UNIT 39 TWO POEMS FROM *MEN AND WOMEN* (1855)

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39.0 OBJECTIVES

After having read this unit you would be able to appreciate two of Browning's poems first published in *Men and Women* (1855). They are:

- '*Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came*' and
- 'Fra Lippo Lippi'

By learning to appreciate them you will gain the ability to read and appreciate any other poem of Browning with the help of criticism available on them, on your own.

39.1 INTRODUCTION

In two earlier units you read two poems of Browning and an excerpt from *Sordello*. In this unit you will read two more poems written in the early fifties of the nineteenth century. With the help of these three units you should be able to appreciate the growth and development of Browning's poetic art.

In this unit you will be prepared to analyse another poem of your choice of Browning such as 'Andrea del Sarto', 'The Grammarian's Funeral', 'Abt Vogler', 'Karshish', and 'Rabbi Ben Ezra' with the help of articles and other reference material.

Don't try to read more than a major subsection such as 39.2.1 or 39.2.2 at a time. Give yourself a break after you've read something weighty and follow the suggestions for reading from 'supplementary reading', printed in this block, offered from time to time.

39.2 READING '*CHILDE ROLAND TO THE DARK TOWER CAME*'

In this section first we will introduce you to the poem and then encourage you to read it on your own before you read my discussion on it.

39.2.1 Introducing *'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came'*

You may have read Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* prescribed for you in B.A. on your *Understanding Poetry* (EEG06) course. Browning's 'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came' is a dream poem like *The Rime*, 'Kubla Khan' and 'Christabel', three of the most celebrated poems of Coleridge and it has the same eerie, gloomy, and weird atmosphere. When some stranger asked Browning about 'Childe Roland' in 1887 he admitted:

> ....Childe Roland came upon me as a kind of dream. I had to write it, then and there, and I finished it in the same day, I believe. But it was simply that I had to do it. I did not know then what I meant beyond that, and I'm sure I don't know now. But I'm very fond of it.

Browning remained fond of 'Childe Roland' till the end of his life. 'Childe Roland' was written on January 2, 1852 in Paris in fulfilment of a new year resolution to write a poem a day. On the previous day he had written 'Women and Roses' and 'Love among the Ruins' the day after. All the three poems were published in *Men and Women* (1855). However, Browning placed 'Childe Roland' among the *Dramatic Romances* in 1863. Browning disapproved of any allegorical interpretations of the poem with the words 'Oh, no not at all,' but went on , 'I don't repudiate it, either. I only mean I was conscious of no allegorical intention in writing it.'

Browning also denied that there were any sources for the poem other than the line in *King Lear*, uttered by Edgar which gave the poem its title. Edgar's song in *King Lear* runs thus:

> Childe Rowland to the dark tower came,
> His word was still, 'Fie, foh, and fum,
> I smell the blood of a British man.

However, we know that Childe Rowland is a much older figure in European literature and folk tales than even Shakespeare. According to James Orchard Halliwell (1820-89), a noted Shakespearean scholar, Shakespeare above was quoting from two different compositions: the first line was from an old Scottish ballad in which Roland was the son of King Arthur. He rescued his sister Burd Ellen who had been carried away by the fairies to the castle of the king Elfland. The first line of the quotation above and the title of Browning's poem thus comes remotely from the Scottish ballad. The succeeding two lines, Halliwell pointed out, were from the nursery tale of 'Jack the Giant Killer'. It is also a tale of Northern origin but was known in England since very early times. You may have read it in your nursery class. Still, let me briefly tell you about it.

Jack lived about the time of Arthur (a chieftain or general in the fifth or sixth century). Jack's father was a Cornish farmer. He got known to his people when he killed the giant of Mount Cornwall. For this he dug a pit and covered it with branches, leaves and earth. Then he lured the giant towards it in which he fell and died. From another giant Jack acquired a coat that made him invisible, shoes that gave him superhuman speed, and a sword of magical powers. With the help of these he succeeded in ridding his land of all the giants.

Harold Golder in his article 'Browning's *Childe Roland*' (PMLA, 39,963-78) has shown that Browning must have drawn unconsciously upon several fairy tales such as 'Jack and the Beanstalk', 'Hap-o'-my-Thumb' and 'The Seven Champions of Christendom' apart from 'Jack the Giant-Killer'. You may like to read this article provided as supplementary reading in this block.

