauled out of the sky so easily as all that. This hyperbolic image suggests that both the speaker and the crowds were so swept up in the joy of victory that they'd lost contact with reality.

The speaker underlines that point when he cries:

> Alack, it was I who leaped at the sun,
> To give it my loving friends to keep!

In other words, he felt as if he could capture the sun all by himself. Puffed up with his triumph, he felt powerful and invincible as a god. But, as he's now learned, no glory is permanent, and no human being can hold the sun in their hands.

Still, there was a time when he felt he could do anything. Perhaps that feeling even led to his downfall. "Naught man could do," he claims, "have I left undone": an ambiguous moment of hyperbole that might at once suggest he performed every possible heroic feat, and that he committed any number of dreadful "misdeeds."

**Where Hyperbole appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 8-10:** "Had I said, "Good folks, mere noise repels— / But give me your sun from yonder skies!" / They had answered, "And afterward, what else?"'"
- **Lines 11-13:** "Alack, it was I who leaped at the sun, / To give it my loving friends to keep! / Naught man could do have I left undone:"

## REPETITION

Repetitions help to evoke the sheer manic exuberance of the speaker's victory parade and to underline just how far he's

fallen by the end of the poem.

For instance, take the poem's very first line:

> It was **roses, roses**, all the way,

That moment of epizeuxis creates an image of an indecent number of roses (just think of that florist's bill), carpeting the ground "all the way" along the speaker's path. Readers can almost *smell* the crushed petals in this repetition, not just see them.

There's a similar feeling of overwhelming celebration in the speaker's anaphora and broader parallelism:

> **The house-roofs seemed** to heave and sway,
> **The church-spires flamed**, such flags they had,
> A year ago on this very day.
> **The air broke** into a mist with bells,
> **The old walls rocked** with the crowd and cries.

In this image, not just the crowds, but the buildings, the walls, and the air itself are partying. The parallelism here draws attention to active verbs like "flamed" and "rocked," stressing that the whole city was swept up in wild excitement.

But later, another moment of anaphora invites readers to compare the speaker's experiences "a year ago" with his sad fate now:

> **Thus** I entered, and **thus** I go!

That repeated "thus" works like a before-and-after picture:

- "Thus," on just these same streets, with just these same crowds, the speaker made his victory parade.
- And "thus" he'll make his final exit.

No wonder, then, that he puts himself in the hands of "God":

> "Paid by the World,—what dost thou owe
> Me?"—**God might question**; now instead,
> 'Tis **God shall repay**: I am safer so.

This last moment of parallelism underlines the speaker's closing message: only God can redeem what humankind messes up.

**Where Repetition appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "roses, roses"
- **Line 3:** "The house-roofs"
- **Line 4:** "The church-spires"
- **Line 6:** "The air broke into a mist"
- **Line 7:** "The old walls rocked"
- **Line 26:** "Thus," "thus"
- **Line 29:** "God"
- **Line 30:** "God"

## METAPHOR

Metaphors evoke the speaker's delusional pride and hint at his coming downfall.

The poem's first two metaphors both help to describe the beauty and energy of the speaker's triumphal parade, "a year ago on this very day." As he made his way through the streets over carpets of roses, listening to the roar of the adoring crowd, the speaker remembers that:

> The church-spires **flamed**, such flags they had,

In other words, the churches were so thickly hung with bright, flapping flags that they looked as if they were on fire. Readers might detect a little foreshadowing in this image: celebratory flags looking like destructive fires might well hint at the way the speaker's joy will turn to grief.

The next metaphor might similarly suggest both beauty and illusion:

> The air **broke into a mist with bells**,

Here, the speaker seems almost to be experiencing synesthesia: the *sound* of ringing bells has become the *sight* of a mist. This evocative metaphor helps readers to vividly picture the scene; the air can indeed feel so full of sound that it seems almost visible. But if those bells are a "mist," they might also be keeping the speaker from seeing *clearly*. All he can perceive right now is his triumph—and that kind of ego boost can go straight to one's head.

Later on, though, the speaker understands all too well that no triumph lasts forever:

> And you see **my harvest, what I reap**
> This very day, now a year is run.

Readers might be familiar with the old cliché "you reap what you sow"—in other words, you harvest what you planted, you get what you earned. Here, the speaker uses the same metaphor to suggest two things at once:

- He isn't at all reaping what he *thought* he sowed: his "harvest" isn't more glory, but an ignominious (and perhaps unjust) death.
- He's reaping *precisely* what he sowed: by believing that he could capture eternal glory, he set himself up for a terrible fall.

