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# UNIT 17 ROBERT BROWNING

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## 17.0 OBJECTIVES

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In this unit you will be reading two well-known poems of Robert Browning. These poems will give you an understanding of Browning's poetry which holds a distinguished place because of its optimistic note.

On reading this Unit you will be able to:

- appreciate the distinctive qualities of Browning's poetry and art;
- understand dramatic monologue which Browning exploited to portray the tensions within a character's psyche;
- understand the differences between Tennyson and Browning, the poets who were products of the same age.

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## 17.1 INTRODUCTION

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Robert Browning was only three years younger than Tennyson. And yet the differences between the two poets are so big that they seem to be writing in two different ages.

Tennyson, you must have seen, is basically an emotional poet, responding to the beauty and pain of life. His involvement with the polemics of his times was also deep: he was as much concerned with politics of democracy as with scientific researches of his time that had begun to instil doubts into the minds of the people. Robert Browning's concerns were never so comprehensive. An intense personal life made him inclined to study characters belonging to aristocracy, the priestly and the artistic classes in whom he noticed contradictions and paradoxes but also a zest for life.

He wrote a few lyrics in which you will notice the argumentative tone of John Donne. But he is chiefly famous for his dramatic monologues, a few too long to

be read in one sitting. These poems are generally about Italian figures from different classes of the society. Their passions, adventures and tensions create a lot of interest: they do touch upon issues of morality and psychology but Browning takes them in his stride and does not let us feel disturbed. This cheerful spirit of Browning has endeared him to modern poets though his poems are considered to be difficult on account of wide-ranging allusions.

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## 17.2 ROBERT BROWNING: LIFE AND WORKS

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Robert Browning was born in 1812. His father worked in the Bank of England and was a man of literary interests. He had a vast collection of books in his personal library. Robert Browning’s mother was a nice musician. It was natural for Robert Browning to be interested in literature and music. Before he entered University College, London he had acquired proficiency in French, Italian, Greek and Latin. However, he left the college without a degree.

In his youth Browning was greatly influenced by Shelley – his poetry and his atheism. He did not remain an atheist for long but he continued to be a radical like Shelley. In 1845, Browning met Elizabeth Barrett in London. When her father objected to their marriage, they eloped to Italy, the country that fascinated Browning.

Browning had started writing quite early. His first published work was a long poem – **Pauline** in which he tried to imitate Shelley’s style. He attracted critical attention by **Men and Women** in 1855. **The Ring and The Book** is an ambitious poem of his in which he justified the ways of God through extended blank verse monologues. These were greatly admired by Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot.

His dramatic monologues portray a great variety of characters speaking to a silent listener about themselves at some important moment in their lives. It is not actually what they say that is important, more important are the things which they do not speak of directly but which are revealed through their tone and the implications of what they think and do. Browning died in 1889 and was buried in Westminster Abbey.

### Major Works

Pauline	1833
Parcelsus	1835
Men and women	1855
Dramatic Personae	1864
The Ring and The Book	1869
Asolando	1889

### Self-check Exercise I

- 1) What impression of Robert Browning do you have after learning the facts of his life?

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2) How is dramatic monologue different from a lyric?

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3) Name three important works of Robert Browning.

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### 17.3 POEM: SOLILOQUY OF 'THE SPANISH CLOISTER'

1

Gr-r-r – there go, my heart's **abhorrence!**  
 Water your damned flower-pots, do!  
 If hate killed men, Brother Lawrence,  
 God's blood, would not mine kill you!  
 What? your myrtle-bush wants trimming?  
 Oh, that rose has prior claims –  
 Need its leaden vase filled brimming?  
 Hell dry you up with its flames!

2

At the meal we sit together  
**Salve tibi!** I must hear  
 Wise talk of the kind of weather,  
 Sort of season, time of year:  
 Not a plenteous cork-crop: scarcely  
 Dare we hope oak-galls, I doubt:  
 What's the Latin name for '**parsley**'?  
 What's the Greek name for Swine's Snout?

