The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's

POEM TEXT

Rome, 15—

Vanity, saith the preacher, vanity!
Draw round my bed: is Anselm keeping back?
Nephews—sons mine...ah God, I know not! Well—
She, men would have to be your mother once,
Old Gandolf envied me, so fair she was!
What's done is done, and she is dead beside,
Dead long ago, and I am Bishop since,
And as she died so must we die ourselves,
And thence ye may perceive the world's a dream.
Life, how and what is it? As here I lie
In this state-chamber, dying by degrees,
Hours and long hours in the dead night, I ask
"Do I live, am I dead?" Peace, peace seems all.
Saint Praxed's ever was the church for peace;
And so, about this tomb of mine. I fought
With tooth and nail to save my niche, ye know:
—Old Gandolf cozened me, despite my care;
Shrewd was that snatch from out the corner south
He graced his carrion with, God curse the same!
Yet still my niche is not so cramped but thence
One sees the pulpit o' the epistle-side,
And somewhat of the choir, those silent seats,
And up into the aery dome where live
The angels, and a sunbeam's sure to lurk:
And I shall fill my slab of basalt there,
And 'neath my tabernacle take my rest,
With those nine columns round me, two and two,
The odd one at my feet where Anselm stands:
Peach-blossom marble all, the rare, the ripe
As fresh-poured red wine of a mighty pulse.
—Old Gandolf with his paltry onion-stone,
Put me where I may look at him! True peach,
Rosy and flawless: how I earned the prize!
Draw close: that conflagration of my church
—What then? So much was saved if aught were missed!
My sons, ye would not be my death? Go dig
The white-grape vineyard where the oil-press stood,
Drop water gently till the surface sink,
And if ye find . . . Ah God, I know not, I! ...
Bedded in store of rotten fig-leaves soft,
And corded up in a tight olive-frail,
Some lump, ah God, of *lapis lazuli,*
Big as a Jew's head cut off at the nape,
Blue as a vein o'er the Madonna's breast...
Sons, all have I bequeathed you, villas, all,
That brave Frascati villa with its bath,
So, let the blue lump poise between my knees,
Like God the Father's globe on both His hands
Ye worship in the Jesu Church so gay,
For Gandolf shall not choose but see and burst!
Swift as a weaver's shuttle fleet our years:
Man goeth to the grave, and where is he?
Did I say basalt for my slab, sons? Black—
'Twas ever antique-black I meant! How else
Shall ye contrast my frieze to come beneath?
The bas-relief in bronze ye promised me,
Those Pans and Nymphs ye wot of, and perchance
Some tripod, thyrsus, with a vase or so,
The Saviour at his sermon on the mount,
Saint Praxed in a glory, and one Pan
Ready to twitch the Nymph's last garment off,
And Moses with the tables...but I know
Ye mark me not! What do they whisper thee,
Child of my bowels, Anselm? Ah, ye hope
To revel down my villas while I gasp
Bricked o'er with beggar's mouldy travertine
Which Gandolf from his tomb-top chuckles at!
Nay, boys, ye love me—all of jasper, then!
'Tis jasper ye stand pledged to, lest I grieve
My bath must needs be left behind, alas!
One block, pure green as a pistachio nut,
There's plenty jasper somewhere in the world—
And have I not Saint Praxed's ear to pray
Horses for ye, and brown Greek manuscripts,
And mistresses with great smooth marbly limbs?
—That's if ye carve my epitaph aright,
Choice Latin, picked phrase, Tully's every word,
No gaudy ware like Gandolf's second line—
Tully, my masters? Ulpian serves his need!
And then how I shall lie through centuries,
And hear the blessed mutter of the mass,
And see God made and eaten all day long,

And feel the steady candle-flame, and taste
Good strong thick stupefying incense-smoke!
For as I lie here, hours of the dead night,
Dying in state and by such slow degrees,
I fold my arms as if they clasped a crook,
And stretch my feet forth straight as stone can point,
And let the bedclothes, for a mortcloth, drop
Into great laps and folds of sculptor's-work:
And as yon tapers dwindle, and strange thoughts
Grow, with a certain humming in my ears,
About the life before I lived this life,
And this life too, popes, cardinals and priests,
Saint Praxed at his sermon on the mount,
Your tall pale mother with her talking eyes,
And new-found agate urns as fresh as day,
And marble's language, Latin pure, discreet,
—Aha, ELUCESCEBAT quoth our friend?
No Tully, said I, Ulpian at the best!
Evil and brief hath been my pilgrimage.
All *lapis*, all, sons! Else I give the Pope
My villas! Will ye ever eat my heart?
Ever your eyes were as a lizard's quick,
They glitter like your mother's for my soul,
Or ye would heighten my impoverished frieze,
Piece out its starved design, and fill my vase
With grapes, and add a vizor and a Term,
And to the tripod ye would tie a lynx
That in his struggle throws the thyrsus down,
To comfort me on my entablature
Whereon I am to lie till I must ask
"Do I live, am I dead?" There, leave me, there!
For ye have stabbed me with ingratitude
To death—ye wish it—God, ye wish it! Stone—
Gritstone, a-crumble! Clammy squares which sweat
As if the corpse they keep were oozing through—
And no more *lapis* to delight the world!
Well, go! I bless ye. Fewer tapers there,
But in a row: and, going, turn your backs
—Ay, like departing altar-ministrants,
And leave me in my church, the church for peace,
That I may watch at leisure if he leers—
Old Gandolf, at me, from his onion-stone,
As still he envied me, so fair she was!

SUMMARY

It's just as the preacher says: don't get attached to the pleasures of mortal life! Here, children, come closer to my deathbed; hey, is Anselm dragging his feet back there? Nephews—I mean, my sons—oh, heck, I don't know what to call you now. Well, the lady who was once my lover was your mother, at any rate. My old rival Gandolf was so jealous of me—that lady was so beautiful! But that's all in the past now, and besides, she's been dead for ages. I've become Bishop since then. And I know that, just as she died, we all have to die one day—and that's how you know the world is nothing more than a brief dream. Ah, what is Life, anyway? As I lie here in this elegant receiving room, slowly dying, spending hours awake in the deepest part of the night, I ask myself, "Am I alive, or dead?" Peace seems like the most important thing. And my church, Saint Praxed's, has always been a peaceful place.

So, anyway, let's talk about my tomb. I fought like crazy to lock down the particular alcove where my tomb will go, you know. Old Gandolf cheated me, despite my efforts to outwit him; he cleverly grabbed the best corner of the church, the place where his rotting carcass now rests, curse it! Still, though, my spot isn't so narrow that you can't see the good side of the pulpit from it, and even get a glimpse of the empty choir loft, and the high dome full of painted angels and shafts of sunlight. In this alcove, I'll fill my dark stone tomb, and enjoy my eternal rest beneath the tabernacle I once worshiped. Nine columns will stand around my coffin, two by two, except for the odd one out, which will be right at my feet, where Anselm is standing now. Those pillars should be made of pink marble, as fine and rich as wine poured straight off of fresh grape mash. Be sure to put my body right where I can look scornfully at old Gandolf in his cheap, flaky marble tomb! *My* tomb will be a pure and perfect pink. I deserve it, after what I did!

Come closer, boys: you remember when the church caught on fire? Well, we sure saved a lot of the holy relics from that disaster, even if a few were—nudge nudge, wink wink—*mysteriously* lost. Listen, sons, if you don't want to kill me prematurely, do what I say: go out to my vineyard and dig around under where the olive oil press used to be. Wet the dirt until it sinks down. And beneath it, if you happened to find—well, I don't know *what* you might find, but just maybe, if you found a heap of old rotten fig leaves, and inside it an olive basket bound up tightly in string, inside *that* you'd discover—oh, lord—a huge lump of the blue stone lapis lazuli. A lump as big as the head of John the Baptist—as blue as the breast-veins of the Virgin Mary in a painting.

Sons, I've left all my wealth to you—all my country houses, everything, even the especially nice house in Frascati, the one with the fancy bathtub. So, since you owe me, be sure to put that lump of lapis between the knees of my effigy on my tomb—just like the lapis globe that the statue of God the Father

is holding in the Jesu Church, where I know you've been for services. I want old Gandolf to see that astonishing sight and absolutely explode with envy!

Our lives fly as quickly as a weaver's tools on the loom. People die, and where do they go then? Wait—did I say I wanted a basalt tomb? No, I meant black marble, I always meant rich old black marble! Otherwise, how will you make the decorative frieze stand out—the low-relief bronze sculpture you promised to have made for me? The one with the Greek forest spirits, you know, and maybe with an oracle's stool and Bacchus's staff, and some decorative urns, and Jesus delivering his famous Sermon on the Mount, and St. Praxed herself shining with holy light—and one goat-god getting ready to strip a forest spirit naked, and Moses holding the Ten Commandments... but hey, you're not listening!

Anselm, son born of my own body, what are they whispering to you? Oh, you all just want to go and party in my mansions while I helplessly gasp, my body entombed in cheap limestone, with Gandolf's effigy laughing at me from on top of his tomb! No, come on, sons, you all love me—so make my tomb of semiprecious jasper! It's jasper you're swearing to find now, to keep me from mourning my beautiful jasper bathtub too much, when—alas!—I have to leave it behind. Just find one block of jasper, pistachio-green—there's plenty of jasper somewhere or other. And if you do me this favor, I'll put in a good word with St. Praxed for you, asking her to give you wonderful horses, and expensive ancient books, and lovers who look as plump and creamy as marble statues. That is, I'll do it if you choose a good tomb inscription for me. I want elegant Latin, carefully chosen, from the great orator Cicero—not tasteless trash like the second line of Gandolf's epitaph. Cicero's too good for him, boys—he's content with Ulpian, a much worse writer!

Once I'm entombed so elegantly, I'll lie in the church for hundreds of years, listening to Mass being performed, watching the rite of transubstantiation turn bread into God's flesh so that the congregation can eat it, feeling the warmth of candlelight and tasting rich, intoxicating incense smoke. Right now, as I lie here for hour after hour, all through the night, dying bit by bit, I pose as if I were my own effigy: I cross my arms to hold a ceremonial staff, I stretch my feet out stiffly as stone, and I let my blankets fall like the cloth that covers a coffin, arranging them so they look as if they'd been carved by a sculptor. And as the candles burn down, and I start to hear peculiar thoughts buzzing in my mind—thoughts of where I was before I was a bishop, and thoughts of my time as a bishop, among other important holy men, thoughts of St. Praxed delivering his famous Sermon on the Mount, and thoughts of you boys' mother and her expressive eyes, and thoughts of ancient stone vases dug up looking good as new. And I think of the language that's fitting for marble monuments: elegant, tasteful Latin—ha, does our old friend Gandolf's tomb read ELUCESCEBAT? Just like I said, he's no Cicero: that particular phrasing of the words meaning "he was illustrious" is in dreadful taste, it sounds more like the workaday Latin of Ulpian!

My time on earth has been sinful and short. Make my tomb only of the purest lapis, sons—nothing but lapis! Or I'll leave my country houses to the Pope instead! Are you all just waiting to break my heart? You've always had shifty little lizard eyes. They're glittering lustfully, just like your mother's eyes used to glitter, only you're hungry for my soul itself. Otherwise, you'd liven up that shoddy bronze frieze you promised me, filling out its bare spots by adding some grapes, and a helmet, and a statue of the god Terminus—and you'd make sure there was a wildcat tied to the oracle's stool, trying to escape and knocking Bacchus's staff over in the process. Those additions would make me feel better as I lie there on the cold stone, where I'll have to lie forever, until again I ask: "Am I alive, or am I dead?"

All right, go on, get out of here! You've cut me to the quick with your thanklessness. You *want* me to die—dear God, you want me to die! You'll make my tomb of shoddy, crumbling sandstone—of damp blocks that bead up with moisture, as if the rotting body inside were leaking out! You won't put a single piece of glorious lapis on my tomb to bring the world beauty when I'm gone! I said go on—get out of here. My blessings on you. Take away some of these candles, and line the rest up neatly. On your way out, turn your backs on me—creep out like altar boys following a priest, and leave my body in my peaceful church. There, I can take all the time in the world to watch and see if he's making faces at me—Old Gandolf, in his cheap tomb, still envying me for my lover—she was so beautiful!

THEMES

GREED, VANITY, AND MATERIALISM

The 16th-century Italian Bishop of “The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed’s Church” might be a powerful religious leader, but he’s far from a holy man. As he lies dying, all he can think about is building himself a palatial tomb—and more to the point, one that will outshine that of his old rival Gandolf. His obsession with wealth and status doesn’t just make him a hypocrite, but a fool: worldly pleasures, the poem warns, last only as long as life does. And worse still, materialistic selfishness can rob people of the ability to find real meaning and connection.

While the dying Bishop is quick to repeat Christian proverbs about the brevity of life and the “vanity” (or emptiness) of worldly power, it’s clear that he doesn’t believe a word he says. He’s spent his whole life obsessed with wealth, pleasure, and petty grievances; he can’t stop talking about how jealous his rival “Old Gandolf” was of his beautiful mistress or fretting that he won’t get to enjoy his fabulous “villas” (country houses) when he’s dead. He’s been so driven by a hunger for wealth and

status that he's even stolen treasures from his own church during the chaos of a fire (a "conflagration" he might have lit himself). And now that he's dying, he's obsessed with building a fabulous tomb—not only for the sake of his own ego, but as an insult to Gandolf, whose tomb is only built of cheap, flaky "onion-stone."