**Where Metaphor appears in the poem:**

- **Line 4:** "The church-spires flamed, such flags they had,"
- **Line 6:** "The air broke into a mist with bells,"
- **Line 14:** "And you see my harvest, what I reap"

## ENJAMBMENT

The vast majority of this poem uses end-stopped lines. That makes its two enjambments practically jump off the page, asking for the reader's special attention.

The first of these appears in lines 14-15:

> And you see my harvest, what I reap
> This very day, now a year is run.

Here, enjambment creates an ominous momentum that mirrors the speaker's fall from grace. The sentence runs over the line break just as swiftly as the speaker's "year" has taken him from glory to ignominy.

The poem's second enjambment has a related (and even more dramatic) effect:

> "Paid by the World,—what dost thou owe
> Me?"—God might question; [...]

Here, enjambment splits off a powerful word—"Me," spoken in the very voice of God—and leaves it hanging at the beginning of a new line. This isn't a place where one would ever introduce a pause in everyday speech, so this enjambment creates some especially insistent momentum, demanding that readers barrel ahead.

This enjambment also creates a strong *visual* break, leaving God's "Me" standing all alone. That fits in with the poem's closing idea: it's "safer" by far, the speaker concludes, to put oneself in God's hands than people's. God stands apart from all the cruelty and chaos of the human world.

**Where Enjambment appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 14-15:** "reap / This"
- **Lines 28-29:** "owe / Me"

## ALLITERATION

Powerful alliteration gives the poem drama and music. For just one good example, listen to the first lines:

> It was roses, roses, all the way,
> With myrtle mixed in my path like mad:
> The house-roofs seemed to heave and sway,
> The church-spires flamed, such flags they had,

All this strong alliteration evokes the pomp and the raucous noise of a triumphant parade. Alongside the epizeuxis on "roses," the repeating sounds suggest excess, energy, and a general sense that everyone (the speaker included) is getting a little carried away by this festive occasion.

But dense alliteration can also have a grimmer effect:

> I go in the rain, and, more than needs,
> A rope cuts both my wrists behind;
> And I think, by the feel, my forehead bleeds,
> For they fling, whoever has a mind,

Listen to the specific sounds here:

- There's a rough /r/ sound, which mimics the abrasive rope that "cuts" the speaker's poor wrists;
- And a harsh /f/ sound, which feels like someone spitting a curse (or flinging a rock).

These moments of alliteration help readers to *hear*, as well as envision, the speaker's terrible march to his death. The same might be said of the heavy /d/ sounds of "drop down dead" in line 27, which add weighty gloom to the speaker's final moments.

Alliteration thus creates not just music, but atmosphere and drama, keeping the reader at the hapless speaker's side.

**Where Alliteration appears in the poem:**

- **Line 2:** "myrtle mixed," "mad"
- **Line 3:** "house," "seemed," "heave," "sway"
- **Line 4:** "flamed," "flags"
- **Line 7:** "crowd," "cries"
- **Line 9:** "sun," "skies"
- **Line 21:** "rain"
- **Line 22:** "rope," "wrists"
- **Line 23:** "feel," "forehead"
- **Line 24:** "For," "fling," "mind"
- **Line 25:** "me," "my," "misdeeds"
- **Line 27:** "dropped down dead"
- **Line 30:** "safer so"

## ASSONANCE

Assonance, like alliteration, helps to create the poem's atmosphere.

For instance, listen to the repeating vowel sounds in this dramatic passage, in which the speaker describes his sufferings on his way to his execution:

> A rope cuts both my wrists behind;
> And I think, by the feel, my forehead bleeds,

The long /oh/ and /ee/ sounds here don't just make these lines sound musical: they suggest groans and screams of pain.