3

Whew! We'll have our platter **burnished**,  
 Laid with care on our own shelf!  
 With a fire-new spoon we're furnished,  
 And a goblet for ourself,  
 Rinsed like something sacrificial  
 Ere 'tis fit to touch our chaps –  
 Marked with L for our initial!  
 (He-he! There his lily snaps!)

4

Saint, forsooth! While brown Dolores  
 Squats outside the Convent bank  
 With Sanchicha, telling stories,  
 Steeping tresses in the tank,  
 Blue-black, lustrous, thick like horsehairs  
 - Can't I see his dead eye glow,  
 Bright as 'twere a Barbary corsair's?  
 (That is, if he'd let it show!)

5

When he finishes **refection**,  
 Knife and fork he never lays  
 Cross-wise, to my recollection,  
 As do I, in Jesu's praise  
 I the **Trinity** illustrate,  
 Drinking watered orange-pulp –  
 In three sips the **Arian** frustrate;  
 While he drains his at one gulp.

6

Oh, those melons? If he's able  
 We're to have a feast! so nice!  
 One goes to the Abbot's table,  
 All of us get each a slice.  
 How go on your flowers? None double?  
 Not one fruit-sort can you spy?  
 Strange! – And I, too, at such trouble,  
 Keep them close-nipped on the sly!

7

There's a great text in **Galatians**,  
 Once you trip on it, entails  
 Twenty-nine distinct **damnations**,  
 One sure, if another fails.  
 If I trip him just a-dying,  
 Sure of heaven as sure can be,  
 Spin him round and send him flying  
 Off to hell, a **Manichee**?

8

Or, my scrofulous French novel  
 On grey paper with blunt type!  
 Simply glance at it, you grovel  
 Hand and foot in Belial's gripe:  
 If I double down its pages  
 At the woeful sixteenth print,  
 When he gathers his greengages,  
 Ope a sieve and slip it in't?

Or, there's Satan! – one might venture  
 Pledge one's soul to him, yet leave  
 Such a flaw in the **indenture**  
 As he'd miss till, past retrieve,  
 Blasted lay that rose-acacia  
 We're so proud of! Hy, Zy, Hine ...  
 'St, there's Vespers! Plena gratia  
 Ave, Virgo! Gr-r-r – you swine!

### 17.3.1 Glossary

<b>Cloister</b>	:	a monastery, one who leads a monastic life
<b>Abhorrence</b>	:	hatred
<b>Salve tibi</b>	:	a toast, literally <i>Your Health</i> in Latin
<b>Parsley</b>	:	a herb used in cooking
<b>Burnished</b>	:	highly polished metal
<b>Refection</b>	:	a light meal
<b>The Trinity</b>	:	One God known as Father, Son and Holy Spirit
<b>The Arian</b>	:	a sect of Christians who believed that Jesus was of a similar nature and substance as God
<b>Galatians</b>	:	a book of the New Testament
<b>Damnations</b>	:	State of being in hell
<b>Manichee</b>	:	a sect of Christians who attribute evil to some adversary to God
<b>Belial</b>	:	a fallen angel
<b>Indenture</b>	:	a type of contract that forced a servant to work for the employer for a particular period of time
<b>Plena gratia</b>	:	full of grace

### 17.3.2 Discussion

The portraiture of ecclesiastical figures in a comic and satiric light has been in vogue in English literature since Chaucer who, through his prioress and monk, drew attention to their inadequacies, their virtual unsuitability for such duties because of their indulgence in material pursuits and luxurious living.

Robert Browning also observed the life of many persons working in the church. He found it in direct conflict with the principles and the code of conduct of the church. And yet as was his wont he expressed his disapproval in a gentle and humorous manner, taking misdemeanour in quite a light way.

