

**Institutional Learning Management System**  
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**e-text**

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**Unit: 3**

**Module No. 1**

**Robert Browning**

**“Fra Lippo Lippi”**

## Introduction

Robert Browning (1812-1889) was dramatist, humorist, lyricist, painter, musician, philosopher and scholar, having sufficient mastery over each of them. His paternal grandfather was a slave-owner in Saint Kitts, the West Indies. His father, Robert Browning, was a clerk in the Bank of England and earned enough to give the family a good life. His father was an abolitionist [he supported the abolition of slavery]. Browning's father was a literary collector, and he had built a library of nearly 6,000 books. Many rare books were available in his library. His mother was an accomplished musician. His father encouraged his interest (along with his sister, Sarianna) in literature and the arts. Browning was not interested in attending school. So, his father arranged for his education at home. His private library was useful in Browning's education. By the time he was fourteen years old, Browning knew Greek, Latin, Italian and French fluently. He became a great admirer of the Romantic poets, especially Shelley. It is recorded that when he was a young boy he debated with himself whether he should become a painter and musician as well as a poet. He decided to become a poet. He depended financially on his father, who sponsored the publication of his early anthologies. It is seen that the latent qualities of painter and musician have developed themselves in his poetry. He writes about painters because he has a kinship with them: "Their pictures are windows through which he sees into their souls".

For him there are two realities: Life and Thought—the dramatic and the metaphysical—for both of which he has one point of view and one manner of treatment. For him every man is an epitome of the universe, a centre of creation. He studies character: it is character in action. He makes every character explain itself by its own speech, and very often by speech that seems false and sophisticated, so that it appears to be personal and individual and explains its speaker, perhaps by exposure. The single speaker can consciously or unconsciously exhibit his own soul through the propriety of the monologue. Browning has painted the first dawn of the modern spirit by distilling the very essence of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. The men and women who move around in that new world of his creation are as varied as life itself, exhibiting his preference for the unusual and complex, rather than the simple and ordinary. Allied to Browning's originality in temper, topic, manner of treatment and special form, is his originality in style.

Browning's chief contribution to literature rests upon his representation of the complex human relationships he came across in his contemporary society in and through the dramatic monologues. Anthologies of Robert Browning's dramatic monologues are *Men and Women*, *Dramatic Lyrics*, *Dramatic Romances* and *Dramatis Personae*.

## Objectives

After going through the module the readers will learn the following:

- Browning's contribution, as a poet, to the form of the dramatic monologue.
- The importance of the poem "Fra Lippo Lippi" in the gamut of dramatic monologues.
- How it brings out Renaissance humanism.
- The relation between art and religion.

### 1. "Fra Lippo Lippi"

#### 1.1 The Poem as a Dramatic Monologue

##### 1.1.1 Features of Dramatic Monologue

- What are the characteristic features of a dramatic monologue?
- The term 'dramatic' clarifies the monologue. It is a dramatic-situation-kind-of-poem. It focuses on one dramatic moment / a short time-span. It is conversational in tone. It reveals the character of the speaker and the relation of the speaker with the listener(s) of the monologue.

##### 1.1.2 Its origin and development

The initial signs of the dramatic monologue could be found in Tudor poetry, particularly in the sonnets. The poems of the Scottish poet Robert Burns (1759-1796) are definitely precursors of Browning's dramatic monologues. In the Romantic Age, elements of the dramatic monologue could be found in some poems by Wordsworth and Coleridge. Browning focussed on a particularly dramatic moment/time which would reveal the complex nature of the speaker and the relation of the speaker with the listener(s).

##### 1.1.3 *Men and Women* (1855)

Browning began writing *Men and Women* in 1853. It is a collection of fifty-one poems in two volumes. The first fifty are spoken by different narrators. The fifty-first, "One Word More", is spoken by Browning himself. It is addressed to his wife. In *Men and Women*, Browning's special instrument, the dramatic monologue, has been brought to perfection. The main poems in the collection are five blank verse pieces, "Andrea del Sarto", "Fra Lippo Lippi", "Cleon", "Karshish" and "Bishop Blougram". Each is a masterpiece of poetry, being itself a drama containing the essence of a life, condensed into a single episode which is indicated in a combination of discourse, conversation, argument, soliloquy and reminiscence. Besides being the presentation of a character, each moves in a certain atmosphere of its own—philosophical, ethical and artistic. Of these five poems, "Andrea del Sarto" and "Fra Lippo Lippi" deal with art.