**Where Assonance appears in the poem:**

- **Line 3:** "seemed," "heave"
- **Line 4:** "flags," "had"
- **Line 6:** "into," "mist"
- **Line 7:** "walls rocked"
- **Line 14:** "see," "reap"
- **Line 19:** "better yet"
- **Line 22:** "rope," "both"
- **Line 23:** "feel," "bleeds"
- **Line 25:** "me," "year's misdeeds"

## VOCABULARY

**Myrtle** (Line 2) - A kind of fragrant plant.

**Church-spires** (Line 4) - The pointed towers of churches.

**Repels** (Line 8) - Annoys, displeases.

**Yonder skies** (Line 9) - In other words, "the skies over there."

**They had answered** (Line 10) - In other words, "they would have replied."

**Alack** (Line 11) - A cry of dismay, like "Alas!"

**Naught** (Line 13) - Nothing.

**Reap** (Line 14) - Gather, harvest.

**Palsied** (Line 17) - Shaky and quivering with age.

**Shambles' Gate** (Line 19) - That is, the gate nearest a "shambles," or slaughterhouse.

**Scaffold** (Line 20) - A gallows.

**I trow** (Line 20) - I'd say, I'd wager, I swear.

**More than needs** (Line 21) - Unnecessarily. In other words, the speaker feels it's really just adding insult to injury for his captors to have tied his wrists behind his back, treating him like a dangerous criminal.

**Fling** (Line 24) - Throw.

**Misdeeds** (Line 25) - Crimes.

**Triumphs** (Line 27) - Here, this word can mean both "victories" and "ceremonial processions."

**What dost thou** (Line 28) - An archaic way of saying "what do you."

**'Tis God shall repay** (Line 30) - In other words, "It's God who will make the payment."

## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

"The Patriot" is one of Browning's famous dramatic monologues, poems in which the writer takes on the voice of a particular character, like an actor playing a part. This one uses an unusual (and uneasy) form that reflects the speaker's tension and suffering. The poem is broken into six cinquains, stanzas of five lines apiece:

- The first two stanzas describe the speaker's life exactly a year before this poem takes place, when he was paraded through the streets and hailed as a hero.
- The last three stanzas tell the tale of what he's come to now: treated like a common criminal, he's being hauled through those same streets to his execution.
- In between, a single rueful stanza hints at what happened between then and now.

The poem thus feels imbalanced: the speaker's memory of his past glory seems overwhelmed by his present suffering.

The cinquains also help to give the poem its harrowing flavor. Cinquains are a pretty unusual stanza form in English-language poetry, especially when there's an alternating ABABA rhyme scheme in play; readers might well feel that these stanzas are missing a closing sixth line, cut as short as the speaker's life.

### METER

"The Patriot" uses rhythmic accentual meter to tell its story. That means that each line contains a certain number of strong stresses (or beats), with varying numbers of unstressed beats.

Accentual meter turns up in a lot of nursery rhymes and folk songs, giving this poem the flavor of an old tale. (And that's fitting: Browning cynically gave this poem the subtitle "An Old Story," suggesting that this hero's fall is the kind of thing that has happened since time immemorial.)

This particular poem mostly uses accentual tetrameter—that is, lines with four stresses apiece. Most often, it turns to iambs (metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm) and anapests (metrical feet with a da-da-DUM rhythm) to create a march-like momentum. Listen to how that sounds in the first couple of lines:

It was ro- | ses, ro- | ses, all | the way,
With myr- | tle mixed | in my path | like mad:

Those four regular stresses give the lines a steady, drumbeat rhythm, while the changing feet keep the speaker's voice sounding natural.

And the poem can get all kinds of different effects by changing

where each line's stresses fall. Take the first line of the final stanza, for instance:

Thus I entered, and thus I go!

Here, the speaker lands hard on the word "Thus" at the very beginning of the line. It's a dramatic moment: it's as if the speaker is demanding that the reader look hard at how splendid his life once was, and how degraded it's become in his last moments.

The poem's meter is thus perfectly suited to a dramatic monologue: it's flexible, colorful, and, well, dramatic.

### RHYME SCHEME

"The Patriot" uses a rhyme scheme that manages to feel both familiar and unsettling. Each stanza's rhymes run like this:

ABABA

Alternating rhyme schemes like this are common. But in English-language poetry, at least, they tend to appear most often in stanzas with an even number of lines. By using five-line cinquains for his stanzas, the speaker makes the reader feel a little wrong-footed. There's the sense that the stanzas might have been *cut short*—that there's still another B rhyme to come.

That fits right in with the speaker's awful reversal of fortune: no sooner does he think he's on top of the world than he finds himself a miserable prisoner. The rhyme scheme seems to say, *You might* think *this story has a happy ending—but keep reading, it's not over yet.*

## SPEAKER

This dramatic monologue's speaker is the "Patriot" of the title: a man who has done some heroic act in his country's service. In a shockingly brief time, he's gone from being the hero of the hour to a pariah. As the poem takes place, he's being marched to his execution along just the same streets that he once walked in a glorious parade. The poem hints that his fall probably wasn't his fault: he might have committed some "misdeeds," but it's changeable public opinion that dooms him.

