

## SCHOLARLY ARTICLE

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# **“Placid and Perfect”: Reading “Fra Lippo Lippi”, “Andrea Del Sarto” and “The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St. Praxed’s Church” as Browning’s Celebration of Imperfection**

Sampuja Ganguly

### **Abstract**

The theme of imperfection is a recurrent motif in literature more particularly in the works of Chaucer and Shakespeare. The genre was perfected by Robert Browning to achieve an immense degree of success. This is Browning’s usual technique of fashioning his imperfect characters into the lofty figure of striving and attaining the soul. Psychological insight, analytical subtlety and the power of dramatic interpretation are the main features which help to construct this imperfection quite perfectly.

“Fra Lippo Lippi” makes a psychological analysis of Lippo’s character as a man and artist who is suffering from the conflict between “Renaissance free will” and “Victorian morality”- The poet seizes upon the imperfectness of his character, the clash between his sensuality his amorousness and the requirement of conforming to the aesthetics of religiosity. In “Andrea Del Sarto” Andrea was a painter who worked in the court of French king Francis. The fact that is revealed here is that despite being a flawless painter Andrea fails to conform to the greatness of his contemporaries Leonard or Michael Angelo, primarily because he lacks the elevation of soul and the perfectness which is essential to galvanize art – and to convert the ephemeral into the eternal. “The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St. Praxed Church” is another

poem by Browning which also celebrates the imperfection of the central character of the poem, the Bishop. He is also a victim of illusion. Despite holding the position of the Bishop, he is able to defy the reality of death by affirming on its threshold the fleeting beauty of life and remains a flawed character. Therefore my aim in this paper is to probe into the psychological depth of Browning's character to present the poet's celebration of imperfection in a quiet natural and perfect manner.

**Keywords:** Fra Lippo Lippi, Andrea Del Sarto, The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St. Praxed Church, Imperfection, Flaw, Renaissance free will, Victorian Morality.

The development of the theme of 'Imperfection' was a genre in literature, practised by Chaucer and Shakespeare and later perfected by Robert Browning to achieve an immense degree of success. Although modelled upon the figure of Renaissance, the protagonists of "Fra Lippo Lippi" (1855), "Andrea Del Sarto" (1855) and "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St. Praxed's Church" (1845) are deliberately constructed by the poet, suffering from intense imperfection. This is his usual technique of fashioning his characters into a lofty figure of striving and attaining soul. Browning deviates from the conventional trend of poetry writing and constructs a tale with a plot pattern that approximates the movement of another genre- the novel. Browning's poems are thus about imperfect characters in a novel treated poetically. The poetic interests of many of Browning's writing lie in the violence and vividness with which he renders the imperfection of personality, caught unaware. Browning seeks the confessional moment, the crisis which forces out of the man, the whole truth about himself as he sees it. Within the form of his poems Browning reveals the history of a character in a manner which anticipates the modern 'stream of consciousness technique'. The various incidents, the snatches of

conversation, the action of guilt, momentary impulses, the desires and memories revealed offer an exploration of the imperfect characters which anticipates post Freudian fiction.

The poetry of Browning embodies a rich variety of themes. The poet has explored life in its various facets. He has not confined himself to a single age, a single country or a single class of people because he was a widely travelled and well-read man. Before making any subjects a part of his poetry, he made it a point to know about it. Thus before dealing with the theme of imperfection Browning engaged himself in a study about the imperfect nature of man, which according to him is the result of the intense conservative atmosphere of Victorian society. “Fra Lippo Lippi”, “Andrea Del Sarto” and “The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St. Praxed’s Church”, all these three poems make a psychological analysis of the protagonists as the man of flesh and blood with their earthly desires, who are immensely suffering from the conflict between “Renaissance freewill”<sup>1</sup> and “Victorian morality”<sup>2</sup>. Therefore Browning hugely derives the characters of Fra; the monk, Andrea; the painter, and the Bishop from Renaissance works and constructs and develops the characters as worldly figures who are suffering from the conflict between sensuality and amorousness and the requirement of conforming to the aesthetics of religiosity. It is the clash which lies at the heart of the theme of imperfection in the poems and accounts for its richness and strength.