But the wealth the Bishop worships is ultimately hollow. As he lists all the elegant materials he wants his tomb built from—"marble," "jasper," and "bronze," richly carved and ornamented—he seems to forget that, when his tomb is built, he'll be dead, utterly unable to appreciate any of it.

In a particularly ironic moment, he even tells his sons to go unearth a lump of precious "lapis lazuli" he's buried in one of his vineyards, an allusion to a Bible story in which Christ warns against hoarding "treasures upon earth" (since earthly treasures inevitably decay). No matter how much material wealth the Bishop amasses, the poem reminds readers, it can't go beyond the grave with him.

What's more, the Bishop's utter self-centered materialism has poisoned all of his relationships. He still feels bitter hatred for his rival Gandolf, even though Gandolf is long dead. And he's certain that his boys—particularly "Anselm," who's looking a little shifty—are just waiting for him to die so they can soak up their vast inheritance (including all the money the Bishop has earmarked for his tomb). He's probably not wrong! But even here, the Bishop's fear doesn't seem to be that his sons don't love him, but that they'll put him in a cheap coffin of "gritstone, a-crumble." Wealth and status have become the only matters of consequence to him—and to them.

Greed and egotism, the poem thus suggests, aren't just empty, but corrosive; an ultimately fruitless obsession with worldly pleasure and power eats away at people's sense of connection and meaning. The Bishop's materialistic egotism is its own punishment: with nothing beyond himself to care about, he dies loveless, angry, and afraid.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-125

DEATH AND DECAY

As he lays his plans for his elegant tomb, the Bishop of St. Praxed's is concerned not just with choosing the most ostentatious and expensive materials, but the materials that will *last*. His obsession with sturdy "basalt" and "marble"—and his terror that his sons will make his tomb of crumbling "gritstone" instead—is a cover for his deep fear of death and decay. Through its images of preservation and rot, the poem reminds readers that death is inevitable and that all attempts to escape it are a foolish waste of time.

The Bishop's opinions about stone barely conceal his anxiety about losing everything he's had in life. He has nothing but scorn for his rival Gandolf's tomb, which is carved from "onion-stone," a cheap, flaky kind of marble. *His* tomb, the bishop insists, will be made of lasting and lovely pink marble—or even of jasper or lapis, even richer and harder rocks. This obsession with materials isn't just about showing off his wealth and power, but about his fear of becoming "carrion" like Gandolf: if the stones of his tomb don't decay, he seems to hope, neither will he.

But the Bishop's terrible visions toward the end of the poem make it clear just how wrong he is. Imagining that his sons will only build his coffin of "gritstone, a-crumble," the Bishop paints an awful picture of cheap, brittle stone coffins beading up with moisture "as if the corpse they keep were oozing through." This image only reminds readers that the Bishop's corpse will decay whether it's in a marble box or a sandstone one.

Death and decay, the poem thus suggests, are facts that people have to learn to live with; no amount of wealth or power can save the Bishop (or anyone else) from their inevitable fate.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 8-13
- Lines 18-19
- Lines 25-26
- Lines 51-52
- Lines 80-90
- Lines 113-118

THE LASTING POWER OF ART

The Bishop of St. Praxed's seems delusional when he believes he'll get to enjoy his own lavish tomb, given that he'll certainly be too dead to care whether it's made of "basalt" or "lapis." But he's not wrong to think that this tomb could be a beautiful, enduring monument in its own right. His elegant stone memorial might well exist for centuries—and, in its loveliness, perhaps bring a great deal more happiness to the world than the Bishop himself ever did. In this way, the poem speaks to the lasting power of art—something that the poem implies can indeed develop a life well beyond its creator's.

The Bishop wants his monument built of high-quality "marble" or "jasper," not *just* because they're expensive and show off his wealth, but also because such stones last and are beautiful. And in asking that his sons decorate this elegant tomb with sculptures, he's also remembering that art persists longer than the people who create it. His tomb, if it gets built, might indeed be an artwork that "lives" for centuries longer than he does.

For that matter, the tomb he proposes might well add some beauty to the world. His description of his tomb's design, with its mixture of classical "Pans and Nymphs" and Christian imagery, evokes real Renaissance sculptures, works admired to

this day for their enduring power. And St. Praxed's Church itself, with its "aery dome" full of "sunbeam[s]," also sounds genuinely lovely. Such art and architecture might often have been made by corrupt men for egotistical reasons, the poem suggests, but it might also have the power to rise above the selfish intentions of the people who paid for it. In other words, art can bring joy to the world in spite of its creators.

The poem thus suggests that art can transcend its circumstances. Not only can art live longer than its creators, but it can also *be better* than they were: the Bishop's tomb might genuinely "delight the world," even if the Bishop himself didn't do a single good work in his life.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 21-24
- Lines 27-30
- Lines 42-44
- Lines 53-62
- Lines 68-72
- Lines 87-90
- Lines 107-110
- Lines 118-118

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

Vanity, saith the preacher, vanity!
Draw round my bed: is Anselm keeping back?
Nephews—sons mine...ah God, I know not! Well—
She, men would have to be your mother once,
Old Gandolf envied me, so fair she was!

The first line of "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church" sounds like a sermon: "Vanity, saith the preacher, vanity!" the speaker cries, alluding to biblical wisdom about the ultimate emptiness of worldly wealth and power. Everything that the speaker says thereafter will ironically undercut that first cry—and unintentionally prove its wisdom.

As the poem begins, its speaker, a 16th-century Italian Renaissance bishop, is lying on his deathbed, calling his sons around him to listen to his last wishes. Right from the start, then, readers know that the Bishop has perhaps not been 100% faithful to his calling: Catholic priests are meant to be celibate, and this man has not just one son, but a whole gaggle of them!

Of course, he's certainly not the only priest in his world to have strayed. When he starts out by calling his sons "nephews," he follows an old tradition:

- When a supposedly celibate priest had children, the kids were referred to not as his sons and daughters, but his nephews and nieces. In fact, the word "nepotism," meaning "using one's influence and power to favor family and friends," comes from the Italian word for "nephew."
- In the Bishop's 16th-century world, such "nephews" were likely to go far in life, supported by a wealthy father with good reasons to keep them quiet and content.

In just these first few lines, then, the poem conjures a whole world of Renaissance corruption, wealth, and power. This Bishop knows how to talk the Christian talk—but also how to take full, selfish advantage of his important church position. Lying on his deathbed, he seems to have no regrets and no shame: he knowingly refers to his sons' beautiful "mother," and gloats over just how jealous his old rival "Gandolf" (another priest—no relation to Tolkien's wizard) was of this "fair" lady. In short, he's spent his whole life as a corrupt, spiteful, selfish man, and he sees no reason to amend his ways now that he's dying.

There are hints, though, that this life has taken its toll on him. As he gathers his sons, he seems nervous that "Anselm" is "keeping back"—in other words, lurking in the background, reluctant to come forward, perhaps resentful or scheming. The Bishop's anxiety about this suggests that his selfish life has made him suspicious, always on the watch for backstabbers. (Keep an eye out for Anselm as the poem goes on; the Bishop certainly will.)

This poem is a dramatic monologue, which means that it's spoken in the first person by a particular character. The poet takes on a voice like an actor playing a part. For this particular monologue, Browning has chosen a theatrical form, too: blank verse. That means the poem is written in lines of unrhymed iambic pentameter—lines of five iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm, like this:

Draw round | my bed: | is An- | selm keep- | ing back?

If this rhythm sounds familiar, that's not surprising: this is the same form Shakespeare used for most of the dialogue in his plays. Browning invites his readers to imagine the Bishop's speech not just as a poem, but as a performance. Like King Lear's or Leontes's speeches, the Bishop's words reveal a lot more about him than he might realize.

LINES 6-9

What's done is done, and she is dead beside,
Dead long ago, and I am Bishop since,
And as she died so must we die ourselves,
And thence ye may perceive the world's a dream.

The Bishop of St. Praxed's has just finished a fond reminiscence not just about his beautiful mistress, but also about how envious she made his bitter rival Gandolf. It seems as if he takes

as much pleasure in the thought of Gandolf's envy as he does in his mistress's loveliness. And he certainly doesn't make any allowance for the fact that the woman he's describing to his many sons is their *mother*; he talks about her to them as if she were a luxurious ornament, a status symbol whose worth the boys might appreciate just as much as he does.

Just as swiftly as he brought this woman up, the Bishop now tidies her memory away, as if he's dusting his hands off. Listen to his alliterative repetitions here:

> What's done is done, and she is dead beside,
> Dead long ago, and I am Bishop since,

All those /d/ sounds land with matter-of-fact thumps, like bodies hitting the ground. What really matters to the Bishop is that, since this lady died, he has made his way up the ranks of the priesthood to the position of wealth and power he now enjoys.

But he won't get to enjoy it for long. Take a look at the way he turns the conversation back to death:

> And as she died so must we die ourselves,
> And thence ye may perceive the world's a dream.

The words the Bishop uses here are well-worn: some preacherly language about how we all "must die ourselves," a clichéd old metaphor about life as nothing more than a fleeting dream. By resorting to cliché here, the Bishop seems to be trying to hold the reality of death at a bit of a distance. If he can just repeat some familiar words about mortality, he can keep himself in a position of power: he casts himself as the impressive Bishop lecturing his obedient sons, rather than a man lying helpless on his deathbed.

LINES 10-15

> *Life, how and what is it? As here I lie*
> *In this state-chamber, dying by degrees,*
> *Hours and long hours in the dead night, I ask*
> *"Do I live, am I dead?" Peace, peace seems all.*
> *Saint Praxed's ever was the church for peace;*
> *And so, about this tomb of mine.*

For all that the Bishop wants to cling to his power and his past victories, he's not above a little self-pity over his current sickly state. In these lines, he takes a moment to glance at the facts of his situation—only to look away again, as quickly as he can.

"Life, how and what is it?" he begins—a rather pompous, vague rhetorical question. His tone here suggests that, for all that he's meant to have spent his career contemplating matters of the soul, he's really been too occupied with lusting after ladies and spiting "Old Gandolf" to think too hard about what his life's purpose might actually have been.

But he has plenty of time to consider it now. Listen to the polyptoton in this picture of his current circumstances:

> [...] As here I lie
> In this state-chamber, dying by degrees,
> Hours and long hours in the dead night, I ask
> "Do I live, am I dead?" [...]

Returning and returning to words related to death—and using death both literally and metaphorically (i.e., "dead night")—he seems to be trying to fathom the idea that, yes, he's really dying, it's really over. But he's also feeling sorry for himself: this image of lying for endless sleepless hours wondering whether he might be dead already is a harrowing one. Wondering "Do I live, am I dead?", the Bishop seems to be confronting his own emptiness. Without constant pleasure and activity to distract him, he discovers that his inner life is "dead" already.

Note, too, that the Bishop is lying in a "state-chamber"—that is, a sumptuous receiving room, meant to impress guests. Even his deathbed is spiced with egotism.

After this grim picture of a man confronting his emptiness in a beautiful, soulless room every night, it's no wonder that the Bishop should conclude: "Peace, peace seems all." There's something ironic about his epizeuxis there: his nervous scrabbling for "peace" only suggests just how troubled and anxious he really is.

Luckily for him, his own home church, "St. Praxed's," is a peaceful place: it "ever was the church for peace," he says. (St. Praxed, the church's patron saint, was a Roman martyr famed for her generosity—another irony, considering the Bishop's greed and selfishness.)

And thinking of St. Praxed's Church helps the Bishop to swing the conversation around to the place he wanted it to go all along: "And so, about this tomb of mine," he concludes. He hasn't summoned his sons to say farewell to them, or even to get their pity; he just wants to make sure that they build his tomb exactly the way he wants it.

LINES 15-19

> *I fought*
> *With tooth and nail to save my niche, ye know:*
> *—Old Gandolf cozened me, despite my care;*
> *Shrewd was that snatch from out the corner south*
> *He graced his carrion with, God curse the same!*

As the Bishop begins to describe his plans for his tomb, it doesn't take long for thoughts of battle to supplant his longing for calm: the word "peace" ends line 14, and the word "fought" ends line 15. In St. Praxed's church, it turns out, even choosing a final resting place means a petty power struggle.

The Bishop remembers that he had to fight "with tooth and nail" to reserve the "niche" he desires (the alcove where his

tomb will be built). And even getting that niche was cold comfort: his old rival Gandolf "cozened" (or tricked) him out of the absolute best spot in the church, the area in "the corner south" where Gandolf's "carrion"—a not-at-all friendly way of describing his dead body—now rests.

Readers might be surprised to learn that the "Gandolf" the Bishop can't stop spitefully referring to has been dead all along. But the Bishop doesn't seem to be a man who'll let death get in the way of some good fiery resentment. Listen to the sounds of his bitter muttering here:

> Shrewd was that snatch from out the corner south
> He graced his carrion with, God curse the same!

The harsh /c/ and grating /g/ alliteration, complemented by hissing sibilance, makes it sound as if the Bishop is practically spitting with hatred at the mere thought of Gandolf and his plush niche. The two men's jockeying for the good spot, it seems, was as petty and spiteful as any real-estate lawsuit.

