**Browning’s Philosophy**

**Reference:** [**www.enotes**](http://www.enotes)**.com**

This poem argues is actually turned to by many critics as being an excellent example of how Browning used the poetic form of the dramatic [monologue](https://www.enotes.com/topics/literary-terms/complete-index/monologue?en_action=hh_answer_body_click&en_label=%2Fhomework-help%2Fdiscuss-brownings-rabi-ben-azra-philosophical-poem-418469%23answer-601834&en_category=internal_campaign) to successfully present his own philosophy and religious ideas on life. In particular, what comes across so strongly in "[Rabbi Ben Ezra](https://www.enotes.com/topics/rabbi-ben-ezra?en_action=hh_answer_body_click&en_label=%2Fhomework-help%2Fdiscuss-brownings-rabi-ben-azra-philosophical-poem-418469%23answer-601834&en_category=internal_campaign)" is the way in which old age is a better and superior state to youth in the way that it gives greater faith and wisdom in god and is a preparation for the ultimate spiritual epiphany which will occur after death. The philosophical nature of this poem is therefore presented in this view of the aging process and how it prepares humans for death, which Browning saw as the final reaching of the perfection in heaven. Note how the first stanza of this poem presents these ideas:

Grow old along with me!

The best is yet to be,

The last of life, for which the first was made:

Our times are in His hand

Who saith, "A whole I planned,

Youth shows but half; trust God; see all nor be afraid!"

The voice of the speaker in this poem is therefore characterised by resilient optimism in his declaration that "the best is yet to be" and that God is ultimately in control of our life, so growing old is nothing to be afraid of. On the contrary, the joyful imperative of the first line indicates how important it is to grow old and to gain the greater wisdom that is not available to humans in their youth. The philosophical nature of this poem is therefore present in the way that it explores Browning's beliefs through examining a series of opposites such as youth and age, and ignorance and wisdom, through the spectrum of the aging process and ultimately, Browning's beliefs about the imperfections of the world and the perfection of heaven.

**Robert Browning: Poems Summary and Analysis of "Rabbi Ben Ezra"**

**Reference: www.gradesaver.com**

**Summary**

The poem is narrated by [Rabbi Ben Ezra](https://www.gradesaver.com/robert-browning-poems/study-guide/character-list#rabbi-ben-ezra), a real 12th-century scholar. The piece does not have a clearly identified audience or dramatic situation. The Rabbi begs his audience to "grow old along with [him]" (line 1). He stresses that age is where the best of life is realized, whereas "youth shows but half" (line 6). He acknowledges that youth lacks insight into life, since it is characteristically so concerned with living in the moment that it is unable to consider the deeper questions.

Though youth will fade, what replaces it is the wisdom and insight of age, which recognizes that pain is a part of life, but which learns to appreciate joy more because of the pain. "Be our joys three parts pain!" (line 34). All the while, one should appreciate what comes, since all adds to our growth towards God, and embrace the "paradox" that life's failure brings success. He notes how, when we are young and our bodies are strong, we aspire to impossible greatness, and he explains that this type of action makes man into a "brute" (line 44).

With age comes acceptance and love of the flesh, even though it pulls us "ever to the earth" (line 63), while some yearn to reach a higher plane. A wise, older man realizes that all things are gifts from God, and the flesh's limitations are to be appreciated even as we recognize them as limitations.

His reason for begging patience is that our life on Earth is but one step of our soul's experience, and so our journey will continue. Whereas youth is inclined to "rage" (line 100), age is inclined to await death patiently. Both are acceptable and wonderful, and each compliments the other.

What complicates the philosophy is that we are wont to disagree with each other, to have different values and loves. However, the Rabbi begs that we not give too much credence to the earthly concerns that engender argument and dissention, and trust instead that we are given by God and hence are fit for this struggle. The transience of time does not matter, since this is only one phase of our existence; we need not grow anxious about disagreements and unrealized goals, since the ultimate truth is out of our reach anyway. Again, failure breeds success. He warns against being distracted by the "plastic circumstance" (line 164) of the present moment.

He ends by stressing that all is part of a unified whole, even if we cannot glimpse the whole. At the same time that age should approve of youth and embrace the present moment, it must also be constantly looking upwards towards a heaven to come and hence simultaneously willing to renounce the present.

**Analysis**

"Rabbi Ben Ezra" is unique in Browning's oeuvre of dramatic monologues because though it is written from the perspective of a historical figure, it does not contain any clear audience or dramatic situation. As such, it is more a philosophical text than a proper poem. Much of its meaning is dissected in the "Summary" above, though this section will provide some context and simplification.

Rabbi Ben Ezra was a real historical figure of the 12th century, known primarily for his philosophy that suggested good sometimes lies in its opposite (badness, or pain). Browning often takes a figure from the past and uses dramatic irony to propose a conflict between the words and the meaning, but here, lacking any sense of the audience to whom he speaks (a congregation? God? Himself?) or of any stakes (what he hopes to gain), we are merely to dissect the philosophy.

The Rabbi's philosophy is a paradox: the struggles of life hold little meaning since life is but our soul's first step, yet the wise man should appreciate everything about life. He praises old age as the time when our soul reaches best fruition on earth, because only in age can this paradox be appreciated. The Rabbi is willing to admire and appreciate every stage of life, even as he is quick to show the folly of those stages. For instance, youth operates from a place of *carpe diem*, 'siezing the day' constantly, and trying to transcend the limits of the body. The Rabbi notes that with age comes an awareness of the pain and difficulty of life, but he says that a wise man should not be weighted down but rather lightened by that realization. He preaches that we should accept the present, but not let the concerns of the present dominate us. What lies at the center of his creed is patience and complicity to what comes. He does not deny the basic tenants of a *carpe diem* philosophy: time is short and transient; the body does not keep its youth; the world is full of wonderful things to be exploited. But at the same time, he believes that focusing on the ways of the world distracts us from our greater goal, which is to continue growing even in the afterlife.

However, it is important to see that while he praises age as superior, it is only superior because it recognizes the beauty of youth's yearnings. Without the latter, the former does not have the insight to both admire and renounce such actions. The most important lesson we learn in old age is that we can know nothing and never truly transcend ourselves. By accepting this limitation, we learn to be content and patient as we near death, which is not an end but a release to a greater sphere where our soul may continue to grow.

The Rabbi embraces body and soul, youth and age, death and life, pain and joy, all the while recognizing that the contradictions are the goal. They are beyond our comprehension, and by accepting that can we find true serenity.