In this poem the anonymous Spanish monk's attempt to denigrate his fellow monk, Lawrence, is a successful exercise in dramatic irony, the many allegations of the speaker reflecting actually his own flawed character. The speaker, in a bitter upsurge of jealousy, tries to tear apart Lawrence through the details of his routine activities – gardening, dining habits, conversation, love affairs and

Christian duties. But anger and envy are in themselves unchristian feelings, exposing the character of the speaker himself. Lawrence is portrayed as a glutton and as a person of loose morals, carrying out a clandestine affair with one or two local women. But the very tone in which these allegations are made point to the lapses of the speaker in all these areas.

In the last two stanzas the speaker declares his intention of further damning the soul of Lawrence. This is again an unchristian desire. A true Christian must try for salvation of individuals: he is not to do anything that leads to damnation. Moreover, the means that the cloister speaks of – the French novels – suggest that he is himself hooked on to such reading to satisfy his vicarious urges.

A sort of progress of the evil thoughts of the cloister is discernible in this poem of nine stanzas. In the first stanza he speaks of the healthy gardening activities of Lawrence that provoke him into a spiteful mood – *Hell dry you up with its flames*. This is quite unwarranted as Lawrence is shown doing his work with great care. Then follows the lunch-time scene in which Lawrence is shown as a glutton but also as a skilled conversationalist. In fact, a glutton rarely shows interest in conversation while he is gorging on food. There is thus a discrepancy between facts and cloister's reporting that catches our attention. The reference to Dolores and Sanchicha, the two local women, shows that the speaker is himself enamoured of their '*tresses ..... blue black lustrous*'. The details of theological debates in the course of drinking fruit-juices are amusing. And more damning are the plans of trapping Lawrence by inciting him to read French novels. Finally, in the last stanza, there is direct invocation of Satan, an act that is against Christian faith.

### 17.3.3 Appreciation

The poem reminds of the personal satires written by Dryden and Pope. But Robert Browning takes one step further in making the speaker an object of satire. This is possible because of the dramatic monologue form where the speaker's tone yields an insight into his own character. Technically speaking, this poem is not a dramatic monologue as there is no listener here. It is a soliloquy. But the variation of tone and mood resembles the style of dramatic monologue, and there is a focus on the temperament and the character of the speaker.

A more significant thing, you should notice, is the use of Lawrence's voice also, creating a dramatic interval within the poem, enabling us to compare the two voices, that is, of the Spanish cloister and of Lawrence.

The use of colloquial phrases – *there go, my heart's abhorrence, oh, that rose has prior claims, oh, those melons!* – help the reader recreate every movement of the scene from the garden to the dining table. They also provide a glimpse into the changing mood of the speaker from anger to mirthful jest. They are a means of striking communication with the reader at an informal level.

There are high sounding words and phrases also – *Jesus praise, the Trinity, Arian, Galatians, Manichee* – connected with the Bible and the theological debates of the Victorian age. They make only pompous statement, a show on the part of the speaker of his acquaintance with controversies of his time. A monk who joined the church to enjoy the pleasures of life without honest work had to justify his position by these tricks.

Anyway, the poem is an entertaining piece – a triumph of poetic art that could present something ridiculous in style.

**Self-check Exercise II**

1) Describe Lawrence’s conversation as presented by the speaker.

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2) What plan is the speaker making regarding damnation of Lawrence?

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3) Why is the Spanish cloister so angry with Lawrence? Can you guess?

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4) What light does the poem throw on the personality of Lawrence?

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5) What impression do you have of the Spanish cloister?