These lines suggest that it isn't just that the Bishop and Gandolf were two bad men in holy positions, but that their rivalry has tainted the very church they supposedly protect, making St. Praxed's very structure a mere monument to their egotism. What will survive of them is hatred.

LINES 20-24

Yet still my niche is not so cramped but thence
One sees the pulpit o' the epistle-side,
And somewhat of the choir, those silent seats,
And up into the aery dome where live
The angels, and a sunbeam's sure to lurk:

Thinking of how Gandolf snatched the good niche out from under him has made the Bishop bitterly angry. Now, he tries to mollify himself with thoughts of all the virtues his own resting place will boast. Again, it sounds more as if he's describing a summer home than an alcove for a dead body to lie in.

He brags of the good view of:

- "the pulpit o' the epistle-side"—that is, the side of the preacher's podium nearest to the right of the altar, the place from which New Testament readings are delivered during the Mass;
- the "choir," a loft where singers gather to perform—though in his imagination, their "seats" are "silent";
- and perhaps most memorably, the "aery dome" where the "angels" live, an image that might suggest both a fanciful spiritual vision and a ceiling decorated with paintings or mosaics.

The imagery here paints a picture of a richly-decorated Italian Renaissance church, all frescoes and gilding and chanting and silences. The Bishop, readers might observe, probably isn't wrong to think his church a genuinely beautiful place.

But the odd thing is, he seems to believe he'll still be able to *see* all these beauties after he's dead. It's already clear that this Bishop is not the most devout man on earth: a "celibate" father, a wealthy and powerful Christian, he's not a person who practices what he preaches. Here, it also seems he doesn't have much sense of a Christian *afterlife*. Imagining death, he pictures neither heaven nor oblivion, but something in between: the grave, to him, is only a sort of eternal hammock, in which he can kick back and enjoy the view.

All the Bishop really has to believe in, these lines suggest, are the very earthly pleasures he hypocritically decried in the first line of the poem. It's easy enough for him to declare that "all is vanity"—but when it comes down to matters of life and death, the vain, empty pleasures of good seats in the church seem to be all he can focus on.

A moment of odd personification in these lines characterizes the man, too. When he thinks of the "aery dome" where "a sunbeam's sure to lurk," he presents a shaft of sunlight as a furtive presence, less an angelic illumination than a skulking fugitive to capture. Even sunlight, in the Bishop's view, is just something to be snatched.

LINES 25-30

And I shall fill my slab of basalt there,
And 'neath my tabernacle take my rest,
With those nine columns round me, two and two,
The odd one at my feet where Anselm stands:
Peach-blossom marble all, the rare, the ripe
As fresh-poured red wine of a mighty pulse.

Having painted a pretty picture of the view from his chosen alcove, the Bishop starts getting down to the brass tacks of how his monument *itself* will look. These lines introduce his obsession with the exact materials and design of his tomb.

He's got some highly specific ideas about his final resting place. He wants, to start with, a "slab of basalt," a smooth black stone, for his sarcophagus. Around this should stand "nine columns" of mottled, pinky-red "peach-blossom marble."

It sounds less like he's designing a tomb and more like he's drawing up plans for a palace—or, for that matter, like he's writing the menu for a banquet. Listen to his simile here:

> Peach-blossom marble all, the rare, the ripe
> As fresh-poured red wine of a mighty pulse.

In other words, the Bishop wants his columns made of a marble whose color looks good enough to feast on: it's peachy-pink, but also the clear red of new wine, just poured off its "pulse," the grape mash it's been squeezed from. The very thought of these rich stones, in short, seems to make the Bishop salivate

with greed.

The idea of "wine" coming from a "pulse" (which could suggest a heartbeat) might also ironically allude to the Catholic idea of transubstantiation. In the Mass the Bishop has spent his life halfheartedly performing, wine is said to transform into the literal blood of Christ. If this Bishop has ever given the meaning of this idea more than a passing thought, it's certainly not where his mind is now. He's more interested in gobbling up wealth than in making sacred sacrifices.

But all this richness and beauty is, so far, just a feverish dream. As the Bishop points out where his wine-and-peach pillars should stand in relation to his sarcophagus, he notes that his son "Anselm" is standing right where the ninth and final column should go, at his feet. The Bishop is deep in visions of a splendid and lasting tomb, but right now, he's just a frail body in a bed, demanding that his sons obey his last orders—with no assurance that they will.

This image also reminds readers that it was "Anselm" who was looking a little shifty in the poem's earliest lines, when the Bishop beckoned him closer, wondering why he was "keeping back." The Bishop has every reason to worry that his sons might not want to follow his designs. By all appearances, he hasn't been the kind of loving father whose wishes the boys will jump to follow. And all this "basalt" and "peach-blossom marble" doesn't come cheap; the Bishop's tomb designs will take a bite out of these young fellows' inheritance. These lines paint a picture of the sons, Anselm in particular, clustered around the Bishop's bed, more like vultures than grieving children.

LINES 31-35

—Old Gandolf with his paltry onion-stone,
Put me where I may look at him! True peach,
Rosy and flawless: how I earned the prize!
Draw close: that conflagration of my church
—What then? So much was saved if aught were missed!

Naturally, the Bishop doesn't just want "peach-blossom marble" for the columns of his tomb because he thinks it's pretty. He wants it because it's just another way to cement his power and status—and a way to insult "Old Gandolf," whose tomb is only made of "onion-stone," a cheap kind of marble that peels off in sheets. (And note, again, that the Bishop's language casts stones as food: Gandolf's everyday "onion" is nothing to the Bishop's imagined feast of wine and peaches.)

"Put me where I may look at him!" the Bishop crows, again imagining that he'll be able to luxuriate in his fancy tomb and soak up Gandolf's envy. It still seems that the Bishop has no real conception of what death means—or, at the very least, he really doesn't want to face the fact that by the time he's in his tomb, both he and Gandolf will be well past caring what it's made of.

But the poem's imagery of lovely stones does quietly make a different point. Anyone who visits an Italian Renaissance church to this very day will see tombs that look just like the visions the Bishop describes: monuments made of all sorts of rich marbles and decorated with sculptures (some of them very famous indeed). If the Bishop wants to cement his legacy, art made of stone is a pretty good way to go about it; both art and stones tend to considerably outlast the people who pay for them.

And the Bishop feels he's done more than enough to "earn[] the prize" of a sumptuous tomb. Now, on his deathbed, he seems ready to tell his sons a lot more about how he earned the *money* for such a prize. Listen to what he *doesn't* say here:

> Draw close: that conflagration of my church
> —What then? So much was saved if aught were missed!

Seemingly out of nowhere, the Bishop recalls a time St. Praxed's caught on fire—and carefully recalls that they managed to save a great many of the church's holy treasures, even if one or two might have gone, ahem ahem, *mysteriously* missing.

The Renaissance Catholic Church was an extremely wealthy and powerful institution; the Bishop would have earned a handsome salary to start with. But apparently, that wasn't enough for him. He's saved up for his tomb, not simply by earmarking part of his vast wealth for it, but by making off with treasures from his own church under cover of a disaster. He's not merely selfish and greedy, but outright amoral.

LINES 36-41

My sons, ye would not be my death? Go dig
The white-grape vineyard where the oil-press stood,
Drop water gently till the surface sink,
And if ye find . . . Ah God, I know not, I! ...
Bedded in store of rotten fig-leaves soft,
And corded up in a tight olive-frail,

Having hinted that he might have spirited away a prize or two from his own church during a fire, the Bishop now prepares to send his sons on a treasure hunt to dig up one of those very prizes. The map he lays out for them underlines his rapacious greed.

The Bishop opens with a wary question: "My sons, ye would not be my death?" There's a double meaning there. On the surface, he's saying, "Listen, boys, if you don't want me to keel over right now from frustration, do what I say." But there's also a subconscious hint here that he's worried his sons might be eager for him to die sooner rather than later. Remember, Anselm was looking shifty not too long ago.

But the frail Bishop has no choice but to entrust his sons with his plans; it's not as if he can get up and see to his business himself. So he begins to tell the boys where to go digging in his

"white-grape vineyard" for a treasure he buried there long ago, under the spot where the "oil-press" used to be (which suggests he once grew olives in his vineyard, too).

The specificity of "white-grape vineyard" suggests that this is only one of the Bishop's *many* vineyards. And his exactitude about the treasure's location makes it clear that he has an indelible mental map of every single place he's squirreled something valuable away. His vast wealth, far from giving him comfort and security, seems only to make him more anxious and grasping.

Listen to how his imagery here shows just how careful he is with this treasure:

> Bedded in store of rotten fig-leaves soft,
> And corded up in a tight olive-frail,

If his sons are to unearth the treasure, he won't have them hacking away at the ground with a shovel: they'll have to "gently" drip water on the earth to soften it. When they do dig, they'll find that the treasure has been laid in a "soft" bed of fig leaves, tied up tight in a protective olive basket. The Bishop has buried this inanimate object with funereal care, as if he were laying a baby to rest.

But he's also careful in a different way: his cry of "Ah God, I know not, I!" is his disclaimer. He's essentially saying, "I mean, I don't know WHAT you might find, but just maybe you'd discover this bundle..." He's well aware that he's not supposed to have done what he's done.

The image of the Bishop painstakingly bundling up a treasure to bury it in one of his vineyards is particularly ironic because it echoes a famous Christian parable. In the Book of Matthew, Christ warns his followers not to store their "treasures upon earth," because all earthly things inevitably decay. Instead, people should reach for the treasures of heaven. "For where your treasure is," the story concludes, "there will your heart be also." The Bishop's heart, this allusion suggests, is firmly in the mud.

LINES 42-44

> *Some lump, ah God, of*
> *lapis lazuli,*
> *Big as a Jew's head cut off at the nape,*
> *Blue as a vein o'er the Madonna's breast...*

At last, with a longing groan, the Bishop reveals what his sons might expect to find buried in the dirt of his vineyard: "Some lump, ah God, of *lapis lazuli*." In other words: a great big chunk of deep-blue stone.

This particular treasure is meaningful in more ways than one. Readers have already noted the Bishop's obsession with the permanence and beauty of stones; he salivates over "peach-blossom marble" as if it were the world's richest dessert. But lapis lazuli isn't just a lovely and pricey rock, but a useful one.

In the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, lapis was particularly prized for creating a rich blue pigment, a color so rare and expensive it was often reserved for painting the Virgin Mary's veil. And the similes the speaker uses here explicitly connect the stone to art:

> Big as a Jew's head cut off at the nape,
> Blue as a vein o'er the Madonna's breast...

Both of these images might seem as if they're mostly about bodies (as well as being antisemitic, in the first instance—a sadly in-character attitude for a Renaissance bishop). But these particular lines also allude to ways that the body was *represented* in Renaissance painting:

- The severed head here calls up images of John the Baptist, whose beheading was a common artistic theme.
- And that scandalous-sounding "vein o'er the Madonna's breast" in fact refers to devotional paintings of the Virgin Mary nursing the infant Jesus—an even more popular subject.

One of the most distinctive features of Renaissance painting was the way it represented biblical figures as real, three-dimensional people. Over the course of a few hundred years, the figures in Christian religious paintings went from remote and stylized to lifelike and fleshy. This change mirrored a cultural shift toward humanism, a rationalist worldview that prized human ingenuity and goodness, and that moved away from an exclusively religious value system.

But humanity isn't perfect, and the religious paintings the Bishop evokes here wouldn't have been pure expressions of devotion either to Christian or to humanist values. They would also have been yet another way of showing off. People who commissioned lovely paintings of the nursing Madonna for their homes or their churches were also demonstrating their good taste and wealth.

The Bishop's prized lump of lapis, and the images he uses to describe it, thus sum up a whole world of Renaissance contradictions. The Bishop is truly a man of his time: a person whose religiosity (such as it is) is all tangled up with worldly concerns.

And it's worth noting that the similes he chooses *are* fleshy, too. A severed head, a blue vein in a breast: there's plenty of sex and death in these pictures. These images remind readers yet again that all the Bishop's metaphorical "treasure" is the kind that eventually rots in the ground; everything he loves is a passing worldly pleasure.

But by having his Bishop evoke Renaissance art, Browning also makes this poem's philosophy a little more complicated. The

Bishop might value lapis and art for purely egotistical reasons. But he's not wrong to think that these things might make a good and lasting monument: the beauty and power of Renaissance art endures to this day. Perhaps, the poem hints, art produced by bad people for selfish purposes can be both longer-lived and *better* than the people who paid for it.

LINES 45-50

Sons, all have I bequeathed you, villas, all,
That brave Frascati villa with its bath,
So, let the blue lump poise between my knees,
Like God the Father's globe on both His hands
Ye worship in the Jesu Church so gay,
For Gandolf shall not choose but see and burst!

Snapping out of his reverie about the sheer size and blueness of the "lump" of lapis he's buried in his vineyard, the Bishop gets back down to business. He reminds his sons that he's left his entire vast fortune to them and that they, therefore, owe him. Guilt-trip firmly in place, he demands that they use the unearthed lapis to make his effigy (the statue of him that will decorate his tomb) even more spectacular. The statue of him should be holding the lapis "between [its] knees," so he can still clutch his treasure beyond the grave.

