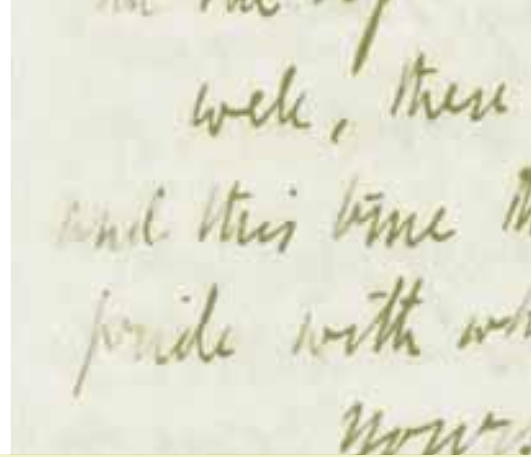


# a noisy poem

## Voice and Ventriloquism in 'Fra Lippo Lippi'



David Gore argues that Browning's poem, with its many conversations and different voices, is no random cacophony but rather a clever satire and debate on art, religion and morality.

'Fra Lippo Lippi' takes the form of a dramatic monologue, characterised by the device of the unheard addressee. The addressee is so silent that we forget the speaker is addressing someone, so taken in (and taken aback) are we by, the force of the speaker's personality. Lippi is the only one of this group of dramatic monologues (*My Last Duchess*, *Porphyria's Lover*) to be composed in blank verse, a decision that further deepens our appreciation of its dramatic nature. Like Shakespeare's dramatic blank verse, it is the default mode for speech. This is a monologue written to be declaimed: probably drunken and certainly defensive. A garrulous monk, painter-in-residence for the Catholic Church, is caught by a Constable in the small hours of the morning in the red light district of the city. What can he say in his defence? Quite a lot, as it happens.

### Stories within stories

In terms of its structure, the poem begins **in media res** just like the start of a Shakespearean drama. We are plunged into animated talk, mid-conversation: a kind of street theatre embracing engaging characters and popular 'low-life' culture (song, drinking, a spring carnival). But, as we know, it's also about high culture. Given that one possible reading of this poem is that it constructs a debate around

the nature of art, then the juxtaposition of popular lyrics from romantic ballads (the bits in italics) with the divine imagery of high religious art, might suggest that Browning's purpose is both aesthetic, to do with art and meaning, and moral, to do with behaviour.

Like a Tarantino movie, the narrative comes full circle, via flashbacks to key scenes, mainly conflicts, in the life of the protagonist. It begins with a confrontation with the Law, re-creates several arguments between Lippi's spiritual elders and himself, ends with an imagined argument between religious authorities and a young attractive angel, before returning to the same tussle with the Law: a hapless Constable trying to arrest the truculent monk. It's stories within stories.

### Secondary audiences

The narrative form of the poem is complicated by secondary audiences, as the speaker imagines debates with the Prior and his allies. Browning creates an imaginary dialogue between Lippi and his adversaries, using Lippi to develop an impassioned argument about the nature and purpose of art. A Marxist reader might use the term **dialectic** here; Browning constructs a **thesis**, advanced by Lippi, that religious art should be grounded in the everyday experience of ordinary people; an **antithesis**, advanced by the Prior, that religious art should eschew the everyday and focus on conventional spiritual symbols and figures; and a **synthesis**, constructed by the reader, that art should be ... whatever we think it should!

### Sorting out the speakers

Voice is crucial to our understanding of the poem. How many voices are we dealing with? This is a noisy poem with lots of voices jostling for our attention. There seem to be at least seven different speakers: Lippi; the Constable (unheard); the ladies of the night (associated with the snatches of song); the 'good fat father'





