

# The Criterion

**December 2012**

ISSN 0976-8165

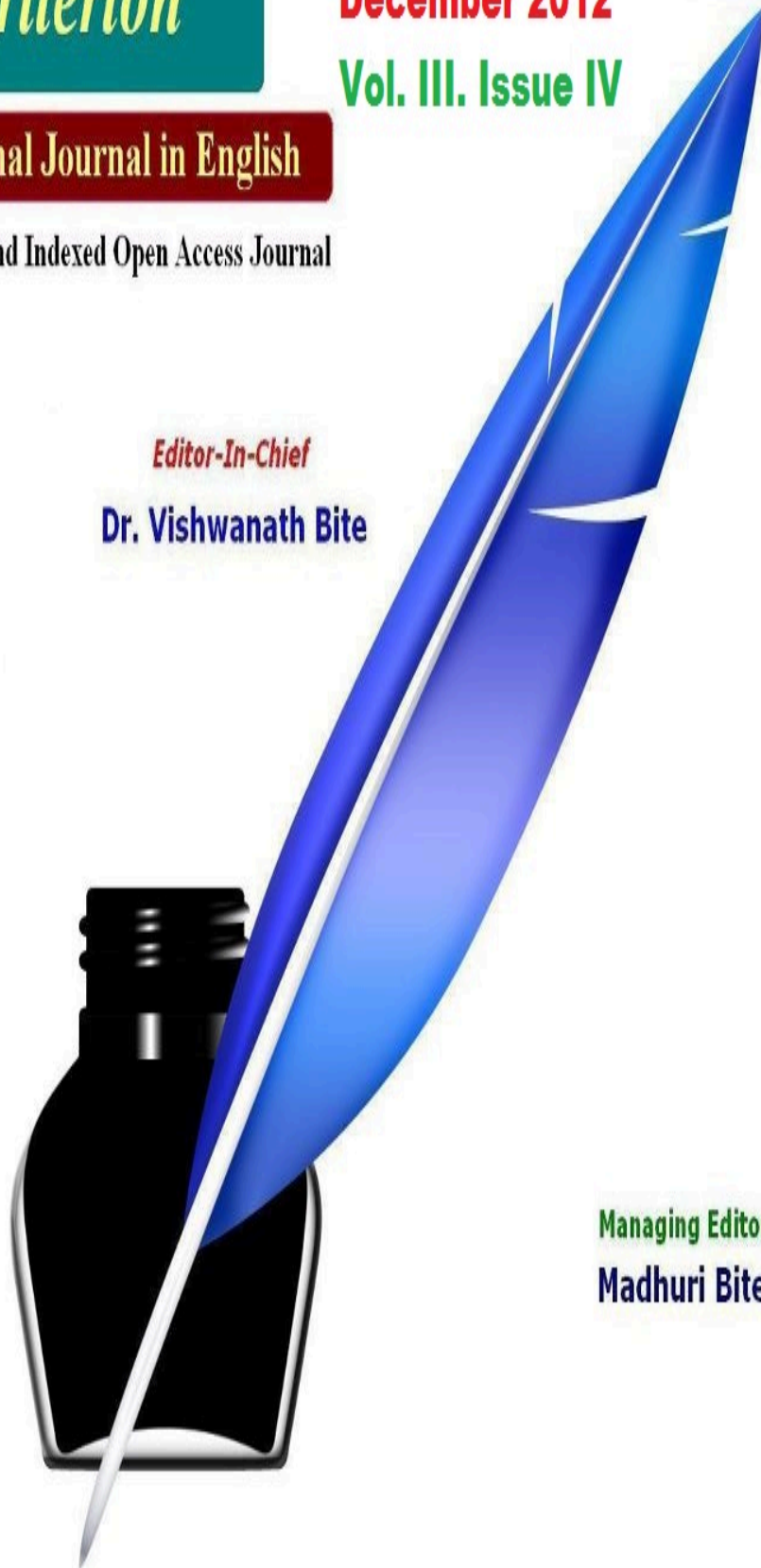
**Vol. III. Issue IV**

**An International Journal in English**

Quarterly Refereed and Indexed Open Access Journal

*Editor-In-Chief*

**Dr. Vishwanath Bite**



**Managing Editor**

**Madhuri Bite**

[www.the-criterion.com](http://www.the-criterion.com)

[criterionejournal@gmail.com](mailto:criterionejournal@gmail.com)