These lines, like the images of Renaissance painting that the Bishop's similes conjured up in lines 43-44, do as much to set the scene around the Bishop as they do to characterize the man himself. When he reminds his sons that he's left them everything, even the villa (or country house) in "Frascati," he alludes to a resort town popular with the Renaissance Roman elite. And when he distinguishes that villa by its "bath," he suggests that a built-in tub is a luxurious novelty—very 16th-century indeed.

But most specific is his reference to a statue of "God the Father" in "the Jesu Church," which he wants his own effigy to emulate. The Jesu Church is a real place, and one that would have been new-built and at the height of fashion in the Bishop's time.

It also indeed contains an altar featuring a massive lump of lapis. That altar, however, was built much later on in the 17th century and doesn't depict "God the Father" holding the stone, as the Bishop describes it here. But Browning's poetic license with dates and architecture helps him to depict the depths of the Bishop's egotism. The Bishop wants, not just to clutch his lapis, but also to be posed as if he holds the whole world in his hands; richer than God, as the saying goes.

And again, a big part of the pleasure in this design is the idea it'll be a poke in the eye for old Gandolf. This enthroned effigy with a lump of precious stone in its lap will make his old rival "burst" with envy, the Bishop crows, once more forgetting that Gandolf can't see anything—and that his own corpse won't be seeing much, either.

These lines begin to suggest that the Bishop sees the tomb not as a container for his corpse, but as a whole new body. Describing his effigy, he says he wants the lump of lapis to "poise between my knees"—and he definitely means the knees of his statue, not his carcass. Once more, he seems to think he can buy his way out of death.

LINES 51-55

Swift as a weaver's shuttle fleet our years:
Man goeth to the grave, and where is he?
Did I say basalt for my slab, sons? Black—
'Twas ever antique-black I meant! How else
Shall ye contrast my frieze to come beneath?

A moment ago, the Bishop was deep in delicious schadenfreude, imagining Gandolf's envy over his lapis tomb ornaments. Now, he seems to realize that this gloating might have carried him a little too far from his religious persona—so he puts on his holy-man voice to deliver a couple of empty aphorisms:

> Swift as a weaver's shuttle fleet our years:
> Man goeth to the grave, and where is he?

There's something ironic about the way the Bishop trots out these old clichés about life's brevity:

- On the one hand, he's clearly just saying what a holy man would be expected to say, without believing a jot of it. The simple fact that he uses well-worn turns of phrase here suggests he's speaking automatically, not from the heart.
- On the other hand, everything he's saying is true. His life has gone by fast and is almost over, no one knows what happens after death—and these are precisely the facts he's unwilling to confront.

The Bishop then underscores his insincerity and fear by swinging right back around to what he's really interested in: his fancy tomb. Now, he revises his original requests. "Basalt" is no longer good enough for the "slab" his effigy will rest on, he decides; he wants "antique-black" marble or nothing. Perhaps readers will not be surprised to learn that this revision will also mean more expense. Pure black marble is a lot pricier than relatively humble basalt.

The juxtaposition of the Bishop's clichés and his sudden desire for an even fancier tomb suggests he's much more disturbed by the thought of death than he's willing to admit. Merely brushing past the idea of annihilation sends him scrambling back to thoughts of wealth and status. *If my tomb is rich enough*, he seems to be thinking, *maybe I won't have to give my treasures up.*

But he's also got stylistic reasons for wanting a slab of "antique-black." Only that dark color, he thinks, will show off his elegant

bronze "frieze," a decorative band of sculpture that he's about to describe in detail.

LINES 56-62

The bas-relief in bronze ye promised me,
Those Pans and Nymphs ye wot of, and perchance
Some tripod, thyrsus, with a vase or so,
The Saviour at his sermon on the mount,
Saint Praxed in a glory, and one Pan
Ready to twitch the Nymph's last garment off,
And Moses with the tables...

The Bishop doesn't just want his tomb decorated with lovely stones. He also wants it adorned with bronze sculpture, all in the most tasteful fashion of his day.

He wants a "bas-relief," a kind of sculpture in which the figures stick slightly out of the background, as in the sculptor Ghiberti's famous "Gates of Paradise" in Florence. And the figures that relief depicts should run the gamut from "Nymphs and Pans"—classical forest spirits and goat gods—to the holy "Saint Praxed in a glory," surrounded by a halo of light.

Here, the poem reminds readers that the Bishop is a literal Renaissance man. Classical mythology was in vogue during the period, and it wasn't too strange for images of pagan gods and Christian saints to hang next to each other on wealthy walls, or even transform into each other. But the fact that the Bishop *leads* with classical allusions suggests his mind is more on the wild debauchery of a bacchanal (a frenzied party in honor of the wine god Bacchus) than the pious scenes one might expect from a clergyman.

Take a look at how his parallelism here draws attention to his priorities:

> Those Pans and Nymphs ye wot of, and perchance
> Some tripod, thyrsus, with a vase or so,
> The Saviour at his sermon on the mount,
> Saint Praxed in a glory, and one Pan
> Ready to twitch the Nymph's last garment off,
> And Moses with the tables [...]

This is, essentially, a shopping list of images—and one whose order and focus are pretty revealing. Here's what the Bishop wants:

- He starts with the classical: the aforementioned forest spirits; an oracle's ceremonial "tripod" stool; Bacchus's pinecone-tipped staff, the "thyrsus"; and a jumble of Grecian urns.
- Then, he remembers to throw some Christian figures in there: first, the famous "sermon on the mount," a speech Christ delivers in the biblical Gospels; then, his church's patron Saint Praxed in a "glory," a sacred halo.
- But he doesn't even finish a whole line discussing the image of the saint. Instead, he swerves right back to a spicy picture of a goat-god about to strip a Nymph naked.
- Finally, to complete this heady brew, he throws in Moses holding the stone tablets upon which the Ten Commandments were written.

This list spells out his priorities plainly. All the Christian figures the Bishop wants on his tomb are pretty rote images: he just names them and leaves his sons to figure out the details with the sculptor. But when it comes to his "Pans and Nymphs," he knows *exactly* how he wants them to look and what he wants them to be doing, in lascivious detail.

This isn't just the Bishop being an old lecher. It's a moment of commentary on the way that Renaissance art really did mingle the sublime and the profane. Not every Victorian critic approved this part of Renaissance style, but this poem clearly finds the humor in the idea of sexy nymphs cavorting alongside Moses himself.

Again, the poem reminds readers that plenty of art just like this still graces churches and museums to this day and that it can give real pleasure. The Bishop might be a dirty-minded old man, but he's also trying to commission a piece of art that might well last for centuries. Without meaning to, he might do some actual good in the world.

That is, his *tomb* might do some good in the world—if his sons actually obey his orders and build the thing.

LINES 62-67

but I know
Ye mark me not! What do they whisper thee,
Child of my bowels, Anselm? Ah, ye hope
To revel down my villas while I gasp
Bricked o'er with beggar's mouldy travertine
Which Gandolf from his tomb-top chuckles at!

The Bishop has been busy making a long, faintly pornographic list of all the images he wants in his tomb sculptures. But now interrupts himself, noticing that his sons aren't paying him the reverent attention he feels he deserves. In fact, they look as if they're scheming amongst themselves.

It's that shifty Anselm again, the Bishop suspects, up to no good. Begging Anselm to know what the others are whispering to him, the Bishop evokes their blood ties, calling Anselm the "child of my bowels"—that is, his own flesh and blood.

But it doesn't seem like this relationship means much to Anselm. Or at least, the Bishop gets no impression that it does. This passage at once suggests that the Bishop is anxious and paranoid—and that he has every reason to be. There seems to be no love lost between him and his sons. Remember, back at the beginning of the poem, he had to impatiently urge his sons to "draw round"; they don't appear to feel especially sorrowful

here beside their father's deathbed.

Here's how the Bishop expresses his paranoia:

> [...] Ah, ye hope
> To revel down my villas while I gasp
> Bricked o'er with beggar's mouldy travertine
> Which Gandolf from his tomb-top chuckles at!

In other words, the Bishop fears that his sons plan to build him a cheap tomb, then spend the rest of the marble-and-sculpture fund partying at the many luxurious country houses the Bishop is leaving them in his will. Readers might note that a lot of this paranoia seems to stem from the Bishop's own personality: these lines sound like a description of what *he'd* do if he were in their place. His selfishness might have made him hugely wealthy, but it also has psychological consequences; he has no trust and no love in his life.

And once again, the Bishop seems to take a pretty delusional view of death:

- He doesn't just fear that the boys will build his tomb from "beggar's mouldy travertine," a cheap stone. (And notice, again, the food-related language here—the only thing worse than peeling "onion" is inedible "mould"!)
- Worse, he imagines being "bricked o'er" in that tomb, still "gasp[ing]," as if he's been buried alive.

Naturally, the deepest horror of this vision lies in the thought that Gandolf will laugh at him "from his tomb-top." Here, again, stone and bodies seem to switch places: the figure the Bishop imagines laughing at him isn't Gandolf's "carrion," but his stone effigy.

LINES 68-72

> *Nay, boys, ye love me—all of jasper, then!*
> *'Tis jasper ye stand pledged to, lest I grieve*
> *My bath must needs be left behind, alas!*
> *One block, pure green as a pistachio nut,*
> *There's plenty jasper somewhere in the world—*

His vision of a future in which he lies "bricked o'er with beggar's mouldy travertine" seems to have spooked the Bishop. In these lines, his tone changes from imperious to wheedling. "Nay, boys, ye love me," he says—in other words, "No, boys, you wouldn't do that to me, you *love* me!" He's trying to persuade himself as much as anyone. If his sons love him, his inner argument goes, they won't make his tomb out of cheap, damp limestone.

Instead, he goes on, they'll agree—in fact, they'll *swear*—to make his tomb entirely from jasper, a richly-colored semiprecious gemstone. Perhaps the Bishop gets the idea from the fabulous "bath" in his "Frascati villa," which seems to have been made of jasper too: here, he hopes that having a tomb made from the same material will comfort him for the fact that his "bath must needs be left behind, alas!"

Just like the transition from "basalt" to "antique-black" marble, this new demand is an escalation both in splendor and in cost. Scrambling toward more and more pomp, beauty, and expense seems to be the Bishop's way of putting distance between himself and thoughts of death and loss—thoughts that have now sunk in just far enough that he knows his bath "must needs be left behind," that at least some of his wealth can't join him beyond the grave.

Describing the jasper he longs for, he returns to a familiar flavor of simile:

> One block, pure green as a pistachio nut,

Once more, the Bishop imagines stone as a delicacy. This metaphor has become so insistent that it's worth thinking about what food might mean to him:

- Besides suggesting a connoisseur's taste for the finer things in life, all this food imagery might suggest that the Bishop wants to merge with his tomb somehow.
- Again, there could be an allusion to the Catholic idea of transubstantiation here, in which bread becomes the body of Christ so that the congregation can literally absorb God into their own bodies. Eating, in this practice, becomes "communion," a process that brings different beings together as one.

Readers have already seen that the Bishop half-believes that sculptures are the people they represent—that Gandolf's effigy on his "tomb-top" can laugh at him, or that putting a lump of lapis between his own effigy's knees will mean that he himself is clutching it. His apparent "hunger" for stones might be a way of fantasizing about eternal life: if he can eat the stones of his tomb, perhaps his own body can somehow take on their permanence and beauty.

This ironically materialistic "communion" won't work, of course. And perhaps the Bishop is beginning to get that sense. His insistent repetition of the word "jasper" in these lines, especially in his pleading insistence that "there's plenty jasper somewhere in the world," is starting to sound desperate.

LINES 73-75

> *And have I not Saint Praxed's ear to pray*
> *Horses for ye, and brown Greek manuscripts,*
> *And mistresses with great smooth marbly limbs?*

The Bishop is starting to feel anxious that his sons won't do what he wishes. Even as he escalates the grandeur of his tomb's materials from "basalt" to "antique-black" marble to semiprecious "jasper," his tone gets less powerful, more and

more wheedling and anxious.

In these lines, he resorts to bribery to get his way. His sons should remember, he says, that St. Praxed, the patron of his church, will be his special friend after he's dead, only too happy to do favors for him. If the boys follow his tomb design to the letter, he'll put in a good word for them with the saint, and she'll make sure they get all the "horses," expensive "Greek manuscripts," and sexy "mistresses" they can handle.

This vision casts a saint as nothing more than an influential higher-up, just one more politician in a holy kleptocracy. The Bishop's you-scratch-my-back, I'll-scratch-yours attitude toward the divine likely reflects exactly how he operated in the Church. The sacred, to him, has always been a mere path to material gain.

And take another look at the pleasures he dances in front of his sons' eyes like lollipops:

> Horses for ye, and brown Greek manuscripts,
> And mistresses with great smooth marbly limbs [...]

In Renaissance terms, offering "horses" is rather like offering sports cars. "Mistresses," of course, are eternally popular—and the Bishop's imagery of their "great smooth marbly limbs" again presents bodies as stony art, status symbols. But modern-day readers might be confused by the allure of "brown Greek manuscripts." What would these venal young men want with crumbly old scrolls? They seem more likely to be interested in partying at the "brave Frascati villa" with their "marbly" lady friends.

But this is another moment of Renaissance scene-setting. Remember, ancient Greece and Rome were in vogue in Renaissance Italy. So was being an educated, well-read man, with the skills to translate Latin and Greek. And books (especially antique "manuscripts") were still treasured in the 16th century; the printing press was a relatively recent invention in the Bishop's time, and books remained costly and rare.