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**17.4 POEM: ANDREA DEL SARTO**


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**Andrea del Sarto**

(Called 'The Faultless Painter')

But do not let us quarrel any more,  
 No, my Lucrezia; bear with me for once:  
 Sit down and all shall happen as you wish.  
 You turn your face, but does it bring your heart?  
 I'll work then for your friend's friend, never fear,  
 Treat his own subject after his own way,  
 Fix his own time, accept too his own price,  
 And shut the money into this small hand  
 When next it takes mine. Will it? tenderly?  
 Oh, I'll content him, – but to-morrow, Love!  
 I often am much **wearier** than you think,  
 This evening more than usual, and it seems  
 As if – forgive now – should you let me sit  
 Here by the window with your hand in mine  
 And look a half-hour forth on **Fiesole**,  
 Both of one mind, as married people use,  
 Quietly, quietly the evening through,  
 I might get up to-morrow to my work  
 Cheerful and fresh as ever. Let us try.  
 To-morrow, how you shall be glad for this!  
 Your soft hand is a woman of itself,  
 And mine the man's bared breast she curls inside.  
 Don't count the time lost, neither; you must serve  
 For each of the five pictures we require:  
 It saves a model. So! keep looking so –  
 My **serpentine** beauty, rounds on rounds!  
 – How could you ever prick those perfect ears.  
 Even to put the pearl there! oh, so sweet –  
 My face, my moon, my everybody's moon,  
 Which everybody looks on and calls his,  
 And, I suppose, is looked by in turn,  
 While she looks – no one's: very dear, no less.  
 You smile? why, there's my picture read made,  
 There's what we painters call our harmony!  
 A common greyness silvers everything –  
 All in a twilight, you and I alike  
 – You, at the point of your first pride in me  
 (That's gone you know), – but I, at every point;  
 My youth, my hope, my art, being all toned down  
 To younder sober pleasant Fiesole.  
 There's the bell clinking from the chapel-top;  
 That length of convent-wall across the way  
 Holds the trees safer, huddled more inside;  
 The last monk leaves the garden; days decrease,  
 And autumn grows, autumn in every-thing.  
 Eh? the who'e seems to fall into a shape



As if I saw alike my work and self  
 And all that I was born to be and do,  
 A twilight-piece. Love, we are in God's hand.  
 How strange now, looks the life he makes us lead;  
 So free we seem, so **fettered** fast we are!  
 I feel he laid the fetter: let it lie!  
 This chamber for example – turn your head –  
 All that's behind us! You don't understand  
 Nor care to understand about my art,  
 But you can hear at least when people speak:  
 And that cartoon, the second from the door  
 – It is the thing, Love! so such things should be –  
 Behold **Madonna!** – I am bold to say  
 I can do with my pencil what I know,  
 What I see, what at bottom of my heart  
 I wish for, if I ever wish so deep –  
 Do easily, too – when I say, perfectly,  
 I do not boast, perhaps: yourself are judge,  
 Who listened to the Legate's talk last week,  
 And just as much they used to say in France.  
 At any rate 'tis easy, all of it!  
 No sketches first, no studies, that's long post:  
 I do what many dream of, all their lives,  
 – Dream? strive to do, and agonize to do,  
 And fail in doing, I could count twenty such  
 On twice your fingers, and not leave this town,  
 Who strive – you don't know how the others strive  
 To paint a little thing like that you smeared  
 Carelessly passing with your robes afloat, –  
 Yet do much less, so much less, Someone says,  
 (I know his name, no matter) – so much less!  
 Well, less is more, Lucrezia: I am judged.  
 There burns a truer light of God in them,  
 In their vexed beating stuffed and stopped-up brain,  
 Heart, or whate'er else, than goes on to prompt  
 This low-pulsed forthright craftsman's hand of mine.  
 Their works drop groundward, but themselves, I know,  
 Reach many a time a heaven that's shut to me,  
 Enter and take their place there sure enough,  
 Though they come back and cannot tell the world.  
 My works are nearer heaven, but I sit here.  
 The sudden blood of these men! at a word –  
 Praise them, it boils, or blame them, it boils too.  
 I, painting from myself and to myself,  
 Know what I do, am unmoved by men's blame  
 Or their praise either. Somebody remarks  
 Morello's outline there is wrongly traced,  
 His hue mistaken; what of that? or else,  
 Rightly traced and well ordered; what of that?  
 Speak as they please, what does the mountain care?  
 Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp.