A 'Childe' in its medieval meaning is a young warrior serving his apprenticeship to Knighthood. Roland was a hero of the medieval French romance *Chanson de Roland*

(early 12th centrury) and was the commander of the rearguard, appointed to the post by Charlemagne on the advice of his traitor uncle Ganelon. Ganelon was in league with the Saracen king Marsile. (For the later Greeks and Romans, a Saracen was a nomadic tribe of the Syro-Arabian desert. By extension, during the Crusades, it meant a Muslim.) Ludovico Ariosto (1474-1535), the Italian poet, continued the story of Orlando (the Roland of the Charlemagne cycle) and his beloved Angelica begun by Boiardo (?1441-94) in *Orlando Innamorato* 1487. Edmund Spenser in *The Faerie Queene* was influenced by Ariosto in both its form and content. It is almost certain that Browning was influenced by the European tradition of Roland, even if remotely, who appeared in the French romances weaved around Charlemagne, the Arthurian legends of his own country and Orlando in Italian epic poems of Boiardo and Ariosto.

Scholars have also tried to trace some of the imagery in the poem back to Browning's early readings, life and travels. Browning wrote to A.W. Hunt, the painter who had done a watercolour of the scene in 'Childe Roland' in 1866, 'My own 'marsh' was made out of my head, - with some recollection of a strange solitary little tower I have come upon more than once in Massa-Carrara ...' The figure of the horse in the poem, Browning told Mrs. Sutherland Orr, was 'the figure of a horse in the tapestry in his own drawing room'. Regarding the landscape of 'Childe Roland' William Clyde DeVane, a well known Browning scholar, has pointed out that when Browning wrote 'Childe Roland' he had forgotten that most of its imagery came from the seventeenth chapter of Gerard de Lairesse's *The Art of Painting in All its Branches*. According to DeVane, in the chapter called 'Of Things Deformed and Broken, Falsely called Painter-like' one could find

> ...the old cripple, the pathless field, the desperate vegetation, the spiteful little river, the killing of the water-rat, the enclosing mountains, the leering sunset, and many other details of *Childe Roland* ...

While these details of source hunting scholarship does throw some light on certain aspects of the poem they do not tell us much about the meaning of the poem as a whole.

Browning himself was reluctant to explain what the dream (or nightmare) signified. Once when a churchman asked him if the meaning of the poem could be summed up in the phrase, 'He that endureth till the end shall be saved' Browning replied, 'Yes just about that.' 'Childe Roland' offers, as Mrs Orr pointed out,

> ...a poetic vision of life: with its conflicts, contradictions, and mockeries; its difficulties which give way when they seem most insuperable; its successes which look like failures, and its failures which look like success.

Mrs Orr warned against trying to draw an imagined lesson from the poem, for it offers none.

You are now familiar with my method and you would expect now to be advised to read the poem, printed in this block yourself. 'Childe Roland' is a poem about which it has been said that every reader can be her/his own allegorist. Having read the poem it may be a good idea also to read Harold Golder's article on the poem supplied to you in this block as supplementary reading. This, however, is optional.

Having read the poem you may like to find out how well you have understood what you've read. The exercise below will help you do that. Try to do it before going on to the next section.

Self-Check Exercise-I

1 What is an allegory?

2 Record below three lines from 'Childe Roland' in which Browning describes the horse.

3. Note down three literary works in which Roland figures as a character.

4. Mention three folk tales by which Browning could be remotely influenced in his poem.

39.2.2 The Plan and Purpose of 'Childe Roland'

Rhetoric is born out of our quarrels with other people: poetry, from our quarrels with ourselves. The epistles of *Vinay Patrika* (Petitions to Ram) recorded Tulsidas's frequent ascesis for self-control and petitions to his god to help him overcome his unruly passions:

मोधव मोह-फाँस क्यो टूटै।
बाहि कोटि उपाय करिय, अभ्यंतर ग्रन्थि न छूटै॥1॥

अंतर मलिन विषय मन अति, तन पावन करिय पखारे।
मरइ न उरग अनेक जतन बलमीकि बिबिध बिधि मारे॥ 4॥

In another petition he again says

माधव! मो समान जग माहीं।
सब बिधि हीन, मलीन, दीन अति, लीन-विषय कोउ नाहीं॥1॥

Tulsidas admits to be deeply immersed in carnal desires and wants Ram to pull him out of the slough of such cravings. In another poem he calls Ram by the name of Hrishikesh i.e. master of the senses and exhorts him to relieve him of the pain engendered by them.