The aim in this paper is to probe into the psyche of the protagonists in order to delve deep into the theme of ‘Imperfection’ and establish Browning’s “Fra Lippo Lippi”, “Andrea Del Sarto” and “The Bishop orders His Tomb at St. Praxed’s Church” as the poems, celebrating

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<sup>1</sup> Renaissance free will is the idea giving importance to the will of Man celebrated in the time of Renaissance.

<sup>2</sup> Victorian morality is the concept of Victorian time which emphasises on the moral value of man.

the imperfect nature of mankind. The primary concern of Browning was with the soul of man. He selected those characters who could provide interesting studies in psychology. “Fra Lippo Lippi”, “Andrea Del Sarto” and “The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St. Praxed’s Church” can be cited as appropriate examples. Browning has shown very keen interest in art and artists. They assume a place of importance among his themes. While portraying artists, Browning’s concern is not as much with the technical skill of their art as with its aesthetic worth and creative force. Poems like “Fra lippo Lippi” “Andrea Del Sarto” deal with art. He had a poor estimation of mere craftsmanship. Technically, Andrea del Sarto is flawless. He can alter and correct the arm wrongly drawn by Raphael. However, he cries:

But all the play, the insight and the stretch  
Out of me, out of me! (“Andrea Del Sarto” 116-117)

There does not burn in him “a truer light of God”. Andrea admits that sheer technical accuracy is not something of which he can feel proud:

My works are nearer heaven, but I sit here. (“Andrea Del Sarto” 87)

For a moment he does dare to correct the arm wrongly drawn by Renaissance painter Raphael, but he rubs it out immediately because he knows that he does not have the soul of Raphael:

Give the chalk here quick, thus the line should go:  
Ay, but the soul: he’s Rafael: rub it out. (“Andrea Del Sarto” 196-197)

The word ‘quick’ here gives us an idea of how perfect and alert is Andrea’s hand but the tragedy is that he does not have the creative instinct in him. He is like a machine- quick and perfect, but dead. Technical perfection is not enough, what is needed is the perfection of the inner self. Therefore Andrea remains imperfect in this aspect.

Browning portrays artists as the conscience of an age. That is why he comes out with severe criticism of their flaws and deformities. He does not expect anything inartistic from an

artist. He held artists in high esteem. In Browning's "Old Pictures in Florence", we get an idea of Browning's knowledge of painting and picture galleries. In Browning's "Pictor Ignotus" (1845), we have the portraiture of an artist who lacks technical skill. Fra Lippo Lippi is a painter with a special pagan love for beauty, wonder, shapes, colours and lights of things. But a cold inhuman love of art held no value for Browning. The exquisite critical taste of the Bishop of St. Praxed does not make him a complete man for he lacks the 'soul'. He is content with mere pride of possession. Browning's poems concerned with art reiterate the importance of the "inner light" of the man. Artists symbolise mankind; they are the voice of humanity. Therefore the so-called imperfection within an artist is instrumental in bringing about the true essence of a man of flesh and blood.

"Fra Lippo Lippi" was written in Florence in 1853-1854 and published in "Men and Women" (1855). The monologue consists the story of life and thinking of Fra Lippo Lippi (1412-1469) – a painter and monk, belonging to the period of the Italian Renaissance. The poem offers a psychological analysis of Lippo's character, a man and artist. It is a critique on the schismatic nature of Renaissance art and a reasoned plea on artistic naturalism. Browning makes it abundantly clear that Fra Lippo Lippi became a monk under the compulsion of circumstances rather than from his own will and inclination. By temperament, he is a man of the world, the flesh and the devil but professionally he is a monk and religious priest expected to live a dedicated life. The poet seizes upon the duality of his character- the clash between his irrepressible sensuality, his amorousness and the ascetic demands of his religious order.