Or what's a heaven for? All is silver-grey,  
 Placid and perfect with my art: the worse!  
 I know both what I want and what might gain,  
 And yet how profitless to know, to sigh  
 'Had I been two, another and myself,  
 'Our head would have overlooked the world!' No doubt.  
 Yonder's a work now, of that famous youth  
 The Urbinate who died five years ago.  
 ('Tis copied, George Vasari sent it me.)  
 Well, I can fancy how he did it all,  
 Pouring his soul, with kings and popes to see,  
 Reaching, that heaven might so replenish him,  
 Above and through his art – for it gives way;  
 That arm is wrongly put – and there again –  
 A fault to pardon in the drawing's line,  
 Its body, so to speak: its soul is right,  
 He means right – that, a child may understand.  
 Still, what an arm! and I could alter it:  
 But all the play, the insight and the stretch –  
 Out of me, out of me! And wherefore out?  
 Had you enjoined them on me, given me soul,  
 We might have risen to Rafael, I and you!  
 Nay, Love, you did give all I asked, I think –  
 More than I merit, yes, by many times.  
 But had you – oh, with the same perfect brow,  
 And perfect eyes, and more than perfect mouth,  
 And the low voice my soul hears, as a bird  
 The fowler's pipe, and follows to the snare –  
 Had you, with these the same, but brought a mind!  
 Some women do so. Had the mouth there urged  
 'God and the glory! never care for gain.  
 'The present by the future, what is that?  
 'Live for fame, side by side with Agnolo!  
 'Rafael is waiting: up to God, all three!  
 'I might have done it for you. So it seems:  
 Perhaps not. All is as God over-rules.  
 Beside, incentives come from the soul's self;  
 The rest avail not. Why do I need you?  
 What wife had Rafael, or has **Agnolo**?  
 In this world, who can do a thing, will not;  
 And who would do it, cannot, I perceive: Yet the will's somewhat – somewhat,  
 too, the power –  
 And thus we half-men struggle. At the end,  
 God, I conclude, compensates, punishes.  
 'Tis safer for me, if the award be strict,  
 That I am something underrated here,  
 Poor this long while, despised, to speak the truth.  
 I dared not, do you know, leave home all day,  
 For fear of chancing on the Paris lords.  
 The best is when they pass and look aside;  
 But they speak sometimes; I must bear it all.

Well may they speak! That Francis, that first time,  
 And that long festal year at Fontainebleau!  
 I surely then could sometimes leave the ground,  
 Put on the glory, Rafael's daily wear,  
 In that humane great monarch's golden look, –  
 One finger in his beard or twisted curl  
 Over his mouth's good mark that made the smile,  
 One arm about my shoulder, round my neck,  
 The jingle of his gold chain in my ear,  
 I painting proudly with his breath on me,  
 All his court round him, seeing with his eyes,  
 Such frank French eyes, and such a fire of souls  
 Profuse, my hand kept plying by those hearts, –  
 And, best of all, this, this, this face beyond,  
 This in the background, waiting on my work,  
 To crown the issue with a last reward!  
 A good time, was it not, my kingly days?  
 And had you not grown restless ..... but I know  
 'Tis done and past; 'twas right, my instinct said;  
 Too live the life grew, golden and not grey,  
 And I'm the weak-eyed bat no sun should tempt  
 Out of the grange whose four walls make his world.  
 How could it end in any other way?  
 You called me, and I came home to your heart.  
 The triumph was – to reach and stay there; since  
 I reached it ere the triumph, what is lost?  
 Let my hands frame your face in your hair's gold,  
 You beautiful Lucrezia that are mine!  
 'Rafael did this, Andrea painted that;  
 'The Roman's is the better when you pray,  
 'But still the other's Virgin was his wife –  
 Men will excuse me. I am glad to judge  
 Both pictures in your presence; clearer grows  
 My better fortune, I resolve to think.  
 For, do you know, Lucrezia, as God lives,  
 Said one day Agnolo, his very self,  
 To Rafael .... I have known it all these years ....  
 (When the young man was flaming out his thoughts  
 Upon a palace-wall for Rome to see,  
 Too lifted up in heart because of it)  
 'Friend, there's a certain sorry little scrub  
 'Goes up and down our Florence, none cares how,  
 'Who, were he set to plan and execute  
 'As you are, pricked on by your popes and kings,  
 'Would bring the sweat into that brow of yours!  
 'To Rafael's! – And indeed the arm is wrong.  
 I hardly dare ..... yet, only you to see,  
 Give that chalk here – quick, thus the line should go!  
 Ay, but the soul! he's Rafael! rub it out!  
 Still, all I care for, if he spoke the truth,  
 (What he? why, who but Michel Agnolo?

