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Robert Browning's Prospice: A Hopeful Prayer or a Suicide Letter

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Abstract:
Literature has always been one of the modes of expressing one's emotions, however dark they are. One's thoughts are spread to others, by simply writing them down, and expressing them. In its world-creating capacity, the literary texts represent and describe the feelings of characters and narrators. Since authors are creating narrators and characters and what is happening to them, they are able to let readers know what these creatures of their own minds feel, and how they respond emotionally to what befalls them. Narrators, ultimately extensions of the author's voice, have the unique ability to guide readers in understanding characters' emotional landscapes, whether subtly through indirect means or explicitly through direct commentary. Indirectly, narrators can reveal characters' emotions by portraying their reactions—gestures, expressions, or speech patterns—allowing readers to infer their inner states. Alternatively, through direct commentary, narrators provide explicit interpretations or insights, offering a clearer, more straightforward analysis of the characters' feelings. This dual capacity allows narrators to not only present events but to shape readers' perspectives, fostering a deeper emotional connection and enhancing the story's interpretive layers. In short, a substantial part of the mimetic dimension of literature is concerned with the representation of feelings. These feelings include misery, pain, sufferings, joy, life and death. The relationship between literature and death or suicide has been a profound and enduring one, spanning centuries and cultures. Suicide, as both a human act and a philosophical concept, has inspired countless literary works, serving as a powerful symbol of despair, existential inquiry, and rebellion against the constraints of society and fate. In literature, suicide has often been depicted not merely as a personal tragedy but as a response to the larger human condition.

Keywords: Literature, Expression, Pain, Suffering, Help, Absurdity of Existence, Sense of Entrapment, Hope, Resilience, Escapism, Defense Mechanism, Personal Abyss.

Introduction:

Death is both literal and symbolic in the field of literature and so is suicide. The act itself possesses the ability to cause controversy in the real world as well in the literary world. The world had witnessed authors such as Sylvia Plath, Ernest Hemingway, Anne Saxton and Virginia Wolf who took their lives. We have also seen many, who have talked amply about death in their writings by creating the characters who were willing to end themselves as an answer to everything. Poets such as Emily Dickinson gave us a sense of passive departure from life in her works where as Ernest Hemingway's heroes could be seen as survivors. Both kind of writings can be interpreted as either a search for hope or cry for help. It is unfortunate to lose someone in this way but it hurts more to have missed their screams for help through their writings, as we did several times.

Antiquity and Early Literature:

The earliest recorded instances of suicide in literature can be found in ancient texts such as *The Iliad* and *The Aeneid*. In *The Iliad*, the Greek hero Ajax takes his own life after a humiliating defeat, unable to cope with the shame and dishonor. Similarly, Dido, the queen of Carthage in *The Aeneid*, kills herself after being abandoned by Aeneas, representing the fusion of personal grief with political betrayal.

In classical philosophy, attitudes toward suicide were diverse. The Stoics, such as Seneca, often regarded suicide as a rational choice in the face of intolerable suffering or injustice. By contrast, Christian theology, which came to dominate Western thought during the Middle Ages, condemned suicide as a mortal sin, fundamentally altering its portrayal in literature.

The Renaissance and Enlightenment:

With the Renaissance came a revival of classical ideas, but Christian doctrine still heavily influenced the portrayal of suicide. In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the famous "To be or not to be" soliloquy encapsulates a deep contemplation of suicide, but within the moral and theological confines of the era. Hamlet reflects on the pain of life but is held back from the act by fear of the unknown after death—a fear rooted in Christian teachings about the afterlife.

During the Enlightenment, attitudes toward suicide began to shift, influenced by the rise of secular philosophy and a growing emphasis on individual autonomy. Writers such as Voltaire and David Hume challenged religious prohibitions, with Hume famously arguing in his essay *On Suicide* that individuals had the right to end their own lives if they so choose.

Romanticism and the Cult of the Tragic Hero:

The Romantic era brought an intensification of the association between suicide and artistic genius or extreme emotional sensitivity. The figure of the tragic hero, often isolated and in conflict with society, became central to literary representations of suicide. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) is perhaps the most famous example. The protagonist, Werther, falls into despair after an unrequited love and ultimately takes his own life. The novel's impact was so profound that it reportedly sparked a wave of "copycat" suicides, a phenomenon now known as the "Werther Effect."