## **The Analysis of Browning's Poetic Milestone *The Ring and the Book* Focusing on the Excellent Characterization of Pompilia: A Critical Assessment**

**Dr. Sanjay Shrivastava**

Associate Professor

IILM College of Management Studies, Greater Noida

### **Abstract**

'The Ring and the Book' is regarded and acknowledged as Browning's poetic masterwork which proves him as an exceptional poetic genius. Based on a set of historical and legal documents the epic poem richly presents a series of dramatic monologues offering various perspectives on a lurid murder trial that involved a child bride Pompilia as the center of story, a predatory older groom, and a disguised priest. Browning poetic excellence reaches to the unfathomable poetic height with this well-crafted poem, illustrating the poet's wide-ranging knowledge on an impressive range of subjects, which finally constitutes one of the finest achievements in English poetry. The present research paper is an attempt to critically analyze and assess this masterly creation focusing on its central figure of attraction Pompilia.

**Key Words: Masterpiece, Achievements, Expression, Symbolism, Treatment, Monologues**

The high ranked work *The Ring and the Book*, is undoubtedly and unquestionably the prominent mile-stone, on the thousand miles of poetic journey of Browning's prolific pen. This long story shone like a gem in the glittering crown of his poetic creations. This work, which bears the label of masterpiece creation, helps him win a safe and supreme place among the love poets, as has been regarded that in the whole range of English Literature, the most cultivating and creative group of poets has not produced like these three characters more charming or a better view point to ponder, than those of Pope, Caponsachi and Pompilia of the epic. This poem of unfathomable poetic skill stands as beyond all parallels may be regarded as the supreme poetical achievements. It is one of the most precious and spiritual- treasures that have ever been produced by any poetic-heart, since the works of Shakespeare.

Edward Berdoe remark:

Mr. Browning was one day wandering about the square of St. Lorenzo in Florence, which on that occasion was crammed with booths, where odd things of all sorts were for sale; and in one of them he purchased for eight pence an old square yellow book, past print past manuscript.

As the jeweler adds a little allow to permit the artistic working of the ring, so the poet must mix his poetic fancy with the simple legal evidence contained in the *Book*, and in this manner work up the history for popular edification. And thus we have *The Ring and The Book*. (Berdoe 393)

‘The Ring and the Book’ is Browning’s best and masterwork. In this epic like poem, his lighting intelligence and jocular humoristic way of expression, his originality of genius in the creation of character and his skill of dramatic expression that tells the reader the whole story in the most magnetic way, all those receive them most extensive, finest and richest expression.

“The ring’s symbolism was fold. It stood for the marriage of Robert and Elizabeth Browning, to the memory of which the whole poem was dedicated. But it stood also for the marriage of fact and fiction, for the ‘pure poet’ of unalloyed gold that could be extracted from the raw material of life, by use of an alloy, the poetic imagination. The Book was the raw material, the ring, the refined dedicatedly incised product, and his supreme tribute to Elizabeth. **(Cohen 114)**

The complete bulk of the poem was regarded as an equal to the great epic poems of the past by the many reviews of the time- almost twenty two thousand of the lives divided into the traditional twelve books which was published in four monthly installments and each month had the group of three books from November 1868 to February 1869.

“His masterpiece is ‘The ring and the Book’ (1868-69). Here the story of the trial of Pompilia, accused by her husband Guido, of adultery with the young monk Caponsachi, is set forth in turn long successive monologues by the principal actors, witnesses and bystanders in the drama. **(Legouis 342)**

The ring and the Book, is after all, Pompilia’s ring and Pompilia’s book. **(Duffin 147)** Pompilia is the embodiment and incarnation of sacrificial and proudless love, the unique kind of selfless love that Browning had long ago treated and expressed in Cristina, the love of supreme kind in which one is contented to serve him or her love partner, without a hope of return or reward. To surrender her completely to the duties of a marriage without love and to flee that marital-know only at the promptings of a higher duty for the protection of her unborn child, the only source of happiness that she could wished or expected for her. The poet’s special attachment for the character Pompilia clearly exhibits his depth of love for his life Elizabeth. At many places, in the long poem, we do observe the poet trying to find out similarity between Pompilia and Elizabeth, the poet’s wife specially when he calls this character who is full of human milk, “O lyric love”.:

O lyric love, half angel half bird

And all a wonder and a wild desire,-

Boldest of hearts that ever braved the sun,

Took sanctuary within the holier blue,

And sang a kindred soul out to his face,-

Yet human at the red-ripe of the heart.