Do you forget already words like those?)  
If really there was such a chance, so lost, –  
Is, whether you're – not grateful – but more pleased.  
Well, let me think so. And you smile indeed!  
This hour has been an hour! Another smile?  
If you would sit thus by me every night  
I should work better, do you comprehend?  
I mean that I should earn more, give you more.  
See, it is settled dusk now; there's a star;  
Morello's gone, the watch-lights show the wall,  
The cue-owls speak the name we call them by.  
Come from the window, love, – come in, at last,  
Inside the melancholy little house  
We built to be so gay with. God is just.  
King Francis may forgive me: oft at nights  
When I look up from painting, eyes tired out,  
The walls become illumined, brick from brick  
Distinct, instead of mortar, fierce bright gold,  
That gold of his I did cement them with!  
Let us but love each other. Must you go?  
That Cousin here again? he waits outside?  
Must see you – you, and not with me?  
Those loans?  
More gaming debts to pay? you smiled for that?  
Well, let smiles buy me! have you more to spend?  
While hand and eye and something of heart  
Are left me, work's my ware, and what's it worth?  
I'll pay my fancy. Only let me sit  
The grey remainder of the evening out, Idle, you call it, and muse perfectly  
How I could paint, were I but back in France,  
One picture, just one more – the Virgin's face,  
Not yours this time! I want you at my side  
To hear them – that is, Michel Agnolo –  
Judge all I do and tell you of its worth,  
Will you? To-morrow, satisfy your friend.  
I take the subjects for his corridor,  
Finish the portrait out of hand – there, there,  
And throw him in another thing or two  
If he demurs; the whole should prove enough  
To pay for this same Cousin's freak. Beside,  
What's better and what's all I care about,  
Get you the thirteen scrudi for the ruff!  
Love, does that please you? Ah, but what does he,  
The Cousin! what does he to please you more?  
I am grown peaceful as old age tonight.  
I regret little, I would change still less.  
Since there my past life lies, why alter it?  
The very wrong to Francis! – it is true  
I took his coin, was tempted and complied,  
And built this house and sinned, and all is said.  
My father and my mother died of want.

Well, had I riches of my own? you see  
 How one gets rich! Let each one bear his lot.  
 They were born poor, lived poor and poor they died:  
 And I have laboured somewhat in my time  
 And not been paid profusely. Some good son  
 Paint my two hundred pictures .... let him try!  
 No doubt, there's something strikes a balance. Yes,  
 You loved me quite enough, it seems tonight.  
 This must suffice me here. What would one have?  
 In heaven, perhaps, new chances, one more chance –  
 Four great walls in the New Jerusalem,  
 Meted on each side by the angel's reed,  
 For Leonard, Rafael, Agnolo and me  
 To cover – the three first without a wife,  
 While I have mine! So – still they over-come  
 Because there's still Lucrezia, – as I choose.  
 Again the Cousin's whistle! Go, my Love.