हृषीकेस सुनि नाउँ जाउँ बलि, अति भरोस जिय मोरे।
तुलसिदास इंद्रिय-संभव दुख, हरे बनिहि प्रभु तोरे॥6॥

Tulsidas was a contemporary of Shakespeare and just as the latter wrote in England, during the reign of Elizabeth I (1558-1603) the former wrote during that of Akbar (1556-1605) in India. There is a relative simplicity in the quality of experience that

Tulsidas, or for that matter Shakespeare, records *vis-a-vis* those of nineteenth and twentieth century poets whether of the United Kingdom or India.

'*Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came*' is a complex record of a poet's ascesis in his profession. Some critics have compared it with T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. However, while Eliot talks about his age and the European society in that poem, Browning talks primarily, if not entirely, about himself, just like Tulsidas in some of the verses of *Vinay Patika* and W.B. Yeats in 'Meditations in Times of Civil War' and 'Nineteen Nineteen'. The atmosphere in 'Childe Roland' is no doubt eerie just as it is in Eliot's poem or in some of those of Coleridge but the intention is self-discovery, an examination of his office of a poet with respect to others', more active more involved in the daily business of life such as Yeats suspected his descendants could become:

> And what if my descendants lose the flower
> Through natural declension of the soul.
> Through too much business with the passing hour.
> Through too much play, or marriage with a fool?

Most human beings busy themselves in solving routine mundane problems of life, not in creating 'monuments of unageing intellect' or artifices of eternity. However, the poet is not *always* sure that what he is doing is of as great an importance as he imagines. Yeats's own Thoor Ballylee tower was founded by a man-at-arms, a violent man:

> A man-at-arms
> Gathered a score of horse and spent his days
> In this tumultuous spot,
> Where through long wars and sudden night alarms
> His dwindling score and he seemed castaways
> Forgetting and forgot;

However, before recognising the violent man's achievement, Yeats had laughed at the 'benighted travellers' who had laughed at him sitting in his 'chamber arched with stone' in front of,

> A grey stone fireplace with an open hearth,
> A candle and written page.

Yeats imagines that before him Milton also must have 'toiled on/in some like chamber' on his 'Il Penseroso', significantly a poem in which Milton was examining his choice of profession in life just as Yeats was examining his own in his 'Meditations in Time of Civil War'.

Browning's 'Childe Roland' records the introspections of a mid-Victorian poet in the middle of his career. Milton wrote his twin poems 'L' Allegro' and 'Il Penseroso' when he was around 23 years old; Yeats (1865-1939) when he published his 'Meditations' in the *Tower* (1928) was around 63; and Browning was an unsuccessful poet, unknown to the world at 40 when he wrote 'Childe Roland'. He was known to the American tourists as husband of the much more successful Elizabeth Barrett. Hence we discover a tone of futility in Browning's voice and an atmosphere of deceit, decay and death in the poem. Did I choose the right profession? is what the poet asks himself. And yet it is not a rhetorical question, for Browning was a stubborn optimist.

The opening of the poem reconciles the dichotomy in the image of the 'hoary cripple':

> My first thought was, he lied in every word,
> That hoary cripple with malicious eye

> Askance to watch the working of his lie
> On mine, and mouth scarce able to afford
> Suppression of the glee, that pursed and scored
> Its edge, at one more victim gained thereby.

The portrait is highly ironical. The man is a 'cripple' and yet venerable –'hoary'. His physical deformity is manifestation of his moral defect. He looks suspiciously sideways, and when Roland takes the path suggested by him he is scarce able to suppress his joy for having gained one more victim by deceiving a lusty youth.

The introductory section of the poem - i.e. from stanza I to VIII – records the ironical situation in which the inscription of the poem is made. Roland is aware that the cripple sat there on the road with staff in hand only to waylay travellers who might seek his direction. However, all agreed that it was that 'ominous tract' that '[hid]' the Dark Tower. Why should Roland want to follow an 'ominous' tract? Why should he wish to go to a "dark" tower?

Roland's condition is described with the help of an *exemplum* of an old man on his death bed who would rather die in order to please his kin than survive and disappoint them. Roland's kin are his 'Band', namely

> The Knights who to the Dark tower's search addressed
> Their steps – that just to fail as they, seemed best.

And Roland's fear now is if he is 'fit' to follow that 'ominous tract' on which many knights went before him.

Notwithstanding the fact that many knights had followed the path to the tower, possibly on the advice of the cripple Roland still finds him 'hateful' and takes the path, away from the highway, pointed out by him.

The first section of the poem of the first eight stanzas ends with an eerie picture of the youthful man as an estray i.e. a domestic animal that has strayed away from home:

> All the day
> Had been a dreary one at best, and dim
> Was settling to its close, yet shot one grim
> Red leer to see the plain catch its estray.