## **1.2 The Source for “Fra Lippo Lippi”**

Giorgio Vasari's (1511-1574) *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* is the book from where Browning has received sufficient information which he has incorporated in “Fra Lippo Lippi”.

### **1.2.1 Vasari's documentation of Filippo Lippi's Life**

Filippo Lippi (1406-1469) was an Italian painter of the fifteenth century and a Carmelite monk. He was the son of a butcher in Florence who died when Lippo was two years old. He went to live with his aunt, Mona Lapaccia, who was very poor and so she gave him to the nearby Carmelite monastery when he was eight years old. Eventually he was trained to be a priest and became one in about 1425. As he watched Massaccio at work, he got inspiration to become a painter. His paintings made him famous and soon he received the patronage of the powerful and rich Medici family. After having spent his life as a successful painter he died in Spoleto. His personal life was very colourful and intriguing.

## **1.3 Renaissance Humanism**

Renaissance humanism celebrated intellectual freedom and individual expression. It may be said that Renaissance Humanism closely followed the philosophy of Epicurus, and saw it as harmonious with Christianity – Christ shows the most enjoyable life of all and the one most full of true pleasure. Renaissance Humanism focused on man as an individual, persevering towards expression of the freedom of the individual's thought and expression--freedom of the mind from the hold of asceticism, asserting the supremacy of reason. As a result *studia humanitas* flourished. It was the study of the humanities (grammar, rhetoric, history, poetry and moral philosophy). Therefore, these studies reflected a blend of idealism and materialism. It also induced an artistic delight in the beauties of the world.

A few Renaissance humanists are:

- 1. Francesco Petrarca (1304-1374)
- 2. Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375)
- 3. Cosimo dé Medici (1389-1464)

## **2. Application**

### **2.1 “Fra Lippo Lippi” as a Dramatic Monologue**

The Dramatic Monologue has three constituent parts: the occasion, the speaker and the hearer. The first, the occasion, can be best understood by considering the purpose of the poem. The occasion is the situation in which the friar is introduced—caught by the guard, beyond midnight, in a doubtful neighbourhood. However, he displays sufficient capability to confront his captors with sufficient information about himself and his connections, to intimidate them. The speaker exhibits first and foremost the bubbling up of a restless and irrepressibly comic nature—the born Bohemian compressed but not contained by the rough rope-girdle of the monk. We find the simplest form of humour—the merry laughter of an unaffected nature, the effervescence of a sparkling and overflowing brain in “Fra Lippo Lippi”. This is a poem infused with biting wit and stinging irony. He is Browning’s finest figure of comedy. The jolly, jovial tone of the poem, its hearty humour and high spirits, and the breathless rush and hurry of the verse, render liveliness to the scapegrace painter. As in a typical dramatic monologue, he expresses himself indirectly. He speaks on a significant occasion to a definite audience: the captain of the troupe of guards and his men who have caught the truant monk. Consequently, the thoughts of the speaker often bear the impress of the hearers. Fra Lippo avoids professional embarrassment for his sportive sexuality and Bohemian sensibilities. Attempting to change the guards’ perceptions, saying, “Zooks, what’s to blame? you think you see a monk” (3)! and trying to win their sympathy, Lippo establishes a disarming fellowship of arrested development with them and identifies himself primarily as a painter from whom they should expect abnormal values. His clerical appearance falsifies his real character, which he insists they recognize so that their own blend of carnal sensations and immature artistic awareness will license his behaviour.