**(The Ring and the Book, I, L 1391-96)**

Browning found this subject for the masterly treatment pouring all his genius of expression, from the yellow book he found in the Florentine market in June of 1860.

The Ring and the Book (1869), shows Browning at once as an observer and a critic of life; in his earlier work he had alternatively given us the observer and the critic. Here, the thinker and the poet join hands in a work of lengthy and sustained importance. It is psychological, pictorial, analytical, dramatic, satiric, tragic, and the only side of Browning that finds no expression is the purely lyrical side. **(Compton and Rickett 433)**

Browning method of treatment in almost all respects was inevitably natural one, for such a poet who had made the dramatic monologue his chief characteristics of poetic expression. But this method was the most proper and suitable method and much more revolutionary than anything that Browning had attempted before the truth and the undisturbed facts of the old yellow book, were related and interpreted from his own point of view from ten distinct points of view in ten different dramatic monologues. The same story of the book was retold ten times differently.

The most primary components and facts which go to make and bind up all “the eventual unity,” of The ring and the Book are formed chiefly on the speeches collocations of the ten monologists, the various incidents which create the whole structure of the strategy are created again and thus, through their experiences and the life-like characters the reality of the world of that old book, the kind of told documents comes back to the spirit and life. As Browning decided to insert himself significantly almost the speaker was as befitting importantly to the story as his originality of device to retelling the tale ten times through personal monologues. While doing all these, Browning never forgets his attachment towards psychological approach in The Ring and the Book in concern. his accomplishment for the psychological realism in his earlier monologues that rest chiefly on his study of “dramatic in principle” and avoiding sheerly from the over commentary in his own appearance. The group of first three speakers-Half Rome and Other Half-Rome and Tertium Quid remains always in a equilibrium and symmetrical to the public’s opinion of this murder-case.

Pompilia, the young wife, one of the noblest character in literature, fit in all respects to rank with Shakespeare’s great heroines; and the Pope, a splendid figure, the strongest of all Browning’s masculine characters. **(Long 479-80)**

Pompilia who comes secondly to bound out the trio of monologues by the principal actors in the talks with greater simplicity and serenity. She is anyhow, motivated to relate her interpretation of the experience of her life with Guido by a desire to free Caponssachi of any public suspicion that the priest Caponssachi and Pompilia were lovers, she speaks:

Earth was made hell to me who did harm:

I only could emerge one way from hell

By catching at the one hand held me, so

I caught at it and thereby stepped to heaven:

If that be wrong, do with me what you will!

**(The Ring and the Book III L 1344-48)**

Pompilia's speech reveals process of self-signification. She has reached a point in her life where she can see what she meant to the contending parties around her, and how Caponssachi was the only person not to misrepresent or misread her. **(Bristow 156)**

In the finest monologues of Pompilia, Browning uses skillfully the fact of Pompilia's child birth to make a rich psychological portraiture of his heroine; while illustrating besides one of his most favorite and philosophical notion. He believes in thought that only evil is apparent always and that good can arise out of the essence of evil. Among the whole life- matters, one thing that Pompilia cannot and will not remember deliberately about the past experiences of her life that, for that time, she had her sexual relations with Guido. This time when Pompilia breathes her last, she considers that the birth of her child to be one of the greatest good that has happened to her in her hole life time, yet she denies that Count Guido, the only cause of evil in her life was the father to this good. And after that she gradually admits the fact she wishes she had resisted. Gifted with the demanding depth of mind and deeper understanding of the natural enmity between the goodness in herself and the evil in Guido, Pomplia settles herself that she can forgive Guido because he has brought good to her, by killing her, he has cleansed her of the bodily corruption and affliction due to the sexual relationship she had with him, "who has never lain beside" Pompilia's soul except her "unresisting body". The following passage clearly shows, how mercilessly Pompilia as behaved in Guido's family and even by her husband Guido.

To the wife had been harassed and abused,  
 More than enough by Guido's Family  
 For non-production of the promised fruit  
 Of marriage? What it Nature, I demand,  
 Touched to the quick by taunts upon her sloth,  
 Had roused herself, put forth recondite power,  
 Bestowed this birth to vindicate her sway,  
 Like the strange favor.

