Robert Browning is known as one of the great Victorian poets and perhaps the greatest practitioner ever of the dramatic monologue form. His personal life seemed to divide into roughly three distinct phases—child/young bachelor, husband, and widower. Born into a devout family in Camberwell (a southern suburb of London), he was the precocious son of a clerk in the Bank of England, who had given up lucrative employment managing the family sugar plantations in St. Kitts because of his objections to slavery. Browning attended boarding school near Camberwell, then the University of London for a brief period. But he much preferred to pursue his education at home, where he could learn Greek, Latin, and other languages from his bibliophile father and piety, music, and a love of nature from his much-loved Nonconformist mother. They in fact thoroughly tutored him in numerous other subjects, and he read omnivorously in his father’s huge library. Indeed, until his marriage at age 34, Browning was rarely absent from his parents’ home. Both parents encouraged his poetry, which was influenced early by the poet Shelley, who precipitated Browning’s life-long fervent romanticism.

In 1845, Browning fell deeply in love with Elizabeth Barrett, who was six years his senior and a semi-invalid, although she was already a renowned poet whose reputation was for many years far greater than Robert’s. After an ardent epistolary courtship, Robert and Elizabeth found their commitment to each other thwarted by Elizabeth’s jealous and highly possessive father, who came to serve as something of a template for the dominating tyrants that later show up in so many of Robert’s poems. The two lovers secretly eloped in 1846, following a daring escape through an upper-story window, and moved to Italy, where they established residence in Florence, beginning one of the most celebrated and devoted marriages in English letters. Elizabeth enjoyed good health and a full life in the warm Mediterranean climate, and Robert also thrived, more at ease among the picturesque landscapes, vivacious street life, and powerful echoes of the Italian Renaissance. Moreover, an eventual legacy of £11,000 (over two million dollars in today’s buying power) from the Brownings’ admirer—and Elizabeth’s cousin—John Kenyon solved their financial difficulties.

After Elizabeth’s death in 1861, a distraught Robert quit his beloved Florence and settled in London with his son, who had been born in 1849 and who would become a painter. There he continued his highly prolific poetic output, to much greater fame, but he could never again bring himself to go back to Florence. Robert Browning eventually died in Venice and, after drawing one of the largest funeral crowds of the age, was buried in...
Westminster Abbey, whereupon an admiring Henry James declared that “none of the great had ever been so strange, none of the strange so great.”

As remarkable as it seems now, despite great productivity, Browning did not gain recognition as much more than a relatively unknown poetic experimenter, and certainly not as the equal of Tennyson and Arnold, until after his wife’s death. His first work was the anonymously published *Pauline: A Fragment of a Confession* (1833), which received scant critical notice but did draw the attention of John Stuart Mill, who was later to declare ambivalently that the poet demonstrated a “more intense and morbid self-consciousness than I ever knew in any sane human being.” In the 1840s, after nearly ten years of relative failure as both a poet and a playwright, Browning found his medium in the dramatic monologue, first publishing the volume *Dramatic Lyrics* (1842) and then in the pamphlet series entitled *Bells and Pomegranates* (1841–46), which produced some of his best known work. Still, although containing clearly strong and revolutionary work, these books were as poorly received by reviewers as his previous, more conventional poetry and plays. His volume *Men and Women* (1855) also garnered hostile notices despite containing some of his greatest poems. Its fifty speaking portraits reveal defective lovers, Renaissance artists, musicians, and religious thinkers, all of whom invite the reader to share and appreciate their worlds and moral crises, even as the reader is obliged to judge their immoral behavior. In *Dramatis Personae* (1864), his first book to justify more than one printing, Browning used exotic locales and arcane learning to investigate contemporary controversies about Darwinism, biblical criticism, and mesmerism.

Part of Browning’s early lack of success may have stemmed from the fact that his poetry often demanded unusual learning and effort from its readers, a consequence perhaps of Browning’s extraordinarily broad (if eccentric) education and his voracious reading habits. It was a level of strenuous interpretation one might expect to be required in a poet who trained himself partly by studying Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary* cover to cover! Commercially unsuccessful for years, he finally achieved popularity with his long poem, *The Ring and the Book* (1868–69), published in serial form and comprising an epic reconstruction from documents of a 17th-century Italian murder case. The poem’s bold structure interlocks twelve books in a multiple narrative, whose complex, ironic characters undermine conventional views of fiction, fact, and truth. Recognized immediately as a masterpiece, it combined Browning’s interests in psychology, philosophical and theological speculation, base action, and elevated thought and expression. He published many works in his later years, culminating with *Parleyings* (1887), which was presented as ostensibly “conversations” with obscure writers who influenced his ideas. His late-won fame and critical reputation were reflected in the founding of the highly active Browning Society in 1881 and numerous offshoots soon thereafter, a then-unprecedented tribute to a living author.

Although generally less popular (until later in his life) than either Tennyson or
Arnold—who are usually cited as the two other poet-superstars of the Age—Browning has probably sustained in more modern times the strongest reputation of all the premier Victorian poets. His poetry has been admired by two widely different groups of readers: (a) on the one hand, those like the devotees in the numerous Browning Societies, who viewed him as a wise philosopher who showed life to be a joyful battle and the imperfections of this world being remedied, under an all-loving God, by the perfections of the next; and (b) on the other side, those, like Ezra Pound and Randall Jarrell, who valued him less for his brave attempts to solve problems of religious doubt than for his understanding of how poetry should be written, hacking through a sometimes stultifying High-Victorian “grand style” to reveal the path that modern poetry would follow. In fact, in some respects, Browning had less in common with his fellow poets than with Victorian novelists like Dickens or polemical critics like Carlyle and Ruskin, particularly in their enormously energetic style and their affinity for the grotesque.

Drawn to themes both prosaic and violent, Browning had a gift for lyric narrative, as well as for love poetry of great sensuality, all the while experimenting with grotesque rhymes, jaw-breaking diction, and complicated syntax that mimic the incongruous and imperfect world they depict. His dramatic monologues present sensational incidents in sharp detail, with smoldering passions straining just beneath the surface of everyday (and not-so-everyday) reality, constantly unveiling the devious ways of the human mind and the complexity of human motives. His poetry habitually questions the grounds of truth, suggesting among other things that we need doubt to keep life human. Browning anticipated modern poetic movements by helping to free Victorian verse from its conventional stuffiness and overly sophisticated polish and thereby exercised much influence over such diverse twentieth-century poets as Thomas Hardy, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, and Robert Frost.