As the composition of the painting falls from the sublime to the ridiculous, Lippo hastens its figural destruction by manoeuvring himself into it, putting himself in the flattering position of being both its creative beginning and thematic end. With mock disbelief and surprising ease he joins this “pure company” (368) from which his notorious sexual escapades should exclude him. By echoing his earlier reference to an impure “company” of mice and men (11), Lippo satirically implicates the heavenly host in parasitical lechery. Apparently having over-reached himself morally, Lippo faces judgment by “the celestial presence” (372), just as his sexual excesses have put him in a compromising civil corner from which he must defend himself. He does this by placing artistic creativity beyond good and evil. The “agent” of his “salvation” is not, as Herbert Tucker, Jr., suggests, “an angelic figure of his own creation” (206), but rather someone “[l]ike the Prior’s niece . . . Saint Lucy, [he] would say” (387). Using this light woman as the model for a saintly defense of his place in the picture, he discounts moral integrity in an artistic cause that never claims to sublimate his rebellious lust. The promiscuous niece’s “good word for [Lippo] in

the nick” (386) makes her his sexual and creative accomplice, turns Scriptural rule into venereal misrule, and “seems to prevent his artistic head from ending up on a monastic platter” (Hackett 118). The Coronation of the Virgin cannot long remain a venerable subject as it projects Lippo's vengery and becomes the crowning renunciation of moral responsibility - an “apt word’ (342) to escape spiritual judgment. Browning seems to subtly insert in the monologue spoken by Fra Lippo the question concerning excess: both moral and religious.

## **2.2 Reflection of Renaissance Humanism in “Fra Lippo Lippi”**

Browning has given a wonderfully realistic portrait of Fra Lippo Lippi. To this artist life in its fullness was the only source of joy—expressing the true Renaissance spirit. He was a monk, not by choice, but by compulsion, who was compelled by the medieval codes of conduct and discipline of the Carmelite monastery to restrict himself within the parameters set by its system. Right from the beginning of his monastic life he resented it and did not find it necessary to follow the ‘rules’. He was a free mind. He made his own choices. So, the Carmelite monastic order could not keep him back for long. His artistic talent took him beyond the walls of the monastery to the secular world outside it. He combined his monastic training and the ways of the secular world to express in his paintings a realistic approach to the spiritual which was a celebration of Renaissance humanism. Fra Lippo has expressed the true end and aim of art and the false asceticism of the so-called ‘religious’ art, in his characteristic confessions and comments, as the innovator in the tradition of religious painting. Browning's poem is so celebrated for its depiction of an artist's coming to maturity amid societal and religious prejudices that it has become one of those “things we have passed / Perhaps a hundred times nor cared to see” (301-302). Lippo rejects as simplistic the Prior's conventional notion of art as a morally potent medium because he sees the priesthood as still bogus or duplicitous, despite its access to spiritualized artistry, and sees Christianity's failure to uplift humankind - even “after the passion of a thousand years” (157). Since the cloister is a rat hole of carnality, Lippo appropriately “put[s] the front on it” (141) by indiscriminately portraying a gallery of rogues and clerics. The less inspiring his art is in terms of ethical worthiness, the more realistically it represents the morally base Carmelites. Just as art excludes moral service, so the artist reads religious subjects profanely. Consequently, untroubled that his works do not “instigate to prayer” (316), Lippo reduces religious iconology to banalities. Lippo demands that he be looked at as an (ir)religious painter, as one with an inherent sacrilegiousness in his imagination and artistry. He repudiates on justifiable artistic grounds a technique that does not respect accuracy and realism: “Thus, yellow does for white/ When what you put for yellow's simply black,/ And any sort of meaning looks intense/ When all beside itself means and looks

naught” (201-04). Nevertheless, he uses the same strategy himself to (dis)colour moral issues of a conventionally black or white nature.

### 2.3 Fra Lippo Lippi’s Contribution to Renaissance Art

The Prior intends religious art to convey ethical doctrine directly and emphatically: “Make them forget there's such a thing as flesh./ Your business is to paint the souls of men — “ (182-83) These lines embody the essence of Medieval painting, which Fra Lippo Lippi denounced in his artistic practice. Lippo would demystify moral norms to coincide with an artistry that just as reductively celebrates the sensations of a material soul that can afford not to hear the plainer meaning of Catholic practice. Fra Lippo Lippi’s contribution, as an artist belonging to the early Renaissance, to painting can be understood from a quick look at the kind of painting he was denouncing in his practice. He claims: “I'm my own master, paint now as I please —“ (226). This line contains the essence of Renaissance humanism, which also influences painting. Fra Lippo Lippi is told by his superiors in the monastery:

It's art's decline, my son!  
You're not of the true painters, great and old;  
Brother Angelico’s the man, you'll find;  
Brother Lorenzo stands his single peer:  
Fag on at flesh, you'll never make the third! (233-37)

As a contrast to this insistence, Fra Lippo Lippi explains Renaissance Humanism to the lay man:

For, don't you mark? we're made so that we love  
First when we see them painted, things we have passed  
Perhaps a hundred times nor cared to see;  
And so they are better, painted — better to us,  
Which is the same thing. Art was given for that;  
God uses us to help each other so,  
Lending our minds out. (300-306)

Lippo continues with his argument:

This world's no blot for us,  
Nor blank; it means intensely, and means good:  
To find its meaning is my meat and drink. (313-315)

His conscious enterprise is to ignore strictures imposed on him by a medieval oppressive system which cannot be logically explained. Therefore, with the active support of the powerful family of the Medici, Lippo Lippi projects an alternative humanistic proposal for celebrating the individual.



### 3. Self-Assessment

#### 3.1 Multiple Choice Question (MCQ)

1. “Fra Lippo Lippi” has been anthologised by Browning in:
  - (a) *Men and Women*
  - (b) *Dramatic Lyrics*
  - (c) *Dramatic Romances*
  - (d) *Dramatis Personae*
2. For “Fra Lippo Lippi” Browning has referred to biographical information in the anthology by:
  - (a) Giorgio Vasari
  - (b) Arthur Symons
  - (c) Mrs. Jonathan Poster
  - (d) Fra Lippo Lippi
3. The Prior tells Fra Lippo Lippi that he should follow famous monks who are artists like:
  - (a) Vasari and Leonardo da Vinci
  - (b) Michaelangelo and Raphael
  - (c) Brother Angelico and Brother Lorenzo
  - (d) none of the above

#### 3.2 Fill in the Blanks

1. “\_\_\_\_\_, what’s to blame? you think you see a monk”
2. “To find its meaning is my meat and \_\_\_\_\_.”
3. “Like the Prior’s niece . . . Saint \_\_\_\_\_, I would say.”

#### 3.4 Long Answer-type Questions

1. Write a brief essay discussing how ‘Fra Lippo Lippi’ shows Browning’s sympathy with the humanism of Renaissance art and its protest against the asceticism of the Middle Ages.
2. Elucidate, with textual reference, how “Fra Lippo Lippi” is engaged in his own way with the artist’s struggle for freedom.
3. Assess “Fra Lippo Lippi” as a dramatic monologue.

#### 3.5 Project Writing

- Prepare a power point presentation on Browning’s “Fra Lippo Lippi” for a demonstration lecture (of about 15 minutes).

#### **4. Learning Extension (LxT)**

##### **4.1 Video Lecture**

- “Fra Lippo Lippi” read by James Mason. <https://youtu.be/Fa51y4MO0mI>
- “Fra Lippo Lippi”: Poem analysis. <https://youtu.be/2Exx9d63-jk>

##### **4.2 Further Reading**

Corson, Hiram. *An Introduction to the Study of Robert Browning’s Poetry*. Boston: D.C. Heath, 1895.

Curry, S.S. *Browning and the Dramatic Monologue*. Boston: Cambridge UP, 1908.

Hackett, Susan, and John Ferns. "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Monk: The Degree of Irony in Browning's 'Fra Lippo Lippi'" *SBHC*4.2 (1976): 105-18.

Howard, Claude. “The Dramatic Monologue: It’s origin and Development”. *Studies in Philology*. vol. 4. 1910. 33-88.

Symons, Arthur. *An Introduction to the Study of Browning*. Cassell and Co., 1886.

Tucker, Herbert F., Jr. *Browning's Beginnings: The Art of Disclosure*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 1980.

Vasari, Giorgio. *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*. vol. II. Trnsl. Mrs Jonathan Poster. London: Bell & Daldy, 1871. 73-86.