The heath has caught its 'estray' once again. The coming of Roland is thus a home coming of a quester, a traveller, and a knight. The picture so far is full of tropes; nothing really appears to match its description: words seem to have lost their communicative talent; all is irony and paradox. Poetry here is at its ironical best.

The ninth to the twentyninth stanza forms the middle section of the poem. It is a harrowing tale of the poetic landscape. Outsiders notice only the triumphs of the poets, their laurels and the rare applause but the real experience that the poet has is of cockle and spurge (plants of acrid milky juice) and a burr becomes his 'treasure trove'. Nature that is rich elsewhere and for other people looks peevishly towards the poet:

> 'See
> Or shut your eyes', said Nature peevishly,
> 'It nothing skills; I cannot help my case,
> 'Tis the last judgement's fire must cure this place,
> Calcine its clods and set my prisoners free.'

To Browning in his early forties, the poetic landscape appeared a dead and dreary place where

BLOCK VIII - INTRODUCTION

The Victorian Age in English literature takes its name, as you know, from Queen Victoria of Great Britain who ascended the throne in 1837 and was monarch until her death in 1901. However, when we talk of the Victorian Age we have the period of 1830-1900 in mind. Prior to this was the Age of a Romanticism about which you read in the previous two blocks.

1830 marks the beginning of the Victorian period in English literature. In 1832 the Reform Bill introduced in the parliament in the previous year was passed. It was one of the most memorable events in the history of civil liberties of the British people since the signing of the Magna Charta by King John at Runnymede in 1215. By the former Act inequalities in the system of representation was removed and franchise was extended by giving representation to the new centres of population. The act also abolished slavery in the British dominions. This was followed by the Second Reform Act in 1867 which more than doubled the electorate. The successive acts of reform in 1872 and 1884 further democratised the country which ensured not ony the well-being and prosperity of the British people as a whole but also their stability as a society.

The immediate result of the reform act of 1832, however, was the rise of the Chartist Movement between 1837 and 1848. This was a working-class political movement. The working-class had been left out of franchise in 1832 for lack of the property qualification. Hence they demanded universal suffrage which was one of the six points on their 'People's charter'. The condition of the poor found eloquent utterance in the novels of Benjamin Disraeli (1804-81) - the trilogy *Coningsby* - *Sybil* (1853), and *Tancred* - Mrs. Elizabeth Gaskell (1810-1865) - *Mary Barton* (1848), *Cranford* (1853) and *North and South* (1855) - and Charles Kingsley (1819-75) *Yeast* (1848), and *Alton Locke* (1850). However, Victorian literature is marked by a spirit of reconciliation and compromise.

Just as the condition of the poor found expression in Victorian novels and pamphlets its conservatism on the 'woman question' was voiced in poetry and prose. The king in Tennyson's *The Princess* expressed the conservative opinion about women's role in the society:

> Man for the field and woman for the hearth:
> Man for the sword and for the needle she:
> Man with the head and woman with the heart:
> Man to command and woman to obey.

This traditional view of woman was questioned by John Stuart Mill (1806-73) in *The Subjection of Women*. He pointed out that 'what is now called the nature of women is eminently an artificial thing – the result of forced repression in some directions, unnatural stimulation in others.'

Notwithstanding the "elitist" ideology of Mill according to many an upper middle-class Victorian the woman's proper place was the hearth and the heart and it was this attitude that was epitomized by the title of that immensely popular poem *The Angel in the House* (1854-62) by Coventry Patmore (1823-96).

The position of the woman in Victorian society influenced as much as it was influenced by its attitude towards the family. An Englishman's home had always been his castle. However, now it was seen also as a temple, a place of peace and tranquillity. 'This is the true nature of home' wrote John Ruskin in 'Of Queen's Gardens':

> The dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
> And the dry stone no sound of water

to borrow Eliot's words in *The Waste Land*. While the land in Eliot's poem is dry and parched, in Browning's grass grows as scantily as hair on a leper's skin and the ground appears to be 'kneaded up with blood.' In the midst of death and destruction all around stands a 'blind horse' apparently thrown out of the devil's stable. 'Alive?' asks Roland about the horse and goes on to answer,

> ...he might be dead for ought I know,
> With that red gaunt and colloped neck a-strain,
> And shut eyes underneath the rusty mane;

Like a true soldier, Roland, overcoming despair, prepares himself for a fight.

He does so by remembering his better days. (It appears that Browning wishes to recall those days when he was welcomed by Macready and Forster and above all Dickens.) But even *that* he is not granted. Cuthbert left him cold by his treatment:

> I almost felt him fold
> An arm in mine to fix me to the place,
> That way he used. Alas, one night's disgrace!
> Out went my heart's new fire and left it cold.