These experiences seem to have given the speaker a grim, clear-eyed perspective on human nature. He knows now that he can't rely on other people for justice or mercy. (And maybe he can't even rely on himself—perhaps he really did commit some "misdeed.") It's "safer" by far, he believes, to seek forgiveness and healing from God.

## SETTING

The poem is set in an unnamed city—one that, judging by its multiple "church-spires" and its "crowds," might be pretty big and important. But this city really represents any city, anywhere: the poem's larger point is that, wherever people come together in groups, it's all too easy for them to form mindless mobs.

That becomes clear in the way the city changes its opinion of the speaker in only one year. At the beginning of the poem, the city is bright with celebratory "roses" and "myrtle," honoring the speaker as a hero; by the end, the same city only has "stones" to throw at the selfsame man as he's marched to the "scaffold" where he'll be executed.

## CONTEXT

### LITERARY CONTEXT

Robert Browning (1812-1889) was a poet ahead of his time. A lot of his contemporaries—even those, like Oscar Wilde, who admired him—saw him as a novelist working in the wrong genre; Wilde famously said that "[George] Meredith is a prose Browning, and so is Browning."

In part, this was because Browning's most distinctive works were dramatic monologues, poems that could have been taken straight out of the dialogue of a play. His characters ranged from selfish bishops to honest soldiers to murderous dukes, and the poems they inhabited often explored the ways that people excuse and justify their own worst behavior. (Browning wasn't above pointing out the failings of real people, either: his "The Lost Leader" is a barely-veiled attack on William Wordsworth, his one-time hero.)

"The Patriot" first appeared in Browning's 1855 collection *Men and Women*, alongside many other dramatic monologues. All these earthy stories were rather different from the dominant Victorian poetry of the day: the lyrical beauty of Tennyson, for instance, or the passionate elegance of Browning's (much more famous) wife Elizabeth Barrett Browning. So it wasn't until the Modernist poets came along in the early 20th century that Browning got his due as a poet. Writers like Ezra Pound admired Browning for his wit, his punchy language, and his vivid characters. Browning inspires writers to this day: contemporary novelist A.S. Byatt's acclaimed *Possession* was partly based on Browning's life and work.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

When "The Patriot" was published in 1855, Browning's native England was at the peak of its own intensely patriotic moment: the Victorian era. Under the reign of Queen Victoria, Britain had become a massive world power; it was often proverbially said that the "sun never set on the British Empire." With colonial footholds across the globe, that Empire saw itself as a force for good, spreading cultural and scientific advances. The colonized countries, understandably, took a very different perspective on the matter, and the period was marked not only

by prosperity in Britain but by discord pretty much everywhere else.

By 1855, Browning was living in Italy with his wife Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and he might well have cast a skeptical eye on some of his native land's more feverish patriotism. In particular, he had serious doubts about the Crimean War, a bloody and unpopular conflict that ran from 1853-1856, during which Britain (as part of an allegiance with France and the Ottoman Empire) fought Russia over religious and territorial disputes.

The Crimean War was notoriously ill-managed. Browning's contemporary Tennyson even wrote a famous poem about one of its disasters, in which hundreds of men rode directly to their deaths in a bungled cavalry charge. Well-meaning "patriots" like the one in this poem, Browning might well have reflected, often end up dying senselessly in the name of an untrustworthy, fickle, and corruptible country.

## MORE RESOURCES

### EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Aloud — Listen to a reading of the poem. (https://youtu.be/6wCQBg9ON1c)
- Browning at the British Library — Learn more about Browning (and read more of his poems) at the British Library's website. (http://www.bl.uk/learning/langlit/poetryperformance/browning/biography/browningbiography.html)
- A Short Biography — Learn more about Browning's life and work at the poetry foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/robert-browning)
- Browning's Voice — Listen to a rare recording of Browning himself reading another of his poems aloud (and forgetting how it goes!). (https://poetryarchive.org/poem/how-they-brought-good-news-from-ghent-aix-extract/)
- Browning Today — Read an appreciation of Browning honoring his legacy on his 200th birthday. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/may/07/robert-browning-bicentenary)

### LITCHARTS ON OTHER ROBERT BROWNING POEMS

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

## HOW TO CITE

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