### 17.4.1 Glossary

- Wearier** : more tired  
**Fiesole** : a beautiful town in the north of Florence where Andrea del Sarto is settled  
**Serpentining** : like a coiled serpent, also very glossy  
**Fettered** : bound by chains, not in a position to move freely  
**Madonna** : a statue or painting of Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus  
**Agnolo** : Michael Angelo, the Renaissance Italian painter

### 17.4.2 Discussion

Andrea del Sarto, called the faultless painter for his technical perfection, was the court painter of king Francis of France, in the sixteenth century. The king sent him with large funds to Italy to purchase Italian works of art. But Andrea del Sarto settled in a comfortable house in Florence with that money and never returned to France. Although Michael Angelo and Raphael were legendary painters of Italy at this time, Andrea del Sarto earned distinction for his minute attention to details. He was therefore called the faultless painter, that is a painter in whose work everything was in perfect order.

The long poem is an example of dramatic monologue. On an evening when Andrea del Sarto is with his wife, Lucrezia, he turns introspective, thinks of his successful career, his betrayal of the French king and, basically, of a serious drawback of his that does not let him have a higher inspiration inspite of technical superiority. And he concludes that his mercenary outlook and his anxiety to keep his wife satisfied are the reasons behind his being at this low level in the world of art. A tone that alters between elation over achievement and then of frustration over a major failure dramatizes the mental conflict of Andrea del Sarto and lays bare several layers of his consciousness.

The pathetic appeal – *do not let us quarrel any more* – with which the poem begins is an index of Andrea del Sarto's state of mind. He further requests

Lucrezia to come closer to him so that he could watch Fiesole from the window of his house in a posture of intimacy and wake up the next day cheerful and fresh and finish a painting exactly according to the terms of the commission. It would be a great satisfaction for Andrea del Sarto to put '*the money into this small hand*'. While art has been a means of livelihood for many, Andrea del Sarto knows very well that he built up his career by fraud: he took money from Francis in the name of purchasing paintings but he used it to construct a house for himself and to fulfil the needs of his wife.

This knowledge or this feeling of guilt has brought no perceptible change in the outlook of Andrea del Sarto. To save a little money on a model he can use Lucrezia to whom his attachment is almost slavish.

For a moment, as he looks out of the window, at the beauty of Fiesole, he hears the last bells of the church and feels the chill of autumn in the wind. He can see lucidly '*autumn in everything*', that is, an inevitable decay of powers, faculties and creativity. In this moment he can view all his work as being '*a twilight piece*', that is, lacking brightness and splendour. This is to suggest that this specific moment is the articulation of an experience that has been with him for a long time. He has been living with this sense of failure for long and it is only now that he finds a release in these terms.

Andrea never forgets the supreme worth of the paintings of Raphael, Leonardo da Vinci and Michaelangelo simply for the reason that their works were inspired from an inner source. That source has dried up in Andrea del Sarto. He can very carefully draw something, making it exact and accurate. But the insight that leads to production of great work of art is out of his grasp. To be acutely conscious of this lapse comes from an understanding of art. And it is quite pathetic to note that an artist, in spite of being conscious of this flaw in him, can never overcome it.

To add to this note of pathos there is the infidelity of his wife who has fallen for a cousin, waiting to give a slip to her husband, come out and meet him. Andrea cannot have any restraining influence over his wife. So he has to come to terms with this also and he would rather let his wife enjoy this affair than quarrel openly with her. His degradation is complete. He may take satisfaction in being called a faultless painter, but his life is in a shambles.

### 17.4.3 Appreciation

As a poet Robert Browning possessed a keen insight in every aspect of art – the devotion that an artist should have towards his work, the mastery over the craft and a moral outlook. Without these three elements the work of an artist would be lacking in vitality and purpose. But his long association with poets, painters and musicians, which Italy had in abundance, gave him acquaintance with the shady side of artistic business also. He must have learnt with pain that an artist could perform for sheer mercenary motives and nothing else. The success could be valuable in terms of monetary gain and fame, but in the process the artist destroyed himself. It is this experience of the moral failure of the artist which is central to the poem.

The poem is a confession on the part of Andrea del Sarto who had great artistic promise. But he was ruined by one basic flaw – he could not devote himself to art. He further compromised his integrity by cheating King Francis and by

attaching himself to a woman to whom money and pleasure counted above everything.