Giles, the soul of honour, was treated shabbily by his peers. He was called a traitor, spat upon and cursed. On the one hand Browning is metonymically speaking of gallants – one fake, i.e. Cuthbert, and the other genuine i.e. Giles – but metaphorically they stand for genuine and fake poets as Keats before him had talked about in 'The Fall of Hyperion: A Fragment' (1818).

To revert to the narrative, Roland is deep in despair somewhat like the Irish Airman of Yeats:

> The years to come seemed waste of breath,
> A waste of breath the years behind

The plight of the Knights such as Cuthbert and Giles makes him prefer his waste land to that of valourous fight for honour. 'Better' he affirms, 'this present than a past like that;' and he commits himself to the 'darkening path'. He hears no sound nor can he have a sight and is afraid that he could be attacked by an owl (howlet) or a sharp toothed bat: 'Will the night send a howlet or a bat?'

Within the middle section stanza nineteen starts a description of a still more ghostly atmosphere reminiscent of those lines from Coleridge's *Rime*:

> About, about, in reel and rout
> The death-fires danced at night;
> The water, like a witch's oils,
> Burnt green, and blue and white.

Roland is taken by surprise by the appearance of a 'little river' which comes as unexpectedly as a serpent. The simile performs more than the trope promises. Browning makes use of it to heighten the effect of the atmosphere. Stroke after stroke the weird milieu grows more and more dim as Browning describes the dark river ('black eddy') spattered with white 'flakes and spumes' making the river look like a dark monster baring its teeth. The river is further endowed with tyrannical power as it is metonymically shown carrying animals and vegetables along its course.

> ...a suicidal throng.
> The river which had done them all the wrong,
> Whate'er that was, rolled by, deterred no whit.

Roland's experience of crossing the river is no less gruesome:

> ...While I forded - good saints, how I feared
> To set my foot upon a dead man's cheek,
> Each step, or feel the spear I trust to seek
> For hollows, tangled in his hair or beard!
> It may have been a water rat I speared,
> But, ugh! it sounded like a baby's shriek.

Having crossed the river Roland expects to witness a better terrain. However, the loam below his feet tells him of some war that must have been fought on that ground. 'Childe Roland' is a dream poem like 'Kubla Khan' and images often symbolise the human condition that the poet wants to portray

> 'Toads in a poisoned tank,
> Or wild cats in a red-hot iron cage-

the fight if animals in the dreadful circular arena - 'fell cirque' - which no animal seems to leave represents the mad fight of poets and men of letters in life. There are besides, the difficult systems of the society, meaningless but painful, created by no one one knows who. These institutions appear in Browning's dream as a 'brake' or machine for separating fiber such as flax or hemp:

> And more than that - a furlong on - why, there!
> What bad use was that engine for, that wheel,
> Or brake, not wheel - that harrow fit to reel
> Men's bodies out like silk? With all the air
> Of Tophet's tool, on earth left unaware,
> Or brought to sharpen its rusty teeth of steel.

The image of the machine or brake hauntingly suggests the painful torment Browning must have gone through as a poet. Dr Johnson had known poverty, was even about to be sent to a debtor's prison but was fortunate in his large group of friends, though not of the patrons such as Lord Chesterfield. However, early in his life adversity did not spare him which elicited those memorable linesfrom him in *London* (1738):

> Quick let us rise, the happy seats explore,
> And bear oppression's insolence no more.
> This mournful truth is everywhere confessed
> SLOW RISES WORTH, BY POVERTY DEPRESSED:
> But here more slow, where all are slaves to gold,
> Where looks are merchandise, and smiles are sold.

Johnson had not yet turned thirty while he had just begun his service with Edward Cave on *The Gentleman's Magazine*. Probably Browning's case, more than a hundred years later, was much more difficult with the social fabric of London no longer the same and his own social intercourse being less close and intimate than Johnson's.

Literary texts, we know, are complex by nature, which means that they are not easily decipherable and are not isotropic. Speaking in the context of 'Childe Roland', we can say that this complexity crops up due to interweaving of several motifs i.e. those of the narrative needs of the Roland legend, the metaphoric need of translating Browning's personal message into the overall plan of the narrative, and finally the

aesthetic demand of the appropriate metonymic choice of images which may give an appearance of unity to the poem.

After Roland had witnessed the various forms of fear and tribulations on the heath he began to look for a new direction in which he could take his steps.