This era also saw a growing fascination with suicide as a philosophical statement—an assertion of personal freedom in the face of societal or existential constraints. The Romantics often viewed suicide as a form of rebellion, a refusal to submit to the mediocrity of life or the tyranny of fate.

Modernism and Existentialism:

In the 20th century, as existentialist philosophy gained prominence, suicide was increasingly portrayed as a response to the absurdity of existence. Writers like Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre grappled with the question of whether life was worth living in a world devoid of inherent meaning. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), Camus famously declared that the only truly serious philosophical question is whether or not to commit suicide. For Camus, the recognition of life's absurdity requires rebellion rather than surrender, and suicide is seen as a failure to confront the challenges of existence.

In the same period, literature began to explore the psychological dimensions of suicide more deeply, influenced by advances in psychoanalysis. The works of Virginia Woolf, such as *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and *The Waves* (1931), as well as her own tragic end, embody a modernist approach that examines the internal, often fragmented experiences of individuals facing despair. Woolf's portrayal of characters who

struggle with mental illness and suicidal ideation marked a shift toward a more nuanced and empathetic literary treatment of suicide.

Contemporary Literature:

In contemporary literature, suicide continues to be a prominent theme, though it is often explored in more complex, multifaceted ways. The rise of memoirs and autobiographical fiction has led to deeply personal explorations of suicidal thoughts and experiences. Authors like Sylvia Plath, whose novel *The Bell Jar* (1963) offers a harrowing depiction of mental illness and the protagonist's attempted suicide, have been influential in shaping modern discussions of depression and suicide.

In addition, contemporary writers have increasingly examined the social and systemic factors contributing to suicide, such as economic hardship, discrimination, and trauma. This broader approach reflects an understanding that suicide is not merely an individual act but is influenced by larger societal forces.

Literature has long been a medium through which individuals express the depth of human experience, particularly when grappling with feelings of despair, isolation, or suffering. When literature functions as a "cry for help," it often embodies the existential struggles of the author or the characters, manifesting as a desperate appeal for understanding, empathy, or escape from an intolerable psychological or emotional state. This form of expression, woven into various literary genres, reflects not only personal anguish but also broader societal, philosophical, and existential concerns.

Psychological and Emotional Expression:

At its core, literature as a cry for help is often rooted in the writer's or character's psychological distress, with the text serving as an outlet for emotions that are otherwise suppressed or inarticulable. This is especially apparent in confessional literature, where authors reveal their most personal and painful experiences in a direct, unfiltered way. Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* is a prime example, where the protagonist's deteriorating mental health mirrors Plath's own struggles with depression. The novel's raw portrayal of suicidal ideation, feelings of alienation, and the overwhelming weight of societal expectations embodies a profound need for validation and support.

In such cases, the act of writing becomes a form of self-therapy, a way to externalize inner turmoil and give shape to chaotic emotions. The "cry for help" is not always a conscious plea; rather, it emerges organically from the depth of the writer's experience, seeking understanding or relief through narrative. The intensity of emotional expression in these works serves to bridge the gap between the individual and the broader audience, inviting readers into the personal abyss of the author or character.

Existential and Philosophical Dimensions:

On a deeper level, the cry for help in literature often transcends personal anguish, entering into the realm of existential and philosophical inquiry. When authors depict characters who are overwhelmed by life's meaninglessness or the absurdity of existence, the cry for help becomes a form of existential rebellion. Albert Camus' *The Stranger* explores this theme through the character of Meursault, whose indifference to life's moral and social structures reflects an underlying sense of isolation from the world's constructed meanings. Though Meursault does not explicitly call for help, his emotional detachment and eventual confrontation with his own mortality serve as a silent plea for understanding in a universe he perceives as indifferent.

Similarly, works by Franz Kafka, such as *The Metamorphosis*, portray characters trapped in absurd, alienating circumstances, reflecting Kafka's own feelings of isolation and despair. The transformation of Gregor Samsa into an insect is a metaphorical cry for help—an embodiment of the sense of entrapment and dehumanization that Kafka himself experienced in his personal and professional life. The grotesque absurdity of Gregor's plight serves as an allegory for the helplessness and frustration felt by those who are marginalized or misunderstood by society.