Andrea del Sarto admits to have sold himself to keep Lucrezia satisfied. But is she satisfied? The betrayal to art and to the patron king haunts him back now not only in the sense of failure as an artist, but as a failure in life as a whole. An artist has his life in art – it is art alone that is his controlling destiny. To forget art and to lose oneself in materialistic pursuits is to move towards death.

Apart from presenting a case-study of Andrea del Sarto in such self-deprecating terms the poem is a verdict on a class of artists who allow themselves to be trapped either by sensual pleasures or material ambitions. Art is simply incompatible with physicality or materialism. Beyond the details of craft, art has a spiritual centre, a view of life of man and nature. This view remains open only to those artists who remain committed to the principle of art, to its spirituality.

Appearing to be comic, ironical and light-hearted, the poem is vindication of this doctrine of art. Robert Browning's mastery of poetic voice is evidently of a moral nature only disguised in banter and ridicule. Many words and phrases – *serpentine*, *I am judged*, *a truer light of God*, *nearer heaven* – have a biblical ring. They suggest Andrea's religious background which has been obliterated by his own acts. There is the memory of Dr. Faustus in his last moment realization – *Love, we are in God's hand ...../ so free we seem, so fettered fast we are.*

### Self-check Exercise III

- 1) Write a note on the personality of Andrea del Sarto.

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- 2) Why did Andrea del Sarto betray King Francis?

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- 3) How are now the relations between Andrea del Sarto and his wife?

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4) What view of art does Browning present through this poem?  
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5) Do you think Andrea del Sarto is a faultless painter?  
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6) How is Browning different from Tennyson?  
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### 17.5 LET US SUM UP

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In this unit we studied:

- the life and works of Robert Browning, noting the dramatic monologue that he developed.
- the two poems in which Robert Browning’s contribution to dramatic monologue is well-represented.

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### 17.6 SUGGESTED READING

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For further studies in Robert Browning you can refer to the following works: -  
W.C. De Vane, *A Browning Hand Book*, John Murray, 1955  
Robert Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience*, Chatto, 1957  
Ian Jack, *Browning’s Major Poetry*, Oxford University Press, 1973  
J. Briston, *Robert Browning*, Harvester, 1991



### Self-check Exercise I

- 1) Go through the second stanza of the poem. The topics of conversation are mentioned; on the basis of that develop your own idea. A part of it is continued in the sixth stanza also.
- 2) The details of various food-items and drinks are given in the fifth and the sixth stanzas.
- 3) Take help of the last part of Discussion.

### Self-check Exercise II

- 1) Andrea del Sarto is presented as an artist who has sacrificed art for commercial success. At the root of this is, however, his passion for Lucrezia, his wife, to whom only pleasure and fashionable living matter. It is to keep her happy that Andrea pocketed the money given to him by King Francis; he constructed a house in Fiesole with this money and turned to a style of painting that could bring him quick success. He creates demand by working hard and maintaining a high level of accuracy in matters of form. The formal perfection appeals immediately to the public who acclaim him for being technically perfect.

But Andrea had good training. At this height of his career he comes to realize that his so-called perfection is a ruse to cheat the people. It is not an outcome of following the artistic principle. There is thus a great sense of honesty in his admission. Moreover, his references to Michaelangelo and other great painters reveal the understanding of spiritual foundation of art.

Andrea is, therefore, filled with remorse, guilt and a painful realization of truth together with a very frustrating sense of complete incapacity. His submission to the fancies and adventures of his wife makes him a farcical figure, though his sense of guilt does elevate him a little.

- 2) See the early parts of Discussion.
- 4) Consult Appreciation.
- 6) Browning is basically different from Tennyson in retaining an optimistic view of life, in developing dramatic monologue, in the range of his characters, and in keeping himself untouched by the religious-political issues that were being hotly debated in England.

Quote lines from poems.