> At the thought,
> A great black bird, Apollyon's bosom friend,
> Sailed past, not beat his wide wing dragon-penned
> That brushed my cap - perchance the guide I sought.

Roland is not the folk hero but Browning himself because he is not shown the direction by Apollyon, an angel of the bottomless pit' in the 'Book of Revelation' and in Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678-'84) himself but by his 'bosom friend.' Browning the devout Christian that he was would have considered it profane and an expression of his pride to have a Biblical character guide his steps. Bunyan's Apollyon 'had wings like a dragon' and the direction of the fall of the cap showed him the direction in which he could go.

And so it happened. Instead of the heath and waste land Roland now found himself surrounded by mountains, or more appropriately from Roland's point of view, 'ugly heights'. However, Roland recounts

> Here ended, then,
> Progress this way. When, in the very nick
> Of giving up, one time more came a click
> As when a trap shuts - you're inside the den!

With these words end Roland's difficult journey and Browning's nightmare.

Somewhat as in Shelley's 'Triumph of Life' Browning receives the epiphany of witnessing the poets whose path he had followed all his life:

> There they stood, ranged along the Hill-sides - met
> To view the last of me, a living frame
> For one more picture! In a sheet of flame
> I saw them and I knew them all.

The last section of the poem i.e. consisting of the last five stanzas is a preparation for this end. If Browning is to feel blessed in their company, the poets of yester years are also to feel alive through him. The poetic undertone, as it were, finally becomes the dominant tune in the last lines of the poem:

> And yet
> Dauntless the slug-horn to my lips I set
> And blew. "*Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came.*"

A poetic act is an act of sound and music. The last words are a poetic quotation just as the 'slug-horn' is a poetic coinage (for slogan) of Thomas Chatterton, the marvellous boy. And yet it is poetry that is a sluggish instrument as Browning must have seen it in his early forties. Browning here as Roland is a hero determined to win just as in 'Prospice' he was prepared to face death bravely.

Harold Bloom considered 'Childe Roland' Browning's 'finest' poem (*The Ringers in the Tower*, p.157). Whether finest or not, it is certainly an example of 'strong' poetry as Bloom would call it and operates at many levels, the most important of which is the autobiographical.

39.3 READING 'FRA LIPPO LIPPI'

While teaching Browning's poems earlier in this and the previous two units we had adopted the method of first providing a background to the study of the poem, then asking you to read it and finally presenting you with an analysis and appreciation of the poem. In the present case we are going to adopt a slightly different strategy.

The poem 'Fra Lippo Lippi' published in *Men and Women* for the first time was based on the life of the painter Filippo di Tomasso Lippi (c.1406-1469) written by Giorgio Vasari. An English translation of the 'Life' by Julia Conway and Peter Bondanella is printed in this block. You may go through it before reading the poem. If you wish to know about Giorgio Vasari please read the following sub-section.

39.3.1 Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574)

Giorgio Vasari was an Italian painter, architect and celebrated author of *The Lives of the most excellent Italian Architects, Painters and Sculptors* (1550 and 1568). This work ranked him along with Machiavelli and Ariosto, as a leading Italian literary artist. Vasari claimed that he had learnt his art in the first place from Michelangelo in Florence, a story which has been disputed, and after his departure for Rome, from Andrea del Sarto (1484-1530) and Baccio Bandinelli. However, later assessments of Vasari have confirmed his titanic energy as an architect but not as a painter. Michelangelo doubted the quality of Vasari's inspiration in his paintings and posterity is in agreement with him. Nonetheless, when the first edition of Vasari's *Lives* was published in 1550 Michelangelo, the century's greatest artist and lyric poet wrote a sonnet on him.

No true reference work existed for Vasari to consult and base his *Lives* upon. So, in a way, he invented the discipline of art history. However, art critics have pointed out that Vasari's technical vocabulary is often inadequate. For instance, he too frequently uses the word beautiful which shows his lack of discrimination.

Notwithstanding his faults, which were of his time, his encyclopaedic knowledge of the major and minor Italian artists, his understanding of the trends in the development of Italian art and his insights into the technical aspects of art counterbalance his deficiencies which seem trivial in comparison. To give you an example of Vasari's insight into the technical aspects: he pointed out that Titian lacked a sound knowledge of human anatomy which was fundamental to the reproduction of the human figure. Vasari valued design in art because he believed that an artist must have a clear *idea* of what he wanted to say through a particular piece of art. Vasari's *Lives* are enriched by the anecdotes from the lives of the painters which at the same time significantly illustrate their characters and make an indelible mark on our memory.

