"The Last Ride Together" which was first published in 1855 in Volume I of a collection of Browning’s poems titled, ‘Men and Women’ is a dramatic lyric and monologue which is regarded as one of the best and noblest of all the love poems written by him. It is an exploration of the end of a love affair—an affair that has been ended by the woman. Browning suggests through the narrator, who is the rejected lover, that rather than feeling sad about the end of an affair, he should feel happy and proud about the love that he did experience and which remains etched on his memory. The feelings of the lover are imagined by the poet but the optimism behind the lover’s words are part of Browning’s personal philosophy and hence, in many ways, the lover is Browning’s mouthpiece. Browning therefore begins his poem with the narrator gracefully accepting that his relationship with his beloved is over. Resigning himself to the fact that “this was written and needs must be”, the narrator feels no bitterness or resentment for his beloved. His “whole heart rises up to bless” her name and all he asks for is her consent to have one last ride together.

When his beloved finally accedes to his request after a lot of hesitation and careful thought, the narrator is overjoyed because his “last thought was at least not vain”. The thought of spending one day more in the company of his beloved, breathing and riding together, makes him feel ‘deified’. The narrator even entertains the hope that ‘the world may end tonight’ in which case his happiness will become eternal as he will forever be with his beloved.

When his beloved leans against his breast for a moment just before commencing on the last ride, the narrator experiences not just ‘joy and fear’ but heavenly ecstasy. The kind of bliss he feels is similar to that which one feels on seeing a cloud in the western evening sky, surging and swelling like a sea-wave and illuminated by the light of the setting sun, moon and stars; a kind of spiritual bliss that makes one feel that ‘flesh must fade for heaven was here’.

As the two finally begin their last ride together, the narrator’s soul which had become wrinkled and disfigured with grief due to his beloved’s rejection, opens out and expands with joy, ‘freshening and fluttering in the wind’. The narrator categorically dismisses his hope of attaining the lady’s love as a thing of the past. He feels that it will serve no purpose to worry or wondering about whether he might have changed things through a different approach towards his relationship with his beloved. While he may have gained her love, there is also the possibility that “she might have hated” him, thus leaving him in a most wretched position. Hence, instead of despairing over a lost cause, the narrator chooses to rejoice in the fact that though he does not have the love of this lady, he is at least not hated by her and “here we are riding, she and I”.

The narrator goes on to console himself with the thought that he is not alone in having tried and failed in achieving his life’s purpose. As he and his beloved ride swiftly, and the landscape rushes by on either side, the narrator feels as if his ‘spirit flew” and in this moment of ecstasy, he sees the world in a whole new light.

Reflecting on the fact that failure is the lot of humanity, he realises that men have little to show by way of actual achievement, “yet no less bear up beneath their unsuccess”. Actual achievement seems negligible in comparison with the great amount that still remains to be done. All men set out
with the highest of hopes which are not, however accomplished. Thus, their past which was so full of lofty aims gives way to a present that is not so hopeful. However, the narrator does not wish to complain of his own failure in love. He wants to make the most of the pleasure he derives from riding with his beloved.

Continuing to reflect on the fate of mankind, the narrator comments on how thought and deed can never be equally balanced because the hands are never able to execute every idea that the brain thinks of. The lover says that he at least, has achieved some success in enjoying a ride in the company of his beloved and seeing her breathe by his side. He feels that he is better off than many others because great effort rarely meets with complete success. A statesman’s devotion to his country gets the inadequate reward of a short obituary while a brave soldier who sacrifices his life for his country receives the petty reward of a “flag stuck on a heap of bones” and an epitaph in Westminster Abbey. The lover feels that he is much better off than these men because his “riding is better”.

He is also better off than a poet who may have the ability to express beautiful things in melodious and rhythmic language but never succeeds in achieving the ideals that he considers best for other men. He ends up “poor, sick, old ere your time” and while a poet can only describe through his imagination a lover’s joy in riding with his beloved, the narrator actually experiences it.

The narrator also feels that he is more fortunate than a sculptor or a musician. A sculptor may spend twenty long years in making a beautiful statue of Venus, the Greek goddess of love and beauty. While people will praise it, they will turn away from it the moment they see “yonder girl that fords the burn”. The sculptor will have to accept that life is always greater than art.

The musician too, is unsuccessful. He grows old composing music but the only praise he gets is that his opera music sounds very nice. His music will not be admired forever because tastes in music change with time. The narrator is more fortunate because while he too, devoted his youth to courting his beloved, he has won the reward of the pleasure of riding in her company.

The lover goes on to say that no one knows ‘what’s fit for us’. Man’s life does not end in this world. He has a life beyond, too. Hence, some desires must be left unfulfilled on this earth so that one may “have a bliss to die with”. If the lover had achieved his life’s greatest aim on this earth and won the love of his beloved, he would have achieved perfect happiness but then, heaven would no longer “seem best”. Since he has not won his love in this life, he can die with the hope of getting his beloved’s love in the life beyond. His ride is joyful but “heaven and she are beyond this ride”.

The thought now strikes the lover’s mind that heaven is nothing but the realisation of one’s highest hopes and aspirations. At the present moment, his beloved and he, ‘fair and strong’, are riding together, looking up towards the sky where man imagines heaven, the flower and culminating glory of man’s life to be. The lover reaches the height of his imaginative hope as he considers the possibility that the ride may continue forever and the instant could be “made eternity” with the old life of the narrator and his beloved staying unchanged except in the intensity and depth of their emotional experiences. Hence, the poem ends with the soaring hope that paradise might just be the bliss of the lover and his beloved, riding together forever.