**(The Ring and the Book IX L 1338-45)**

Again-

She was both young and beautiful,  
 Heard everywhere report she suffered much,

from a jealous husband thrice her age.

**(The Ring and the Book IV L 980-982)**

Joseph Bristow writes-

So much of The ring and the Book is given over to the question of marriage as an exclusively, and dangerously, contractual relation that it becomes difficult to think of any true, pure and spiritual love occurring within its restrictive bounds. Pompilia, at first, would prefer to be a nun that suffers at the hands of Guido. Nut in Caponssachi, she discovers that love need not to be sexual. He does not desire her body but communed with her soul. Just as she learned to comprehend what she might signify- as a daughter, wife, mother and most important of all, individual in this world. **(Bristow 155)**

After reaching at the sublime heights of Pompilia's monologue, the reading group is dropped suddenly down to focus their attention on the written brief of the lawyers. The monologue includes the marvelous and majestic judgment of Pope Innocent. The XII, is really wonderful, grand and mystic, which successfully closes the book with a mighty and wonderful music. It seems it has been pre-decided by Browning to let the villainy of Guido's speaking, and over all character, this is only Guido who has been privileged to justify himself for the second time and he is also privileged to leave "with the name of Jesus on his lips." Bur anytime he gets the chance of speaking he always tries to bring infamy, to his wife as the following speech indicates-

My dowry was derision, my gain-muck,

My wife, (The Church declared my flesh and blood)

The nameless bastard of a common whore.

**(The Ring and the Book XI. L 1215-17)**

After all, Browning ends The Ring and the Book by one time more widely and openly addressing the public of Britain:

This lesson, that our human speech is naught,

Our human testimony false, our frame,

And human estimation words and wind.<sup>122</sup>

**(The Ring and the Book XII L 838-840)**



This is rather dispiriting acceptance of the impoliteness of language to convey truth, which is skillfully managed by the more optimistic assertions that art can remain possible at least in one way, in speaking truth of the poet. The real approach for *The Ring and the Book* is not extinct in resolving sins and disputes over Pompilia's virtuous innocence, or in Caponssachi's excessive bravery of heroism or in Court Guido's heinous and monstrous evil. This all was the poet's decision to sketch and present these characters and all the actions through these nine distinct individual consciousness that made the poem all time favorite of everyone who likes to appreciate some basis of authentic truth with a fine literary treatment, and this was the cause that the book became an appropriate and perfect psychological epic of the nineteenth century as Chesterton (1903) calls it "the epic of free speech."

It is also noticeable in Browning's significant work that he always exhibits his skill in.

J.M. Cohen writes-

"Pompilia's purity was of different kind. It lay in her selflessness, first displayed towards her brutal husband and then in the interests of her child. Her transforming effect upon the worldly priest, upon the ageing and still doubting Pope, and finally on her husband and murderer himself, derived from the quality of her emotion. She represented a depth of experience greater than theirs that they could not fail to be conscious of. (Cohen 5-6)

From the very beginning of the epic to the very last Pompilia haunts the entire poem with her glory and behavior. Her sorrowful and wretched birth, her miserable and incomplete life, her ruthless murder, all that gather around her like the black clouds only to disperse vapor like, and reveal again the heavenly brightness. We do not observe any slightest attempt to present her saintly. She remains a poor child in her childhood, no one's heart comes ahead to mitigate her suffering. The spell of her charm, beauty, nature, behavior and delicacy so much influences us that we utterly forget the awesome plot of her whole life's story, instead of suffering we are just full of exquisite pleasure boundless and ineffable in its approach. While, Pompilia is on her death-bed, she prattles about her child, we shed tears indeed, not for the sake of sorrow because such sorrow cannot demand such tears but for her husband Count Guido, our hearts cry "pity of it, the pity of it Iago?" as Iago is said after he strangles Desdemona.

"It could not have been so-the Italian story world not has been seized upon by Browning-if she had died like Pietro and Violante. But the miracle did happen: she did survive to see her baby safe to bring Guido to justice and to forgive him to make a brief disposition and confession which provided Browning with inspiration for a great poem he wrote under her name. Browning the feminist produced the only epic with a woman for its lovely and courageous 'hero' splendid as Caponssachi is, he is so by reason of his relation to Pompilia. (Duffin 147)

What is the most noticeable in her monologue is the way Pompilia touches and describes freely her most delicate subjects fearlessly laying bare the strongest secrets of her marital life, so effortlessly as an unconscious, so delicately as purity, that these passages are the sweetest in the poem and make the entire poem smelling good and scanty. But, at last she must have been left by

us to her immortality. Pompilia accomplished and perfect in each respect, not a bit of flesh, not a single tone of the soul, escapes us as we read and observe ourselves.

