

## Patriot into Traitor

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By: Robert Browning

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 flames, 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.  
Had I said, "Good fold, mere noise repels--  
But give me your sun from yonder skies!"  
They had answered, "And afterward, what else?"

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

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.

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

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.

### KEY POINTS:

1. Dramatic Monologue
2. Herd Mentality
3. Intolerance
4. Political Immaturity of Public
5. Satire on Democracy

## About the poem

*The Patriot* is a **dramatic monologue** written by the renowned English poet and playwright Robert Browning. He is well known for his dramatic monologues and is widely celebrated as one of the foremost poets of the Victorian era. In this poem, Browning talks about Politics, Patriotism, Religious faith, and the harsh reality of the leaders who are true to their sense of patriotism. It speaks about the sacrifice of such leaders who are misunderstood by the people.

The speaker of the poem is a patriot. The poem is a monologue of this 'patriot speaker' who narrates his tale to us as he has been taken to the scaffold to be executed publicly for his 'misdeeds'. He tells us of his situation: how he was once well loved by everyone, and how he is now despised by the same people. The patriot is innocent of having done any misdeeds, and it is only out of the misunderstanding of the people that he is being put to death. His death sentence is for the wrong reason, and although he's tried to persuade the people to listen to him, it has done him no good.

'The Patriot' is a harsh **critique** on public sentiment and morality. It stresses on the point that not all decisions made or supported by the people are the right decisions, or even in their own interest. The poem has a sense of **universality** to it as history has witnessed the rise and fall of many such 'patriots' throughout its course — a grim reminder that life is uncertain!.

## Explanation

### Stanza 1

The poem starts with the patriot describing an event – a grand public welcome – that took place a year ago on that very same day. He is reminiscing the past, and he builds a picture for us as he remembers that day. His walking path was covered with lots and lots of rose petals, with myrtle mixed in them. The path was festooned with these flowers for him.

People standing on the roofs of their houses cheered for him as he passed by. They were overjoyed to see him. The spires of the church – pointed tapering roofs we generally see on old cathedrals and similar buildings – were covered with flaming flags that the people had put up for a celebration. People were overwhelmingly delighted to greet their hero and were enthusiastic to see him as he passed by.

It is only logical to assume that this grand celebration must be as a result of some achievement on the speaker's part. Perhaps it was a victory in war or the assemblage for fighting one, or winning a popular election to an office, or being nominated as a ruler, or maybe something else. It can be assumed at this point in the poem that it concerned the common people highly, and they were happy on the occasion. The patriot is seen as a public hero in this stanza who is greeted with much love and affection by the commoners.

### Stanza 2

In the second stanza of the poem, the speaker continues narrating the old story from the same day a year ago. He describes the event to the readers. People were rejoicing by ringing bells and the entire atmosphere was thick with its noise. They were standing on some kind of old structure and cheering for the patriot with their cries rocking the walls.

Now the patriot says, had he asked the public for anything – even the dearest things on which their sustenance depends – they would have readily given it to him; such great was his image. They would then ask him what else he wanted.

We can see the exuberance of the people at the sight of the. The poet is trying to establish the kind of popularity the speaker had through this stanza.

### **Stanza 3**

The third stanza of the poem is the speaker's discourse on what all he did for his country. It begins with the poet giving a subtle reference to the old Greek mythological tale of Icarus and Daedalus. Icarus was the son of the great Inventor Daedalus and the story revolves around the escape of these two men from a high tower where they were held prisoners by making wings out of bird feathers and wax. Icarus, taken aback with the ability of flight, flies too close to the sun, which causes the wax in his wings melt and his eventual fall which kills him.

Just like Icarus, the speaker admits that he too was overly ambitious and 'leaped at the sun'. Giving the sun his "loving friends to keep" may suggest that his actions somehow caused the death of his close friends. Here again, we can hypothesize that the patriot is talking about some battle that claimed the lives of his dear ones.

He did everything a man could have done to make things right. Despite this he is facing his undeserved end. He calls to attention the miserable state he is in. The terms 'harvest' and 'reap' are closely seen as common metaphors for karma, and the poet uses this to convey that what he is facing is not what he truly deserves. He says it has been a year since that day. Here, the poet ends the speaker's flashback.

### **Stanza 4**

The speaker returns to the present and talks about what he sees. He describes the present setting and in a way contrasts it with the one on the same day a year ago. Now he has been convicted and is being led to the gallows to be put to death.

As opposed to the setting in the first stanza, now the place is all empty. Now there's nobody on the roof-tops cheering him. Only old men who are taken down by palsy (a disease) and unable to cross the threshold of their houses are watching the patriot as he marches towards his death.

The reason why no one is there to see the speaker is because people have gathered at the Shambles' gate, the gate of the gallows, to see him die. The people want to be where the action is. The speaker further makes the heart-touching comment that the best sight is at the gate of the slaughterhouse, or at the very foot of the scaffold.

### **Stanza 5**

The fifth stanza is the continuation of the previous one and further describes the speaker's humiliation at the hands of the people. The poet starts with filling up the setting even more. It is raining as the speaker is walking towards the scaffold. His hands are tied behind by a tight rope – so tight that it cuts his wrists. He has now arrived closer to the 'Shambles' Gate' where all the people are gathered. The patriot is in his own mind, knowing the steadfast certainty of death ahead of him.

As he is walking, he thinks he is bleeding from his forehead. He can only feel the trickling of blood. People throwing stones at him are causing the injuries. So stones have replaced the petals of roses! He says that the people who are throwing stones are the ones who have an active mind, and are aware of his 'misdeeds'. The speaker doesn't seem to be angry with these people for throwing stones at him. It suggests, that despite the treatment he is receiving, he doesn't blame the people; he knows that they have misunderstood him.

#### **Stanza 6**

The last stanza of the poem reflects on the patriot's death. It is full of philosophical and religious ideas. *"Thus I entered and thus I go"* – his entry and exit from life, position and people's minds in the presence of so many others – sums up the speaker's life well.

He says that in (his) triumphs, people have dropped (him) down dead. This suggests that he looks at his predicament as a triumph. He believes that he stood by the right things and thus considers himself victorious in defeat.

The final three lines of the stanza deal with the ideas of the speaker. Yet again we see Browning's stout religious belief. He believes that god might say "Your sins were already washed away when you died. The people sought to it. They punished you; what now do you expect from me? You are now free of all corruption". Thus, the patriot thinks that the punishment he got in the mortal world has purged him, and that he hopes to go to heaven instead of hell. He feels safer knowing that god knows he stood for what he thought was right and thus he will be safe under him.