The monologue opens with Lippi caught in an embarrassing situation. It is past midnight and the painter monk is apprehended in the wrong quarters of the town, where 'sportive' ladies have their door ajar and 'here you catch me at the alley's end' because 'you think you see a monk!'- the situation is sensational. It is between the monastery and the street of ill fame – which is symbolic of the dual perspective of one personality- the spiritual and the

sensuous. Browning proposes an impassioned plea for the recognition of the reality and goodness of the flesh. 'Flesh' is the dominant discourse in the poem. 'Flesh and blood that's all I'm made off' - Lippo says quite early in the poem, and later when he gets seriously involved with the issues of art, he reasserts his faith in 'the value and significance of flesh'. Though trapped in an awkward situation Lippo does not lose his humour. He can intimidate the police men by mentioning the name 'Cosimo of the Medici' and he can control the subordinate police by offering them a drink:

Drink out this quarter-florin to the health

Of the munificent House that harbours me. ("Fra Lippo Lippi" 28-29)

Unlike some of his contemporaries Browning had a robust sense of verbal humour and a keen eye for human absurdities. The frank down to earth attitude of Lippo is reflected in his use of language, enlivened by his own coinages- 'zooks', 'weke', 'gullet's grife'. Lippo with his language may become dignified, embellished with learned vocabulary and spiritual allusions and his tone becomes correspondingly solemn. Browning has captured the frank sensuality of the painter-monk, his ribaldry, his impudence and disregard for what other monks think of him. It is a rich human portrait not a spiritual one. Therefore it can be taken into consideration that by incorporating such details which is somewhat contradictory to that of the life of a monk, Browning deliberately hinted at the theme of imperfection.

In the case of "Andrea Del Sarto", despite being a 'faultless painter' Andrea fails to equal the greatness of his illustrious contemporaries Leonardo, Raphael or Michael Angelo primarily because he lacks the elevation of soul which is essential to galvanise art and to convert the ephemeral into the eternal. As Fra Lippo Lippi experiences the compulsions of his masters and his muse, in the case of Andrea it is his weakness for surface perfections, be it of golden haired Lucrezia or of gold coins. His attitude cripples his art and restricts it to the mere perfection of lines and forms.

In spite of being so certain of his touch- so futile with his brush, he is far behind the truly great painters. Andrea does not this time look for extraneous causes, such as an unfavourable fate, or an understanding wife. We all retain sufficient intellectual energy and self knowledge to admit that the roots of his failure be within. Andrea is a ‘love pulsed craftsman’, not an inspired artist. He lacks the power of imagination and insight-

Ah, but a man’s reach should exceed his grasp

Or what’s a Heaven for? (“Andrea Del Sarto” 97-98)

This remark is ironic upon the self. He knows the secret of ‘great art’ and can theorise about it but he lacks the capacity to follow his own perceptions. He lacks the potential of a painter to elevate his soul, consequently, ‘All his silver grey/ placid and perfect’. Andrea collapses into the temptation to blame his wife for the shallowness of his art.

Through his recognition of Andrea, Robert Browning makes a philosophic assessment of life and art. The true great painters like Rafael, Leonardo and Michael Angelo gave up their sense of the self, for them to be possessed. Andrea refuses to empty himself of what he is. He wants to remain the flawed Everyman and insists that he may be still redeemed. Andrea fails to reach the zenith of perfection. It is the failure of art to happen to life- the failure of the divine to make itself manifest in the human.