For instance Vasari tells us that Fra Filippo Lippi had lost his mother at his birth and his father two years later. So he had to be brought up by Mona Lapaccia, the sister of his father Tommaso. As she found it difficult to bear the costs so Vasari tells us, Filippo had to be made a friar at the Carmine church at the age of eight. (The footnote to the 'Life' would tell you that Filippo took the vows not in 1414 but in 1421 when he was fifteen. Vasari is often careless about his dates. However, considering the scale on which he was working and the documents so few on which he could base his researches Vasari deserved the praise of the posterity that he got.)

You would enjoy reading the 'Life of Fra Filippo Lippi'. If we had been in the classroom we would have discussed it. We would still do the same through the following check-your progress exercises.

Self-Check Exercise-II

1. Who was Filippo's first teacher of art at Florence?

2. How did Filippo elicit 'compassion and freedom, from the Moors of Barbary?

3. Who was Cosimo de' Medici? What did he do to Filippo and Why? How did the artist respond and what was his master's reaction to his act?

4. Who was Lucrezia Buti?

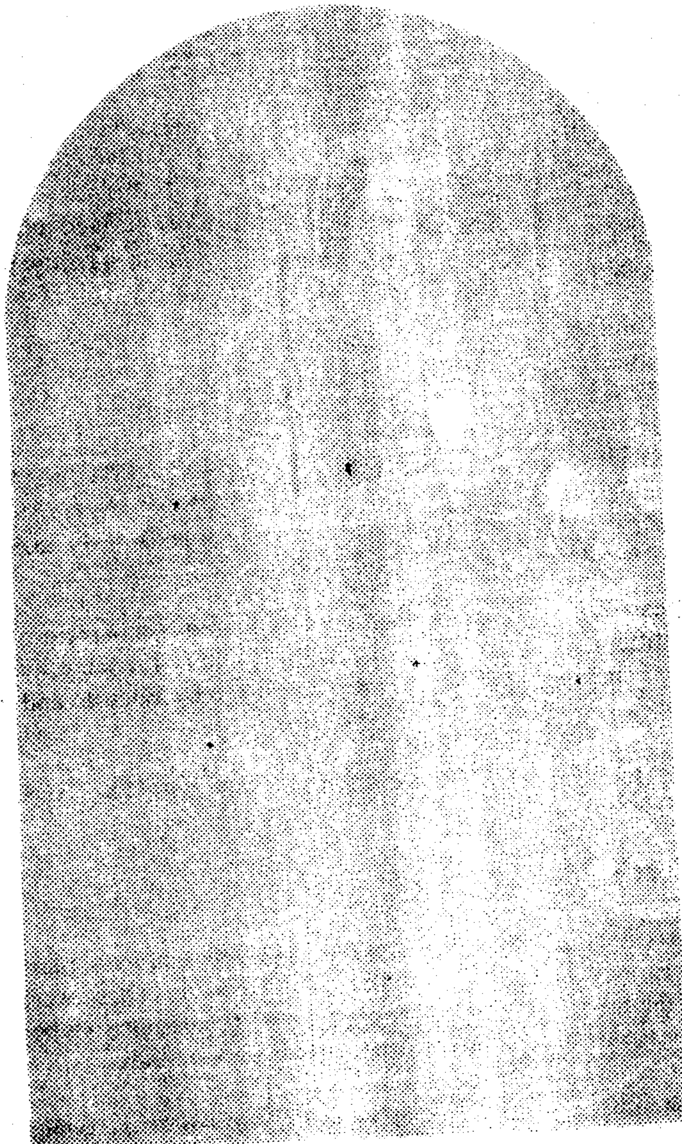
39.3.2 Introduction to 'Fra Lippo Lippi'

Now that you have read Vasari's life of Fra Filippo Lippi you are ready to read Browning's verse narrative which was based on that life.

Browning must have seen in and around Florence many of Lippi's works. In lines 344-77 of the poem he tells the watchmen about his plan to paint 'The Coronation of the Virgin' for St. Ambrose's Convent. There is another reference to Lippi's painting in line 73 of the poem of St. Jerome (340-420), which he did for Cosimo, his patron. Lippi was rebelling against the work of painters such as Giotto (whom you met in the first block of this course), Fra Angelico, Giovanni da Fiesole (1387-1455), and Lorenzo Monaco (c.1370-c.1425). Angelico was the model Medieval painter who took painting as an act of piety and painted the portraits of the saints kneeling down. Lippi talks about another type of piety. The world of beauty according to him was God's creation and was not to be passed by unheeded:

> Oh, oh,
> It makes me mad to see what men shall do
> And we in our graves! This world's no blot for us,
> Nor blank; it means intensely, and means good:
> To find its meaning is my meat and drink.