Once again, then, the poem points out the ways that Renaissance learning, art, and literature were interwoven with status, ego, and wealth. The connection will get even clearer in the next lines, when the Bishop requests his epitaph.

LINES 76-79

> *—That's if ye carve my epitaph aright,*
> *Choice Latin, picked phrase, Tully's every word,*
> *No gaudy ware like Gandolf's second line—*
> *Tully, my masters? Ulpian serves his need!*

Having dangled saintly favors before his sons' eyes, bribing them to do what he tells them, the Bishop remembers yet another requirement for his tomb: a fitting epitaph. Here, the relationship between learning and status becomes even clearer.

It turns out that it isn't enough for one's tomb to bear a Latin inscription. There are also different *grades* of Latin, just as there are different grades of stone. The Bishop makes this point concrete in a metaphor, calling the Latin on Gandolf's tomb "gaudy ware"—tacky, cheap, substandard goods, just like the "onion-stone" his effigy is carved from.

Indeed, Gandolf's epitaph might as well have been written by "Ulpian," the Bishop sneers, alluding to a minor Latin writer. But "Ulpian serves his need"—that is, Ulpian is good enough for a fool like Gandolf, who doesn't know any better.

For the Bishop himself, though, only the elegant Latin of "Tully"—that is, the great Roman orator Marcus Tullius Cicero—will do. Even the Bishop's casual use of the name "Tully" suggests that he sees himself as a great scholar, on familiar terms with Cicero himself.

In short, there's not one single thing the Bishop can't be a snob about. He's not *wrong*, here; he is indeed well-read, and most would agree that Cicero has the better turn of phrase than Ulpian. But he can only view his learning through the prism of his ego. Not just the "manuscripts" he bribed his sons with, but the knowledge they contain, are ways to show that he's a great man. Again, he's transforming something that could teach him to look beyond himself—learning, art, religion—into a status symbol. He's like a perverse alchemist, turning gold to lead.

LINES 80-84

> *And then how I shall lie through centuries,*
> *And hear the blessed mutter of the mass,*
> *And see God made and eaten all day long,*
> *And feel the steady candle-flame, and taste*
> *Good strong thick stupefying incense-smoke!*

Struggling past his anxiety about whether his sons will build his tomb the way he says, the Bishop now slips back into his favorite hobby, fantasizing about how death won't really be anything like death.

In these lines, the Bishop imagines how he'll "lie through centuries" in the comfort of his elegant tomb (words that might contain a subtle pun: his tomb, which will present him as a great and holy man, will certainly "lie" for him all through the years). Take a look at his imagery here:

> And hear the blessed mutter of the mass,
> And see God made and eaten all day long,
> And feel the steady candle-flame, and taste
> Good strong thick stupefying incense-smoke!

The Bishop works his way through all his senses, one by one, underlining the laundry-list quality of his description with all that anaphora on the word "and." In his imagination, he won't want for any sensory pleasure; even his sense of "taste" will be

satisfied by that "good strong thick stupefying incense-smoke."

Readers are already familiar with the Bishop's delusions that his consciousness will stay right where it is in his body after he's dead. What's new here is the way that belief interacts with the high drama of the Catholic Mass.

In these lines, the Bishop describes watching a sacred religious rite as if it were a dinner show. Everything he brings up here has a holy purpose, from the "blessed mutter" of ritual language to the "incense-smoke" that symbolizes prayer rising to God's ears. Once more, though, his imagination seems to stop at the physical pleasure of the rites. Even his description of transubstantiation—watching "God made and eaten all day long"—sounds more like a novelty act than like something he seriously believes.

Part of what might have attracted this hopelessly materialistic man to a career in the Church, these lines suggest, is the physical beauty of Catholic ritual. These lines might even point to one of the oldest Protestant criticisms of Catholic Christianity: the idea that all the sensory splendor of Catholic churches and Catholic rites might distract people from spiritual matters. The idea that the "incense-smoke" is "stupefying" (that is, dazing and intoxicating) might suggest that the Church's wealth might be more a, well, smokescreen than a spiritual aid.

At any rate, the Bishop's appreciation of the Mass here is totally irreligious. Even the idea that he might just lie comfortably in his tomb watching all the pageantry for eternity suggests that he's never believed one word of what he preaches: the thought of a Christian afterlife doesn't even seem to occur to him.

LINES 85-90

For as I lie here, hours of the dead night,
Dying in state and by such slow degrees,
I fold my arms as if they clasped a crook,
And stretch my feet forth straight as stone can point,
And let the bedclothes, for a mortcloth, drop
Into great laps and folds of sculptor's-work:

The Bishop has just finished fantasizing about how death will mean nothing any worse than kicking back and enjoying the Mass from his tomb: he can't face thoughts of either oblivion or an afterlife. Now, he returns for a moment to his real-life predicament, lying awake for "hours of the dead night," dying "by such slow degrees." Here, he's repeating language he used way back at the beginning of the poem—a choice that makes his thoughts sound increasingly circular and desperate.

His method of coping with these long, anxious nights seems similarly desperate. As he lies there in the dark, he starts to rehearse being, not a dead body, but a deathless effigy. Once again, it seems as if he's imagining turning to stone when he dies, not rotting away:

- He "fold[s] his arms as if they clasped a crook," posing as if he's holding his ceremonial crozier—a curved staff modeled on the ones shepherds use, symbolizing a priest's role as the "shepherd" of his congregation. (Of course, the Bishop has never played this part very convincingly.)
- He stretches his feet out "straight as stone can point," like the toes of a recumbent effigy.
- He even arranges his blankets as if they were a "mortcloth," the embroidered cloth draped over a coffin—but, in particular, a "mortcloth" as represented in "sculptor's-work," in stone. He tweaks the fabric until it falls in elegant "laps and folds," as it would if it were carved.

In other words, he deals with his fear and loneliness by pretending he's his own effigy. "Death can't be so bad as all that," this bedtime ritual seems to say; "I'll just be a statue, like this!"

The Bishop, these lines remind readers, isn't just a selfish, pompous, greedy old man. He's also a sick and frightened one. There's something macabre about this image of the Bishop rehearsing to become a statue, but also something close to touching: his delusional escapism here seems pathetically childish. Perhaps his smallmindedness hasn't just made him a bad man, but also prevented him from growing up.

LINES 91-96

And as yon tapers dwindle, and strange thoughts
Grow, with a certain humming in my ears,
About the life before I lived this life,
And this life too, popes, cardinals and priests,
Saint Praxed at his sermon on the mount,
Your tall pale mother with her talking eyes,

The Bishop might be doing his fruitless best to flee from death, but reality seems to be catching up with him. As his bedside "tapers dwindle"—that is, as the candles rather symbolically melt, suggesting that his time on earth is almost over—he describes how he's visited by thoughts of his past life.

He finds these thoughts "strange" and unnerving, uncontrollable; they seem to fly at him like a swarm of bugs, making "a certain humming in [his] ears." The imagery here suggests that the Bishop is starting to lose his grip. He's at the mercy of his memories now.

It's not clear how he responds to these memories. He only lists the images that present themselves to his imagination: he remembers his past life, before he was a bishop, and then the confused crowd of "popes, cardinals, and priests" he's had to deal with in his current role. He remembers, too, his lover, his sons' mother, in much more detail than he's gone into before: here, she's not just "fair," but a "tall pale" woman with "talking eyes," an expressive and lively figure who might almost be right there in the room with him.

But if the Bishop's memories are newly vivid, they're also muddled. He doesn't only think of his past, but of "Saint Praxed at his sermon on the mount," an image that repeats language from his sculpture instructions back in lines 56-62, but also confuses the female Saint Praxed with Christ himself.

The Bishop's grip, these lines show, is weakening. He's helpless not only before death, but before the workings of his own mind.

LINES 97-101

And new-found agate urns as fresh as day,
And marble's language, Latin pure, discreet,
—Aha, ELUCESCEBAT quoth our friend?
No Tully, said I, Ulpian at the best!
Evil and brief hath been my pilgrimage.

After spending a few moments drifting off into confused memories, the Bishop wrenches himself back to his normal state. His dreams of saints, popes, and lovers eventually meander back around to "new-found agate urns as fresh as day"—that is, recently unearthed antique stone vases, a subject much more to his customary tastes. Again, he's interested in the fact that such "urns" remain "as fresh as day": it's the lasting power of these artifacts that really pleases him. The Bishop, readers will notice, is not a man who's fond of decay.

Thinking of agate makes him think of marble, which makes him think of elegant Latin inscriptions—and this, at last, returns him to his usual self:

> And marble's language, Latin pure, discreet,
> —Aha, ELUCESCEBAT quoth our friend?
> No Tully, said I, Ulpian at the best!

These lines make a complex scholarly joke. Here, the Bishop is criticizing the inscription on Gandolf's tomb (which he seems to have spitefully memorized—remember, he's lying at home in his "state-chamber," not at St. Praxed's itself). It's not just that it says "ELUCESCEBAT" (that is, "he was illustrious," a point the Bishop would certainly debate). It's that it uses a particular Latin verb form the Bishop finds inelegant. Only "Ulpian," he scoffs again, would use such workmanlike Latin; old Gandolf was "no Tully" (a.k.a. Cicero)!

Such pettiness will feel pretty familiar to readers by now. But here, something new intrudes.

In the past, the Bishop has occasionally thrown a Christian aphorism or two into his monologue, as if remembering he's meant to sound like a holy man. He does so now, muttering: "Evil and brief hath been my pilgrimage." This familiar metaphor describes life on earth as a holy journey; the Bishop's own journey, he says, has been both bad and short.

The Bishop's earlier aphorisms have always sounded memorized and mechanical. But this one comes so much out of nowhere that it feels like a quiet aside, something that creeps a little closer to a moment of genuine self-knowledge. As the next lines show, even getting this close to insight is too much for the Bishop to bear.

LINES 102-105

All
lapis
, all, sons! Else I give the Pope
My villas! Will ye ever eat my heart?
Ever your eyes were as a lizard's quick,
They glitter like your mother's for my soul,

For one bare moment, the Bishop has looked inward, sifting through a swirl of memories and half-acknowledging that his life has been both "evil and brief." Now, that insight sends him veering back toward tomb design. In his fear and paranoia, his demands leap from lavish to outright delusional. At this point, even "jasper" isn't a rich enough stone to distract him from thoughts of death: now, only a tomb made entirely of "lapis" can sate him.

This is rather like demanding that your tomb be built entirely from opals. But in a frenzy of mortal terror, the Bishop only knows one thing to do: spend more money.

All his life, the Bishop has used money to get his own way. Now, as his body fails him, he finds that money only goes so far. He can threaten to rewrite his will and leave all his "villas" to the Pope rather than his sons if they don't build him a lapis tomb. The problem is, he won't be around to watch them, or to change his will if they defy him; his threats are unavoidably toothless. Ironically, the very money that gave him power in life makes him powerless now. His sons' greed for their inheritance is all part of what makes them not *want* to build him the tomb he demands.

The Bishop knows it, too. "Will ye ever eat my heart?" he cries in despair. Again, there's a twisted allusion to the holy flesh-eating of transubstantiation here. The selfish Bishop has never been in any kind of emotional "communion" with his sons; now, he has no interest in willingly sacrificing himself—or his wealth, which to him is the same thing—for their benefit.

Feeling his powerlessness, he begins to hiss insults at the boys. Listen to the assonance in this passage:

> Ever your eyes were as a lizard's quick,
> They glitter like your mother's for my soul,

All those short, quick /i/ sounds evoke exactly what the Bishop is describing: the speedy, reptilian glances his sons are darting at each other as they conspire. The idea that their eyes "glitter like [their] mother's" suggests that the Bishop sees a family resemblance, not just in their faces, but in their attitudes: perhaps his lover was just as greedy as he.

But the Bishop also feels as if the boys' eyes are glittering "for

[his] soul," as if they want to snap up not just his wealth but his very essence (though of course, he seems to think the two are essentially identical). The image of these lizardy sons waiting to drag the Bishop's soul away paints a nightmarish picture of them as lurking, scaly devils, preparing to spirit him off to hell.

LINES 106-111

Or ye would heighten my impoverished frieze,
Piece out its starved design, and fill my vase
With grapes, and add a vizor and a Term,
And to the tripod ye would tie a lynx
That in his struggle throws the thyrsus down,
To comfort me on my entablature

If his sons weren't just waiting to pounce on their inheritance, the Bishop goes on, they'd prove their sincerity by promising to make his bronze frieze—the bas-relief tomb sculpture with all the "Nymphs and Pans," remember—even more spectacular. The lavish design he suggested before, the Bishop says, will actually be "impoverished," "starved," and sparse if the boys don't add even more elaborate figures to "comfort" him as he lies eternally on his stone "entablature."

Like his demand that his tomb be built from "lapis," the Bishop's new ideas start to sound almost comically excessive. Now it feels as if he's just slinging all the classical imagery he can think of at this imagined sculpture:

- The "vase" he requested before must now overflow with grapes;
- The boys should find some way to wedge a "vizor" (an ornate helmet) and a "Term" (a statue of the god Terminus) in there;
- And a "lynx," a wild cat, should be tied to the oracle's "tripod" he already specified, and knocking down the "thyrsus" (Bacchus's staff).