“The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St. Praxed’s Church” is a monologue of a 16<sup>th</sup> Century Italian Bishop, sensual and senile who though lying in death is obsessed with the type of tomb that should be constructed for him after his death. The poem opens with a Biblical quotation- “Vanity, saith the preacher, Vanity!” These words coming from the lips of the dying Bishop who ought to know their meaning reveals the mood of the poem denouncing the traits of vanity and pride, and stressing the virtues of humility and humanity. Even at the time of death he is worried about his destination on earth rather than the salvation of his soul. His desperate desire to lie in a tomb far superior to the tomb of Gandolf reveals the inner impulse

of his psyche. The poem works through the technique of irony and innuendo. Browning makes an effective use of situation and diction as aids to character revelation. There is a discrepancy between the specific situation and the dramatically imperfect sensuousness and greed displayed by the speaker. The dichotomy in the Bishop's character is further revealed in the two voices with which he speaks- the stylised voice of the clergy, expressing it in pious platitudes alternates with the more authentic colloquial voice of the man.

The poem is Browning's dramatic presentation of the revelation of imperfection within man. Even at the end of this poem, not understanding this realization, there is no sign of remorse or request in the voice of the dying Bishop, nor is he prepared to shed his sensuousness and vindictiveness, which are his typically non-Christian traits. Unlike the conventional Christian hero, who affirms life by holding on to it, even as it passes. The Bishop is able to defy the reality of death by affirming on its threshold the poignant fleeting beauty of life. The Bishop's habit of fusing together the sacred and the profane, the moral and the festive, the spiritual and the physical reveals Browning's attempt to reconcile body and soul, flesh and spirit. This tension of the opposites, dilemma of sense and soul, makes him a pagan as well as a Christian at the same time. The Bishop is Browning's vision of an imperfect, 'Everyman', who like "Fra Lippo Lippi", suffers the pangs of his plural selves.

All these three poems "Fra Lippo Lippi", "Andrea Del Sarto" and "The Bishop Orders His tomb at St. Praxed's Church" reveal Browning's interest in the revelation of characters especially imperfect characters- the tension between sympathy and judgement which frames the chief interest in the dramatic monologue accounts for the richness of these poems also. Browning's language is crude and his attitude to conventional Christianity is irreverent. His characters are unique study of defiance of moral and social code. Fra Lippo Lippi, Andrea and The Bishop all the three characters are capable of giving a profound interpretation of sense and soul, life and art, earth and heaven. The central dilemma between sense and soul makes

them a representative of the ordinary imperfect man who suffers from the pangs of the divided self.

## Notes

1. Amygdala is derived from a Latin word as it is of an almond-like shape. Amygdala is very sensitive region of the human brain which is not only the centre of the emotional organization but also generates extreme fear in the human mind.
2. Me Too is a social movement against sexual harassment and abuse by powerful men of society. In this movement, the victim of women share their events of sexual harassment on social media by putting hashtag before Me Too (#Me Too). This movement is meant to create an awareness in a society where men use their power to satisfy their sexual gratification. The allegations of women have become a global concern in this movement.
3. Push button technique is a strategy in Adlerian four stages of therapy where the counsellor asks the client to remember some incidents of happy moments and then an unhappy and unpleasant event of the past. This technique is designed to interrupt and interpret the depression of the client so that he/she can control his or her own feelings.
4. Dona Maria (1734-1816) was the queen of Portuguese and the first undisputed female monarch of Portugal. In *Dear Zindagi*, *Dona Maria* is a movie within a movie where Dona Maria is also a Portugal queen who fights for the country disguised herself as a male Soldier. But in the end when she fights as a woman soldier uncovering her imposed identity as a male warrior, she becomes a successful female warrior.

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## About the Author

Sampuja Ganguly has completed her Masters in English Literature from Calcutta University. Presently she is working as a Lecturer in English at Banipur Mahila Mahavidyalaya affiliated with West Bengal State University. She has published her research articles in journals like "Literary Herald" (ISSN: 2454-3365) and "International Journal of Creative and Innovative Research in All Studies" (ISSN: 2581-5334). Two of her book chapters have also been published in the books entitled "Gender, Sexuality and Literature" (ISBN: 978-81-946799-0-5) and "Women Empowerment in India: Ancient and Modern Perspectives" (ISBN: 978-81-949251-1-8.) by Delhi based publishing house "Upanayan Publication".