Lippi's life and career, it appears, provided Browning with a perfect objective correlative, to use Eliot's term in *The Sacred Wood* (1920), for the expression of his own beliefs and ideals



FRA FILIPPO LIPPI [illegible] ENTHRONED
1437 [illegible] cm
Galleria N[illegible] d'Arte [illegible] Rome

Read the poem first and then, read [illegible] Arm[illegible] article on Browning afforded in this block for supplementary reading

39.4 LET'S SUM UP

With this unit you come to the end of [illegible] on Browning on this course. We could have made this block one entirely on Robert Browning as we did earlier in the

first, second and fourth [illegible] Spenser and Milton. However, we decided to take up one maj[illegible] more major minor poets of the Victorian period. These [illegible] the [illegible] two units. It was our endeavour to examine [illegible] hang of this method of close analysis we would [illegible]

39.5 ANSWERS T[illegible]SES

Self-Check Exercise-I

1. An allegory is a fig[illegible]ve or description meant to convey a veiled moral. It is in a w[illegible] metaphor. *The Faerie Queene*, and *The Pilgrim's Progres*[illegible] Absalom and Achitophel is a political allegory [illegible] have a more well defined moral and the characters in it are [illegible]ell's *A[illegible] Farm* is a political satire in the form of a fable.

2. One stiff blind hor[illegible] one a-stare,
   Stood stupefied, [illegible] there
   Thrust ou[illegible] on the [illegible] stud!

   Above are the last [illegible] the 13th stanza. The first three lines of the 14th stanza also de[illegible]. A [illegible] is a stable. Notice how well Browning creates [illegible] sphere [illegible] the help of the ima[illegible] of the grotesque that is th[illegible]

3. Shakespeare's *King Lear* [illegible] Browning admitted to have provided him with the title of his [illegible] early twelfth century French romance *Chanson de Roland;* and the [illegible] *Orlando Innamorato* by Boiardo and Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* [illegible] as the hero.

4. 'Jack the Giant K[illegible] the Beanstalk' and 'The Seven Champions of Christendom'.

Self-Check Exercise-II

1. Masaccio was doing the [illegible]es (pictures painted on fresh plaster) on the walls of Branacci [illegible] Maria del Carmine. These were going to be some of the most [illegible] paintings [illegible] the Renaissance. Filippo thus got his first lessons f[illegible] artist of [illegible]ssance Italy.

2. Later researches [illegible] that Vasari's story about the kidnapping of Filippo and his friends while they were amusing themselves in the March of Ancona was fan[illegible]. In [illegible] Filippo was at Padua and art historians have felt the effect of his pres[illegible] there on the art of that period on the paintings at Padua, especially [illegible] Mantegna

3. The story narrat[illegible] paragraph of the 'Life' has been found to be broadly true by [illegible]up.

   The last few words of the [illegible]graph [illegible] rare geniuses are celestial forms and not beasts of burden [illegible] memorable

4. Lucrezia Buti, daughter [illegible] Francesco Buti (a Florentine citizen), was a nun at the convent of [illegible] Margh[illegible]. He fled with her in 1456 from Prato causing [illegible] the reputation of the convent and shock to her father. The Pope [illegible] granted him permission to marry her and from this union was born Fi[illegible] called Filippino, one of the most renowned Florentine painter[illegible] of the [illegible]er half of the fifteenth century.

39.6 FURTHER READING

You have several articles in this block which you may like to go through. In this unit we have referred to Harold Bloom's 'Browning's *Childe Roland*: All things deformed and broken' (pp.157-167) published in *The Ringers in The Tower: Studies in Romantic Tradition* (University of Chicago P: Chicago, London, 1971) and to 'Testing the Map: Browning's Childe Roland' (pp. 106-122) published in *A Map of Misreading* (O.U.P.: Oxford, New York, 1975, 1980) by the same author.

It would be useful to consult any of the following three books if you are going to attempt a poem for your term paper not discussed on this course. The books are as below:

1. Mrs. Sutherland Orr, *A Handbook to the Works of Robert Browning* (G. Bell & Sons: London, 1919)

2. William Clyde DeVane, *A Browning Handbook* (1935, Appleton- Century – Crofts, Inc.; New York, 1955)

3. Ian Jack, *Browning's Major Poetry* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1973)

Those who don't have access to a good library may write sessional essay on 'Fra Lippo Lippi'.