The specific requests he makes here don't just feel higgledy-piggledy and random. They also embody his own panic. That struggling "lynx" knocking things over sounds a lot like a symbol of the savage anxiety the Bishop feels now. And the "Term," an armless statue once used to mark boundaries, subconsciously hints that he's edging ever closer to the boundary between the living and the dead—and that he himself is "armless," unable to act.

In short, the Bishop's old tricks aren't working, and he can feel himself losing his grip. In the past, he could always just throw more wealth at his insecurities. Now, his efforts to pile one rich image on top of another are obviously futile: he can imagine all the sculptures he wants, but he has no power to make them real.

LINES 112-115

Whereon I am to lie till I must ask
"Do I live, am I dead?" There, leave me, there!
For ye have stabbed me with ingratitude
To death—ye wish it—God, ye wish it!

Throughout the poem, the Bishop has proved that he's an utterly irreligious and hypocritical man. But as he makes these final demands for lavish sculptures and stones, he seems to be edging uneasily close to some of the ideas he's given lip service to all his life. Back in line 101, for instance, he declared, "Evil and brief hath been my pilgrimage," with just a touch more honesty and sincerity than he's shown before. Now, he tiptoes right up to a Christian belief: the Resurrection.

Earlier in the poem, the Bishop described lying in bed wondering: "Do I live, am I dead?" Then, those words suggested a man enduring an encounter with his own emptiness. Now, he repeats them, with a difference:

> And to the tripod ye would tie a lynx
> That in his struggle throws the thyrsus down,
> To comfort me on my entablature
> Whereon I am to lie till I must ask
> "Do I live, am I dead?" There, leave me, there!

Here, the Bishop is no longer imagining lying on his stony bed forever enjoying the Mass. Instead, he looks to the future with an "until": he'll only lie there, these lines suggest, until he once again has to ask "Do I live, am I dead?" And that won't happen until Judgment Day. The Bishop's thoughts of the future here subtly allude to the Christian idea that, at the end of time, the dead will rise from their graves to be judged—a process in which the Bishop seems unlikely to come off especially well.

The very thought seems to be too much for him. Now, he flies into wild exclamations. Listen to his caesurae here:

> [...] There, || leave me, || there!
> For ye have stabbed me with ingratitude
> To death— || ye wish it— || God, ye wish it! [...]

These mid-line pauses make it sound as if the Bishop is practically choking with rage and fear.

Perhaps the most chilling part of these lines is the sense that the boys make no real response to their dying father's outburst. All through the poem, the Bishop has carefully observed them whispering and darting lizardy glances at each other. Now, by all indications, they silently look on while the Bishop howls.

These lines might lead readers to reflect that those very sons are the Bishop's true legacy. These scheming, selfish boys are the real monument he's leaving behind him: a whole new generation of men like him.

LINES 115-118

Stone—
Gritstone, a-crumble! Clammy squares which sweat

As if the corpse they keep were oozing through—
And no more
lapis
to delight the world!

The Bishop's outburst leads him into a nasty fantasy. From agonized cries that his sons want him to die, he swerves back to the symbolic stones his imagination has clung to all along. He seems almost to be raving, seeing a nightmare vision before his very eyes. Listen to his awful imagery here:

> [...] ye wish it—God, ye wish it! Stone—
> Gritstone, a-crumble! Clammy squares which sweat
> As if the corpse they keep were oozing through—

All along, the Bishop has imagined stone as both an extension of his body and a way that he can make his wealth and status concrete and permanent. In this image of a leaky, crumbly coffin, the darker side of that idea comes out. When the Bishop describes cheap sandstone that seems to "sweat" like an oozing corpse, it's clear that what he's afraid of isn't just shoddy craftsmanship. It's the actual, horrific, disgusting process of decay—the worst thing a materialist can imagine.

In other words, the Bishop has transferred his terror over his own mortality to the stones. Imagining a coffin that *appears* to rot, he reveals that what he really can't handle is the idea his *body* will rot, no matter what kind of stone it's encased in. There's an oozing corpse in every tomb, whether that tomb is made of "gritstone," "onion-stone," or "lapis."

The very sounds of this passage suggest the Bishop's disgust and horror:

> Gritstone, a-crumble! Clammy squares which sweat
> As if the corpse they keep were oozing through—

The hissing, sibilant /s/ sounds, hacking /k/ sounds (which appear as alliteration and consonance), and gluey /oo/ assonance both evoke the foul scene the Bishop pictures and suggest he might almost be on the verge of vomiting at the very thought.

These lines work like a traditional *memento mori*—a reminder that death comes to everyone, and equalizes everyone. All bones look the same; all corpses ooze. The "lapis" the Bishop longs for can't save him from this shared human reality.

But once again, the poem drops a little hint that art can indeed cheat death, at least for a while. Tombs of lapis and marble might indeed "delight the world" long after their inhabitants are nothing but dust.

LINES 119-125

Well, go! I bless ye. Fewer tapers there,
But in a row: and, going, turn your backs
—Ay, like departing altar-ministrants,
And leave me in my church, the church for peace,
That I may watch at leisure if he leers—
Old Gandolf, at me, from his onion-stone,
As still he envied me, so fair she was!

The Bishop's long speech has brought him to a crisis. He's been forced to confront the reality of decay, acknowledged his "evil and brief" life, and even sidled right up to the edge of religious belief. Perhaps readers might hope that he's on the verge of a deeper kind of self-knowledge, maybe even some humility or remorse. But the poem's last lines dash those hopes. The bishop's terror of "oozing" corpses and crumbling "gritstone" only pushes him right back into his old habits.

First, he dismisses his sons, with what sounds like a rote and insincere blessing. Sending them away, he seems to be sinking back into his vision of himself as his own effigy:

- He tells them to take away some of the "tapers" (or candles), and to line the rest of them up in a neat row, as if he's arranging the lighting on a stage.
- He even instructs the boys on *how* to leave, telling them to go "like departing altar-ministrants"—a simile that suggests he's imagining them as altar servers, conducting a ritual around the holy edifice of his tomb.

In other words, he's escaping into a familiar old fantasy, falling into the same egotistical patterns he's spent his whole life acting out.

The repetitions in the poem's final lines make that point even clearer:

> And leave me in my church, the church for peace,
> That I may watch at leisure if he leers—
> Old Gandolf, at me, from his onion-stone,
> As still he envied me, so fair she was!

Readers will remember these exact words, and these exact preoccupations, from the very beginning of the poem. The Bishop retreats into his obsessive spite as if he's ducking under a security blanket.

There's something pitiable about these repetitions. The Bishop sounds like nothing so much as a demented old man, repeating the same stories to himself over and over.

But what's pitiable here is also frightening. A mind like the Bishop's, these lines suggest, is inherently *circular*. Believing in nothing beyond himself, the selfish Bishop can only circle the same ideas obsessively, even to the brink of death. His mingled egotism and materialism themselves become the tomb of a rotting soul.

SYMBOLS

THE STONES

The many different kinds of stone the Bishop lists in this poem, from marble to basalt to travertine, symbolize two things:

- The ultimate emptiness of wealth and power.
- The longevity of art.

The Bishop can't seem to stop thinking about what stone his tomb will be made out of. He pours scorn on the cheap "onion-stone" from which his rival Gandolf's tomb is built, and keeps upgrading his demands for his own tomb: first, he wants "basalt," then peach-colored "marble," then "jasper," then "lapis lazuli," a progression that moves from the just-about-reasonable to the ludicrously expensive. (Asking for a tomb made of lapis lazuli is a little bit like asking for a tomb made entirely from opals!) He's trying his best to preserve his status, even in the face of death.

Of course, none of these rich stones can change the fact that the Bishop isn't long for this world. His obsessive focus on wealth and status, symbolized by these increasingly fancy but lifeless rocks, can't cover up the emptiness of his soul.

On the other hand, though, tombs carved from beautiful stone *do* last. The permanence of sculpture can be a reminder of the brevity of human life: the Bishop's tomb will, by definition, outlive him, perhaps for centuries.

The poem's stones thus invite readers to think about both the brevity of life *and* the lasting power of art. The Bishop might be wrong to think that he can cling to wealth and status beyond the grave—but he's not wrong that later generations will see and marvel at Renaissance tombs just like his.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 25:** "And I shall fill my slab of basalt there,"
- **Lines 29-33:** "Peach-blossom marble all, the rare, the ripe / As fresh-poured red wine of a mighty pulse. / —Old Gandolf with his paltry onion-stone, / Put me where I may look at him! True peach, / Rosy and flawless: how I earned the prize!"
- **Lines 42-44:** "Some lump, ah God, of / lapis lazuli, / Big as a Jew's head cut off at the nape, / Blue as a vein o'er the Madonna's breast..."
- **Lines 47-49:** "So, let the blue lump poise between my knees, / Like God the Father's globe on both His hands / Ye worship in the Jesu Church so gay,"
- **Lines 53-54:** "Did I say basalt for my slab, sons? Black— / 'Twas ever antique-black I meant! "
- **Lines 68-72:** "Nay, boys, ye love me—all of jasper, then! / 'Tis jasper ye stand pledged to, lest I grieve / My bath must needs be left behind, alas! / One block, pure green as a pistachio nut, / There's plenty jasper somewhere in the world—"
- **Lines 102-103:** "All / lapis / , all, sons! Else I give the Pope / My villas!"
- **Lines 115-118:** "Stone— / Gritstone, a-crumble! Clammy squares which sweat / As if the corpse they keep were oozing through— / And no more / lapis / to delight the world!"

THE BISHOP'S TOMB

The Bishop's imagined tomb is a symbol of his empty egotism and greed.

As the Bishop designs his tomb, he imagines it almost as a palace: a splendid resting place built from semiprecious stones, ornamented with bronze sculpture, engraved with the most tasteful Latin, and—most important of all—far more elegant than the tomb of his rival Gandolf. Not only does the Bishop want his tomb to outdo Gandolf's, he wants it to have his effigy (a memorial statue of him) posed in exactly the same way as a famous statue of "God the Father" himself.

The Bishop's vision of this monument is thus also a picture of how he thinks of himself: as the most important person in the universe. But the poem hints that this tomb will never actually get built, thus suggesting that all the Bishop's egotism—and the Bishop himself—will ultimately come to nothing.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 15-33:** "And so, about this tomb of mine. I fought / With tooth and nail to save my niche, ye know: / —Old Gandolf cozened me, despite my care; / Shrewd was that snatch from out the corner south / He graced his carrion with, God curse the same! / Yet still my niche is not so cramped but thence / One sees the pulpit o' the epistle-side, / And somewhat of the choir, those silent seats, / And up into the aery dome where live / The angels, and a sunbeam's sure to lurk: / And I shall fill my slab of basalt there, / And 'neath my tabernacle take my rest, / With those nine columns round me, two and two, / The odd one at my feet where Anselm stands: / Peach-blossom marble all, the rare, the ripe / As fresh-poured red wine of a mighty pulse. / —Old Gandolf with his paltry onion-stone, / Put me where I may look at him! True peach, / Rosy and flawless: how I earned the prize!"
- **Lines 47-49:** "So, let the blue lump poise between my knees, / Like God the Father's globe on both His hands / Ye worship in the Jesu Church so gay,"
- **Lines 53-62:** "Did I say basalt for my slab, sons? Black— / 'Twas ever antique-black I meant! How else / Shall ye

contrast my frieze to come beneath? / The bas-relief in bronze ye promised me, / Those Pans and Nymphs ye wot of, and perchance / Some tripod, thyrsus, with a vase or so, / The Saviour at his sermon on the mount, / Saint Praxed in a glory, and one Pan / Ready to twitch the Nymph's last garment off, / And Moses with the tables..."

- **Lines 68-72:** "Nay, boys, ye love me—all of jasper, then! / 'Tis jasper ye stand pledged to, lest I grieve / My bath must needs be left behind, alas! / One block, pure green as a pistachio nut, / There's plenty jasper somewhere in the world—"
- **Lines 76-79:** "—That's if ye carve my epitaph aright, / Choice Latin, picked phrase, Tully's every word, / No gaudy ware like Gandolf's second line— / Tully, my masters? Ulpian serves his need!"
- **Lines 106-110:** "Or ye would heighten my impoverished frieze, / Piece out its starved design, and fill my vase / With grapes, and add a vizor and a Term, / And to the tripod ye would tie a lynx / That in his struggle throws the thyrsus down,"

POETIC DEVICES

IRONY

The Bishop's hypocrisy is the poem's fundamental irony. This supposedly holy man, quick to spout familiar aphorisms about the brevity of life and the emptiness of worldly wealth, is in truth a money-grubbing, lustful, materialistic old sinner.

Everything this Bishop has done during his tenure in a supposedly selfless pastoral job has been in the service of his personal comfort. He's used his wealth to build countless country houses, stolen treasures from his own church, and fathered a substantial clan of illegitimate children. To him, being a Bishop just means having easier access to wealth, power, and pleasure.

He even behaves as if his church's patron saint, St. Praxed, is just another higher-up he can pull strings with: he offers to put a good word in with her for his sons if they follow his tomb designs to the letter. In short, if this Bishop ever really believed in his religion or cared for his congregation, there's absolutely no sign of it in his behavior.