	Lines	Duologue between	Subject	Effect
1	1-44 1-392	Lippi and Constable	Breach of the peace?	Comic challenge of our ideas about Holy Orders?
2	92-95 106	Lippi and good fat father  'Let's see what the urchin's fit for'	Contract between Church and Lippi fostering / education in exchange for Art?	Lippi exploited by the Church?  We side with Lippi?
3	137-141 175-198 233-237 296-299 316-319	Lippi and the Prior	Prior lectures Lippi against painting physical reality at the expense of the soul.	What form should religious Art take? Should Art be didactic?
4	168-171 326-335	Lippi and his peers	Peer approval of Lippi's Art	Creates sympathy for Lippi's position
5	371-377	Young female angel addresses a host of Saints in planned painting by Lippi	Angel defends the role of Lippi as an artistic saviour of religion.	Peer support and now a divine voice cement our position on the side of Lippi?

who admits the eight-year-old Lippi to the monastery; the Prior and his senior clerics; Lippi's sympathetic brothers; and, finally, the imaginary (guardian?) angel in the anticipated painting, who defends Lippi against the divine hierarchy. You can hear other voices too: the abusive pedestrians who 'holla for the Eight' to have the begging Lippi 'whipped'; the outraged husband shouting at Lippi in bed with his wife (or so Lippi imagines it). How does Browning manage this cast of characters?

Browning the poet, like Shakespeare the dramatist, acts like a ventriloquist, creating a cast of voices all competing for our attention and approval. Quite who you listen to, and with whom you agree, is what reading the poem is about. Let's look a little closer.

One way of dealing with the structure of the poem is to see it as a series of duologues between a succession of paired speakers, each of whom is locked into a debate. This is to acknowledge the dramatic nature of its form. We could identify and evaluate each debate as shown in the table above right.

Browning seems to enjoy creating speakers who subvert the social hierarchy that seeks to trap them. Why is it, for example, that we get a strong sense that the Prior is a pompous hypocrite and a philanderer? And why is it that the medieval Catholic church practices the exact opposite of what it preaches, and wants Lippi's paintings to preach that the Flesh is a false God. It isn't easy to find evidence of the Prior's lechery. Browning uses the very same snatches of song sung, appropriately, by the Ladies of the Night who tempt Lippi out of his cell, to expose the Prior's double standards. In this delicious, insinuating rant by Lippi, who is retorting to the Prior's injunction that he should not 'Fag on at flesh' if he wishes to be famous, we hear the damning accusation,

**Flower o' the pine,  
You keep your mistr... manners, and I'll stick to mine! (238-239)**

### A modern poem?

Such dexterity with discourse, blending bits of ballads into polemic to achieve his satirical point, is what many critics feel

makes Browning a curiously modern poet: his experimentation with form and manipulation of voice, his use of irony and ambiguity to make meaning.

However we read 'Fra Lippo Lippi' – as a debate on the nature of art, as a satire on the hypocrisy of the Church, as the self-obsessed rant of a genius – what remains is its richness. And its boldness. It is ribald and irreverent. Your local butcher as the face of a saint; your local policeman as the face of an assassin: Lippi – and Browning – can paint whatever they want. It is a celebration of the everyday in the face of institutionalised corruption, and in that sense stands in the tradition of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Lippi would make a good husband for The Wife of Bath: both characters present experience as the only authority worth having; both paint their own pictures. Like Chaucer's feisty character, Lippi asks a lot of questions: 23 to be exact, and most of those are fiercely rhetorical:

**Who am I?  
What's it all about? / To be passed over, despised? Or**



bar to admision, and the half-  
opened door shut, and I went  
home my thousand miles,  
and the night w. never to be!  
well, these poems were to be  
and this time thankful joy and  
pride with which I feel myself  
yours ever faithfully,  
Robert Browning

**dwelt upon./ Wondered at?**

**Why not .....paint these / Just as they are, careless  
what comes of it?**

Some of my students found this tone reckless and self-important rather than impressive. They argued that, like the Duke of Ferrara, Lippo is self-obsessed, and like Porphyria's lover, he is paranoid and mad. They pointed to Browning's neat touch at the end where he places Lippo as a cameo character in his own painting ('Who but Lippo! I! ... I'm the man!') as evidence for this reading. Other readers, myself included, might prefer to read this behaviour as a kind of innocent egotism, the kind you encounter when talented creative types are repressed, and even oppressed, by authority. However you read the poem, once you've been buttonholed by Lippo, you don't forget it.

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