Social and Political Underpinnings:

In addition to personal and existential struggles, literature as a cry for help often addresses broader social, political, or economic contexts. When writers explore themes such as oppression, injustice, or systemic inequality, their work can be seen as a collective plea for societal change. These works channel individual suffering into a critique of societal structures, suggesting that the cry for help is not solely an individual appeal but a call for collective action.

For example, in Richard Wright's *Native Son*, the protagonist Bigger Thomas' descent into violence and despair is framed by the racial injustices of early 20th-century America. His personal sense of entrapment is inextricably linked to the systemic racism that limits his opportunities and warps his sense of self. Wright's depiction of Bigger's inner turmoil and societal alienation acts as a cry for recognition of the dehumanizing effects of racism. Similarly, in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, the haunting presence of a dead child symbolizes the inescapable trauma of slavery, and the novel as a whole represents a plea for reconciliation with America's brutal history.

Literary Devices as a Cry for Help:

From a formal perspective, the way literature expresses this cry for help often involves specific literary techniques, such as fragmented narratives, unreliable narrators, or stream-of-consciousness writing, that reflect the inner disarray of the character or author. Virginia Woolf, in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Waves*, utilizes stream-of-consciousness to capture the fractured, often chaotic thought processes of characters who are overwhelmed by the pressures of life and society. This technique allows readers to experience the characters' emotional states in a visceral way, blurring the lines between reality and perception.

In addition, symbols and motifs in literature frequently act as vehicles for the cry for help. In Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the character Blanche DuBois' increasing reliance on illusion and fantasy reflects her inability to cope with the harsh realities of life. Her dependence on the kindness of strangers, echoed in her famous line, becomes a metaphor for her deep vulnerability and yearning for understanding in a world that is indifferent to her suffering.

Robert Browning, a person whom many have agreed to consider a reason for Elizabeth Barret's will to live. Her demise had made Browning to compose *Prospice* which literally means 'to look forward'. And what exactly was it that he looked ahead of her death? The poem feels like a journey of finding his beloved who is now in another world. The urge to get pass this life and reach towards death starts with the fact that he sees 'no barriers' between him and death then, when she does not exist in the same world as he does. He is not talking about fleeting episode with death but to 'taste the whole of it., to accept it completely and get submerged in it. A sense of urgency is there, an agitation, a tenacity to reach the place where she resides now. He is certain of her whereabouts and determined to complete his 'journey'. A furor, a frenzy that he is feeling after her departure, he seems eager to end it all. Only in the last three lines the calmness emerges, a tranquility surfaces, where he is with her. There, this suicide-note ends, disguised as a prayer,

a prayer with a hidden 'Amen'.

While reading the poem, readers pray along with the speaker to meet his beloved, but also wants to stop him from willingly going to the dearth of death. Finding a solace in death, without the fear of abandonment is really daunting and understandable too. A 'cold', 'dark', 'painful' image, longing for a light; we sense a hope that it might be possible for the speaker to get united with his beloved in the world beyond. A hankering to 'clasp' and never let go of her is there but along with the fear that this moment might vanish and, in that trepidation, God acts as an assurance. God, being the one who took her away for the first time, He might do it again; hence, we witness a suicide letter turns into a prayer. The 'barrier' about which he talks is his beloved, she was the one standing firmly between him and the death, but the 'barriers fall', now there is no reason for him to live.

As the poem starts with a fearless question which by the end seems like a rhetoric – 'fear death?' – a challenge to all the painful imagery that one feels nearing the death. At some points, this work gives us the conjecture of a provocation or a dare to death to come and get him, a bit of teasing here and there. For Browning, it was a way to find and alternative to this world where resides. Although, he kept living for almost three decades with her memories.

Conclusion:

Literature as a cry for help serves as a profound expression of the human condition, capturing the complexities of emotional, existential, and societal struggles. Whether through the confessional voice of the author, the internal suffering of a character, or the broader critique of societal injustices, this cry manifests as a plea for empathy, understanding, and change. It transcends the boundaries of personal anguish, offering readers a glimpse into the universal aspects of human suffering while simultaneously inviting them to respond to that suffering with compassion and action. Literature, in this sense, becomes not only an artistic expression but a lifeline—a means through which the deepest human cries for help can be heard and understood. *Prospice* suggests a suicide letter disguised as a prayer on a very personal level, loss of love and struggle to find a reason to live and yet a resilient hopeful person reflecting a way to fight and struggling to live on.

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