Not only does the Bishop fail to live by the tenets of his religion, he can't even die by them. Without real faith, he can take no comfort in the thought of a Christian afterlife. His obsession with his splendid tomb is a cover for his fear of death: whenever he begins to ponder his mortality, he quickly turns his mind to semiprecious stones and elaborate sculpture instead. He can't even seem to face the bare facts of death, instead imagining that he'll just lie cozy in his church enjoying "the blessed mutter of the mass" for eternity. His hypocrisy doesn't just make him a corrupt and selfish man, but a cowardly and delusional one as well.

The deep irony here, then, is that the very man whose job it is to teach love, selflessness, faith, and generosity possesses none of these qualities himself.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-125

IMAGERY

The poem's sensuous imagery underlines just how attached to worldly pleasures the Bishop is.

Much of the imagery here is all in the Bishop's imagination. As he pictures his glorious tomb, he describes the rich stones he wants it carved from: "peach-blossom marble" in a "rosy and flawless" pink; a "lump [...] of *lapis lazuli*" that's as "blue as a vein o'er the Madonna's breast"; a great block of jasper "pure green as a pistachio nut."

His intensely specific imagery here makes it sound as if he's caressing each stone one by one—and as if those stones were almost edible, delicacies he longs to devour. From "peach" to "wine" to "pistachio," there's a banquet of stones here.

The image of lapis that's blue as a vein in "the Madonna's breast" suggests sexual desire, too. The Bishop's memories of his one-time mistress, a "tall pale" woman with "talking eyes," hints that he's haunted by all kinds of lost physical pleasures.

Perhaps his vivid sense of all that's delightful in the physical world is part of what makes death seem like such an incomprehensible horror to him. This ironically irreligious bishop takes no comfort in the idea of an afterlife; when he's forced to think of the physical realities of death, he recoils in horror from the image of cheap stones which bead up with damp "as if the corpse they keep were oozing through."

The Bishop's imagery thus helps readers understand the Bishop's deep materialism, which makes him cling to earthly pleasures in order to flee earthly realities.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 23-24:** "And up into the aery dome where live / The angels, and a sunbeam's sure to lurk:"
- **Lines 27-30:** "With those nine columns round me, two and two, / The odd one at my feet where Anselm stands: / Peach-blossom marble all, the rare, the ripe / As fresh-poured red wine of a mighty pulse."
- **Lines 32-33:** "True peach, / Rosy and flawless: how I earned the prize!"
- **Lines 36-44:** "Go dig / The white-grape vineyard where the oil-press stood, / Drop water gently till the surface sink, / And if ye find . . . Ah God, I know not, I! ... / Bedded

in store of rotten fig-leaves soft, / And corded up in a tight olive-frail, / Some lump, ah God, of / lapis lazuli, / Big as a Jew's head cut off at the nape, / Blue as a vein o'er the Madonna's breast..."

- **Line 71:** "One block, pure green as a pistachio nut,"
- **Lines 74-75:** "Horses for ye, and brown Greek manuscripts, / And mistresses with great smooth marbly limbs?"
- **Lines 80-84:** "And then how I shall lie through centuries, / And hear the blessed mutter of the mass, / And see God made and eaten all day long, / And feel the steady candle-flame, and taste / Good strong thick stupefying incense-smoke!"
- **Lines 87-90:** "I fold my arms as if they clasped a crook, / And stretch my feet forth straight as stone can point, / And let the bedclothes, for a mortcloth, drop / Into great laps and folds of sculptor's-work:"
- **Lines 91-92:** "strange thoughts / Grow, with a certain humming in my ears,"
- **Line 96:** "Your tall pale mother with her talking eyes,"
- **Lines 104-105:** "Ever your eyes were as a lizard's quick, / They glitter like your mother's for my soul,"
- **Lines 115-117:** "Stone— / Gritstone, a-crumble! Clammy squares which sweat / As if the corpse they keep were oozing through—"

ALLUSION

The poem's allusions help to conjure up the Bishop's Italian Renaissance world and to underline his deep hypocrisy.

The Bishop may have no real religious faith to speak of, but he does know how to talk the talk. Many of the poem's allusions quote the Bible or refer to biblical stories. The poem's first line, for instance—"Vanity, saith the preacher, vanity!"—is an allusion to the book of Ecclesiastes, which warns that life is brief and worldly power ultimately meaningless.

In fact, some of the Bishop's ideas for tomb sculpture are drawn from important moments in the Bible: the "sermon on the mount," a speech Christ delivers in the New Testament, and "Moses with the tables," Moses holding the stone tablets engraved with the Ten Commandments.

All these Christian allusions are surrounded by classical ones. The Bishop doesn't just want Christ and Moses on his tomb, but "Pans and Nymphs" (forest spirits) and all sorts of other Greek and Roman iconography. This mingling of Christian and pagan imagery suggests that the Bishop is more interested in what looks good on a tomb frieze than in religious devotion. It also sets the poem firmly in the Italian Renaissance, a time and place when artists were equally interested in depicting religious and classical stories (and sometimes even fused the two, as in this famous painting of John the Baptist/Bacchus).

Even the Bishop's similes draw on the artistic landscape of the Italian Renaissance. When he describes his buried lump of lapis as "blue as a vein o'er the Madonna's breast," readers might imagine one of the countless Renaissance images of the Virgin Mary nursing the baby Jesus. Renaissance art was marked not just by a renewed interest in classical art and myth, but by a whole new artistic style. Religious painting, once stylized and two-dimensional, became so lifelike that one might indeed see the very veins under Mary's skin. The Bishop's allusions, in other words, are right up to date with the artistic fashions of his time.

The Bishop's snobbery about Gandolf's bad tomb Latin also helps to evoke his era. Not everyone would have learned Latin: it was the language of the upper classes. When the Bishop scornfully notes that Gandolf's inscription could have been composed by "Ulpian" (a minor Latin writer), and only "Tully" (that is, Cicero, a famous Roman orator) will do for him, he makes it clear that he very much considers himself part of an elegant, educated elite.

The poem's allusions thus help readers to imagine the Renaissance world around the Bishop, and to see how he—as a wealthy, educated, and hypocritical clergyman—was a man of his time.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Vanity, saith the preacher, vanity!"
- **Line 3:** "Nephews—sons mine...ah God, I know not! Well—"
- **Line 14:** "Saint Praxed's"
- **Lines 43-44:** "Big as a Jew's head cut off at the nape, / Blue as a vein o'er the Madonna's breast..."
- **Line 46:** "That brave Frascati villa with its bath,"
- **Lines 48-49:** "Like God the Father's globe on both His hands / Ye worship in the Jesu Church so gay,"
- **Lines 57-62:** "Those Pans and Nymphs ye wot of, and perchance / Some tripod, thyrsus, with a vase or so, / The Saviour at his sermon on the mount, / Saint Praxed in a glory, and one Pan / Ready to twitch the Nymph's last garment off, / And Moses with the tables..."
- **Lines 77-79:** "Choice Latin, picked phrase, Tully's every word, / No gaudy ware like Gandolf's second line— / Tully, my masters? Ulpian serves his need!"
- **Lines 99-100:** "—Aha, ELUCESCEBAT quoth our friend? / No Tully, said I, Ulpian at the best!"
- **Lines 107-110:** "Piece out its starved design, and fill my vase / With grapes, and add a vizor and a Term, / And to the tripod ye would tie a lynx / That in his struggle throws the thyrsus down,"

APHORISM

In the midst of his instructions to his sons, the Bishop sometimes seems to remember his role as a religious leader and throws in a Christian aphorism or two. His mechanical use

of these sayings both makes it clear he doesn't have an ounce of real faith and ironically plays up his hypocrisy: every one of these lines is absolutely true, and absolutely applicable to him.

Most of the Bishop's aphorisms have to do with life's brevity and the emptiness of worldly wealth and power. But the fact that he uses such familiar sayings to discuss these issues suggests that he's only giving them lip service; he knows what he's *meant* to say, but he's far more eloquent on the subject of all the semiprecious stones he wants his tomb built from.

When he observes, for instance, that death reveals that "the world's a dream," he's using an old cliché—one whose truth doesn't seem to strike him even as he faces down his own death. He does the same thing in lines 51-54, even more blatantly:

> Swift as a weaver's shuttle fleet our years:
> Man goeth to the grave, and where is he?
> Did I say basalt for my slab, sons? Black—
> 'Twas ever antique-black I meant! [...]

Notice how quickly the Bishop's mind veers from these pat sayings to the design of his tomb, and how much more urgent his voice sounds when he demands "antique-black" marble than when he intones, "Man goeth to the grave."

Perhaps the most ironic of the Bishop's aphorisms appears in line 101: "Evil and brief hath been my pilgrimage" (or, in other words, "my journey through life has been short and sinful"). This is a very traditional Renaissance Catholic sort of thing to say—and what's more, it seems to be completely true. But if the Bishop lets the reality of his own words sink in, he gives no sign of it; a moment later he's back to thinking about lapis lazuli again.

Where Aphorism appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Vanity, saith the preacher, vanity!"
- **Lines 8-9:** "And as she died so must we die ourselves, / And thence ye may perceive the world's a dream."
- **Lines 51-52:** "Swift as a weaver's shuttle fleet our years: / Man goeth to the grave, and where is he?"
- **Line 101:** "Evil and brief hath been my pilgrimage."

METAPHOR

The Bishop's metaphors help to characterize him, giving readers a sense of the way he sees the world.

Some of the Bishop's metaphors are also clichés: "the world's a dream," for instance, or the dramatic (but insincere) declaration, "evil and brief hath been my pilgrimage." Note that both of these metaphors—the world as nothing more than a fleeting vision, the Bishop's time on earth as a holy journey gone wrong—are just ways the Bishop pays lip service to his role as a religious leader. Resorting to well-worn images, he makes it clear that he doesn't really believe in what he's saying.

The metaphors he uses to describe the things he *does* believe in—his own pleasure and importance—are much more striking, and reveal a lot about what kind of a guy he is.

When he describes the "aery dome" of St. Praxed's, for example, he says that "a sunbeam's sure to lurk" up there somewhere. This odd moment of personification turns a shaft of sunlight into a shadowy figure; most lurking gets done in dark places, after all, and for dark reasons. Even as the Bishop describes the heavenly sight of sunbeams piercing a richly decorated church dome, his metaphor suggests trickery and crime.

It's not surprising, then, that he imagines his sons not just disappointing him, but "stabb[ing]" him "with ingratitude." This metaphor suggests that he sees the world in pretty mercenary terms: in his eyes, everyone's just waiting to run a metaphorical knife into someone else's back (and perhaps sometimes a literal knife, too). This untrustworthy Bishop has no reason to trust anyone else!

No wonder, then, that he puts most of his energy into hoarding treasures and delights for himself, and sees much of the world in material terms. When he scorns the "gaudy ware" of his rival Gandolf's tomb inscription, he describes a Latin phrase as if it were cheap, tacky goods, turning even language into just another status symbol.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "And thence ye may perceive the world's a dream."
- **Line 24:** "a sunbeam's sure to lurk"
- **Line 78:** "No gaudy ware like Gandolf's second line—"
- **Line 96:** "Your tall pale mother with her talking eyes,"
- **Line 101:** "Evil and brief hath been my pilgrimage."
- **Line 114:** "For ye have stabbed me with ingratitude"

SIMILE

The Bishop's similes let readers into his covetous, glittering imagination.

The Bishop often uses similes to describe the kinds of marvelous stones he wants his tomb carved out of. The "peach-blossom marble" he demands at first, for instance, should be as richly colored "as fresh-poured red wine of a mighty pulse." In other words, it should look just like wine right after it's been pressed, when it gets poured off the grape mash. And the jasper he wants later on should be "pure green as a pistachio nut." Both of these similes present the stones not just as beautiful, but as *delicious*: sweet as a peach, rich as wine, savory as pistachio. The Bishop's greed, these similes suggest, makes him into a devourer.

The similes he uses to describe the precious lapis lazuli he's buried in his vineyards also suggest his covetousness. The

"lump" of stone, he tells his sons, is:

> Big as a Jew's head cut off at the nape,
> Blue as a vein o'er the Madonna's breast...

Both of these images draw on Renaissance art traditions. The "vein o'er the Madonna's breast" evokes paintings of the Virgin Mary nursing the baby Jesus. And the "Jew's head" might be an allusion to the severed head of John the Baptist, another common theme in Renaissance painting (though it could also just be Renaissance-era antisemitism):

- The Bishop's similes here suggest he's thinking in the terms of a 16th-century world that often married religious devotion with displays of wealth; paintings of these subjects would have been used as devotional objects in a church like St. Praxed's, but they'd also have shown off just how rich the Bishop was.
- But they also link the Bishop's treasure to images of fleshly beauty and violence—neither of which, it seems, the Bishop has been a stranger to.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 29-30:** "Peach-blossom marble all, the rare, the ripe / As fresh-poured red wine of a mighty pulse."
- **Line 43:** "Big as a Jew's head cut off at the nape,"
- **Line 44:** "Blue as a vein o'er the Madonna's breast..."
- **Line 51:** "Swift as a weaver's shuttle fleet our years:"
- **Line 71:** "One block, pure green as a pistachio nut,"
- **Line 104:** "Ever your eyes were as a lizard's quick,"
- **Line 121:** "—Ay, like departing altar-ministrants,"

PARALLELISM

Parallelism helps to evoke the Bishop's preoccupied deathbed thoughts.