“The Ring and the Book, appeared in 1868, he had given to the world the noblest expression of his poetic genius.”<sup>129</sup> The real essence of the Ring and the Book lies in the dying speech of Pompilia’s conclusion Browning rises to a height equal to that of Milton’s invocation to Light in Paradise Lost.

John Doherty writes-

The Character of Pompilia is not only well contrasted with Guido’s, but is in itself an exquisite conception; for which also, perhaps, Mr. Browning is more indebted to his Italian experience that he would care to own. It is a type of simplicity, innocence, ad purity. She can scarcely understand why scandal couples her name with Caponsachi’s as it has done. To her he is not only the priest, but also a hero and a saint. He is the angel and the help from God.....Her love for him is not that of woman; there is something of the supernatural in it. Her deepest human love is for her child; but she has charity for all even for her husband. **(Doherty 58)**

If we put last words of Pompilia’s life into the mouth of dying Elizabeth Barrette, it might be read as a promise to Browning himself and the remainder of the duty he had still to perform; to hold hard by the truth and bearing witness to the light he had known to shed sufficient of his own for others if not for her, to rise by. By Guido’s ill speech for Pompilia does not blot on the fair character of the heroine. The following passage from the “Tertium Quid” explains the faith of life of that idol whose beauty, innocence and behavior was the written pledge to enjoy all the bliss of the world and immense love, but, in really who suffered most of her life under Guido’s cursing shadow and was murdered brutally:

All sorts of torture was piled, pain on pain,  
 On either side Pompilia’s path of life,  
 Built round about and over against by fear,  
 Circumvallated month by month, and week  
 By week, and day to day, and hour by hour,  
 Close, closer and yet closer still with pain.  
**(The Ring and the Book IV L 788-93)**

Again-

Of how the little solitary wife



Wept and looked out of window all day long?

**(The Ring and the Book III L 860-61)**

### Conclusion

There is no denying the fact, that without Pompilia, this great poetical creation has no beginning, middle or end. The attractive and adorable personality of Pompilia rises like an idol of love, stuffed of sincere love, innocent love and above all pure love. She even surpasses the best of Shakespeare's heroines in her beauty, boldness, sincerity, love, devotion, patient and tolerance. We find a great resemblance of this lovely lady with that of the Duchess of Malfi who was killed by her two real brothers as Pompilia mercilessly murdered by her own husband, Count Guido. There are some episodes which encomforts Pompilia sad and injured heart, like the arrival of Caponssachi in her life and the birth of the child, but so far a happy life, full of entertainment of love and ecstasies of youth, her heart remains unfulfilled. She is so large and holy-hearted lady that she does not hate her murderer husband, who was no more that a wild, ruthless, callous-hearted, ill-minded man, thrice of her age. Her love for Caponssachi is pious, true, sincere and moderate. Thus, Pompilia gloriously reaches at the height of the most celebrated love heroines of the literary world and she will ever be remembered for her dove-like innocence, for her heart full of human milk and for her unfathomable love keeping within the oceanic depth.

### Works Cited:

1. Berdoe, Edward. *The Browning Cyclopedia*, Atlantic Publications, Delhi, 1989.
2. Bristow, Joseph, *Robert Browning*, Herfortshire, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991.
3. Cohen, J. M., *Robert Browning*, London. The Macmillan Press Limited, 1903.
4. Compton and Rickett. *A History of English Literature, From Earlier Times on 1916*, New Delhi, UBS Publications Limited, 2000.
5. Doherty, John. *The Dublin Review*, July 1869.
6. Duffin, H.C. *Amphibian: A Reconsideration of Browning*, Bowes and Bowes, London, 1962.
7. Legouis, Emile, *A Short Story of English Literature*, Translated by Boyson and Coulson, London, Oxford University Press, 1936.
8. Long, William J, *English Literature: Its History and its Significance*, Kalyani Publications, New Delhi, 1999.
9. *The Poetical Works of Robert Browning. The Ring and the Book*, London, Smith Elder and Company, 15 Waterloo Place, 1889.