Much of the parallelism here comes in the form of anaphora—long strings of lines that start with the same words. For instance, take a look at the way the Bishop describes how he imagines spending eternity, lying comfortably in his fabulous tomb:

> And then how I shall lie through centuries,
> And hear the blessed mutter of the mass,
> And see God made and eaten all day long,
> And feel the steady candle-flame, and taste
> Good strong thick stupefying incense-smoke!

All those "ands" make the Bishop sound as if he's spinning out a fantasy at length (and conveniently forgetting that, by the time he's in his tomb, he'll be too dead to hear, see, feel, or smell a single thing).

Parallelism also shapes his fantastical visions of the decorative frieze he wants to adorn the tomb itself:

> Those Pans and Nymphs ye wot of, and perchance
> Some tripod, thyrsus, with a vase or so,
> The Saviour at his sermon on the mount,
> Saint Praxed in a glory, [...]

Each of the lines here starts with another item the Bishop wants depicted in his sculpture. The parallelism here might draw the reader's attention to the fact that he thinks of "Pans and Nymphs"—classical forest spirits, known for partying—long before he hauls his attention around to the Christian imagery that might seem more appropriate for a Bishop's tomb!

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "And"
- **Line 9:** "And"
- **Line 22:** "And"
- **Line 23:** "And"
- **Line 25:** "And"
- **Line 26:** "And"
- **Line 43:** "Big as a Jew's head"
- **Line 44:** "Blue as a vein"
- **Line 57:** "Those Pans and Nymphs"
- **Line 58:** "Some tripod"
- **Line 59:** "The Saviour"
- **Line 60:** "Saint Praxed"
- **Line 80:** "And"
- **Line 81:** "And"
- **Line 82:** "And"
- **Line 83:** "And"
- **Line 88:** "And"
- **Line 89:** "And"
- **Line 95:** "Saint Praxed"
- **Line 96:** "Your tall pale mother"
- **Line 97:** "And"
- **Line 98:** "And"

REPETITION

The Bishop's repetitions make him sound both obsessive and pathetic.

Sometimes, the Bishop seems to use repetitions on purpose for effect. For instance, take a look at the diacope and polyptoton in this passage:

> What's done is done, and she is dead beside,
> Dead long ago, and I am Bishop since,
> And as she died so must we die ourselves,

All these variations on words to do with death make it clear what one major theme of the Bishop's speech will be. He's all

too aware that he'll be dead soon—though that doesn't mean he's come to terms with the idea.

In fact, he seems to be struggling desperately to find some "peace":

> [...] Peace, peace seems all.
> Saint Praxed's ever was the church for peace;

The epizeuxis and diacope on "peace" here, ironically enough, suggests that the Bishop is agitated and anxious. As he repeats the word over and over, it's clear that peace is exactly what he lacks. He thinks he'll find that peace only so long as he gets the lavish tomb of his dreams.

But some of the poem's most memorable repetitions—whole phrases that first appear at the beginning of the poem, and crop up again at the end—suggest that this greedy, selfish man is far too caught up in his own petty power struggles to ever find *real* rest.

Haunted by the feeling that he's "dying by degrees" (lines 11 and 86), he spends most of his time reflecting that, back in the day when he had a beautiful mistress, his old enemy Gandolf "envied [him], so fair she was" (lines 5 and 125). The return of phrases like these suggests that the Bishop is caught up in an awful whirlwind of his own pettiest thoughts; as he lies dying, he has nothing to comfort him but his past spiteful triumphs.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Vanity," "vanity"
- **Line 5:** "Old Gandolf envied me, so fair she was!"
- **Line 6:** "done," "done," "dead"
- **Line 7:** "Dead"
- **Line 8:** "died," "die"
- **Line 11:** "dying by degrees"
- **Line 12:** "dead"
- **Line 13:** ""Do I live, am I dead?"," "Peace, peace"
- **Line 14:** "the church for peace"
- **Line 27:** "two," "two"
- **Line 53:** "Black"
- **Line 54:** "black"
- **Line 68:** "jasper"
- **Line 69:** "jasper"
- **Line 72:** "jasper"
- **Line 85:** "hours of the dead night"
- **Line 86:** "Dying in state and by such slow degrees,"
- **Line 113:** ""Do I live, am I dead?"," "There," "there"
- **Line 115:** "ye wish it," "ye wish it"
- **Line 122:** "the church for peace"
- **Line 125:** "he envied me, so fair she was"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration adds emphasis and emotion to the Bishop's long speech. (Note that we've only highlighted some representative examples of the poem's alliteration here; there's much more to find!)

Often, alliteration evokes not just the scene the Bishop's describing, but how he feels about it. For instance, listen to the sounds he uses in this bitter complaint:

> —Old Gandolf cozened me, despite my care;
> Shrewd was that snatch from out the corner south
> He graced his carrion with, God curse the same!

The cutting /c/ sounds and hissing sibilant /s/ sounds here make the Bishop sound as if he's practically spitting with hatred. Appropriately enough, those same sounds return at the end of the poem in a moment of deep horror:

> Gritstone, a-crumble! Clammy squares which sweat
> As if the corpse they keep were oozing through—

Now, those harsh /c/ sounds and /s/ sounds make the Bishop sound as if he's recoiling in disgust from the very thought of the horrible cheap tomb he imagines his sons will build for him—and, subconsciously, from the thought of the oozing corpses inside all tombs.

Elsewhere, though, the Bishop's alliteration evokes the very deathly finality he's so afraid of. Listen to these lines:

> [...] As here I lie
> In this state-chamber, dying by degrees,
> Hours and long hours in the dead night, [...]

Those /d/ sounds fall as heavily as dead bodies.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "men," "mother"
- **Line 6:** "done," "done," "dead"
- **Line 11:** "dying," "degrees"
- **Line 13:** "Peace, peace"
- **Line 14:** "Praxed's," "peace"
- **Line 16:** "nail," "niche," "know"
- **Line 17:** "cozened," "care"
- **Line 18:** "snatch," "corner," "south"
- **Line 19:** "carrion," "curse"
- **Line 20:** "niche," "not"
- **Line 21:** "pulpit," "epistle"
- **Line 22:** "silent seats"
- **Line 26:** "tabernacle take"
- **Line 29:** "rare," "ripe"
- **Line 30:** "poured," "pulse"
- **Line 116:** "crumble," "Clammy," "squares," "sweat"
- **Line 117:** "corpse," "keep"

ASSONANCE

Assonance, like alliteration, gives the poem emphasis and music. (Note that we've only highlighted a representative sample of the poem's assonance—there's plenty more to find.)

For instance, listen to the sounds in these lines:

> Ever your eyes were as a lizard's quick,
> They glitter like your mother's for my soul,

All those short /i/ sounds mirror what they're describing: the swift, glittery dart of the Bishop's sons' eyes. Assonance here helps readers to imagine the scene as these untrustworthy boys gather around their equally untrustworthy father, glancing at each other as if to say: "We only have to humor him a little longer."

Assonance works like this throughout the poem, drawing the reader's attention to certain moments and bringing the poem's images to life.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "mother once"
- **Line 5:** "envied me"
- **Line 9:** "perceive," "dream"
- **Line 11:** "state-chamber," "dying by"
- **Line 13:** " Peace, peace seems"
- **Line 16:** "nail," "save"
- **Line 18:** "out," "south"
- **Line 24:** "sure," "lurk"
- **Line 28:** "Anselm stands"
- **Line 104:** "lizard's," "quick"
- **Line 105:** "glitter"

CONSONANCE

Consonance, especially sibilance, works just like (and strengthens the effects of) the other sonic devices in the poem (that is, alliteration and assonance). It adds emphasis to certain images and ideas, evokes the bishop's tone, and, sometimes, simply makes the poem sound more interesting.

For example, take a look at the way the consonance sounds in this passage brings the bishop's bitterness to vivid life:

> —Old Gandolf cozened me, despite my care;
> Shrewd was that snatch from out the corner south
> He graced his carrion with, God curse the same!

The sibilant hiss of /s/ sounds in words like "despite," "graced," and "curse" combine with the sharp, biting /k/ sounds to make this passage sound even more venomous.

(Note that we've only highlighted the consonance in the first few lines of the poem; the same effect appears in a number of other places.)

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "know not"
- **Line 4:** "men," "mother"
- **Line 6:** "done," "done," "dead beside"
- **Line 7:** "Dead"
- **Line 11:** "dying," "degrees"
- **Line 13:** "Peace, peace seems"
- **Line 14:** "Saint Praxed's," "peace"
- **Line 16:** "nail," "niche," "know"
- **Line 17:** "cozened," "despite," "care"
- **Line 18:** "snatch," "corner," "south"
- **Line 19:** "graced," "carrion," "God," "curse," "same"
- **Line 21:** "pulpit," "epistle-side"
- **Line 22:** "somewhat," "silent seats"
- **Line 25:** "shall fill," "slab," "basalt"
- **Line 26:** "tabernacle take"
- **Line 29:** "rare," "ripe"
- **Line 30:** "fresh-poured red," "pulse"
- **Line 31:** "paltry," "onion-stone"
- **Line 32:** "Put," "peach"

VOCABULARY

Vanity (Line 1) - "Vanity," in this context, means a combination of uselessness and arrogance. In other words, it's "all in vain," useless, to try to cling to worldly wealth and power—but it's also "vain," arrogant, to believe you can!

Nephews—sons mine (Line 3) - When the Bishop begins by referring to his sons as "nephews," he's drawing on an old tradition: when Renaissance Catholic priests, who were supposed to be celibate, had illegitimate children, those children were referred to as their nephews and nieces rather than their sons and daughters.

Fair (Line 5) - Beautiful.

Thence (Line 9) - From this, through this.

Ye (Line 9, Line 16) - An old-fashioned way of saying "you."

State-chamber (Line 11) - An elegant room used for hosting visitors; the Bishop is dying in style!

Saint Praxed's (Line 14) - Saint Praxed, to whom the Bishop's church is dedicated, was an early Christian martyr known for her generosity and piety—virtues this Bishop pointedly lacks.

Niche (Line 16) - An alcove in the church wall where a tomb can fit.

Cozened (Line 17) - Cheated.

Care (Line 17) - Precautions.

Shrewd (Line 18) - Clever, wily.

Carrion (Line 19) - Dead meat—a nasty way of describing Gandolf's dead body.

The pulpit o' the epistle-side (Line 21) - In other words, "the preacher's lectern at the right side of the altar, where New Testament readings get delivered during Mass." The Bishop is happy his tomb will have a good view of the church's services.

Choir (Line 22) - An upper-level area of the church where singers perform.

Aery (Line 23) - Airy, spacious, and high up.

Basalt (Line 25, Line 53) - A kind of smooth, dark stone.

Tabernacle (Line 26) - An ornamented box for the consecrated bread used in the Catholic Mass.

Pulse (Line 30) - The grape-mash left over from wine-making.

Paltry (Line 31) - Feeble, meager.

Onion-stone (Line 31, Line 124) - A kind of cheap marble. It's called "onion-stone" because it has a tendency to flake off in thin layers, like onion skin.

Conflagration (Line 34) - A huge fire.

Aught (Line 35) - Anything.

Corded up in a tight olive-frail (Line 41) - In other words, "tied up tightly in a basket used for carrying olives."

Lapis lazuli (Line 42, Line 102, Line 118) - A bright blue stone, especially prized during the Renaissance.

Bequeathed (Line 45) - Passed down in a will, left as an inheritance.

Villas (Line 45, Line 46, Line 65) - Elegant country houses—palaces from which the wealthy could enjoy the countryside.

Frascati (Line 46) - A town near Rome, popular with wealthy vacationers.

Jesu Church (Line 49) - A church in Rome, which contains a statue that holds a lump of lapis lazuli—just like the Bishop wants for his own tomb.

Shuttle (Line 51) - A tool weavers use to pass the active thread (the "weft" thread) between the threads stretched out on a frame (the "warp" threads).

Fleet (Line 51) - Speed away.

Goeth (Line 52) - Goes. The Bishop is using a lofty biblical tone here.

Antique-black (Line 54) - That is, deep black marble.

Frieze (Line 55) - A long, horizontal decoration, either sculpted or painted.

Bas-relief (Line 56) - A kind of sculpture in which figures stand out from a flat surface. "Bas-relief" in particular means "low relief": the figures wouldn't stick out very much.

Pans and Nymphs (Line 57) - Forest spirits from classical mythology.

Ye wot of (Line 57) - You know of.

Perchance (Line 57) - Perhaps, maybe.

Some tripod, thyrsus (Line 58) - These are both traditional objects from classical mythology. A tripod was a three-legged stand or stool often associated with the Oracle at Delphi, where a priestess sat on a tripod to deliver sacred messages. A thyrsus was a staff decorated with a pinecone, the symbol of the wine-god Bacchus.

Twitch (Line 61) - Snatch.

Tables (Line 62) - That is, the stone tablets upon which the Ten Commandments were carved.

Ye mark me not! (Line 63) - In other words, "You're not paying attention!"

Child of my bowels (Line 64) - In other words, "child born from my body."

Revel (Line 65) - To party.

Travertine (Line 66) - Limestone—relatively cheap and weak compared to the marble the Bishop wants for his tomb.

Tomb-top (Line 67) - The lid of a tomb, decorated with a sculpture of the person inside.

Jasper (Line 68, Line 69, Line 72) - A semiprecious stone that comes in many different colors.

Stand pledged to (Line 69) - That is, "You swear to make my tomb out of jasper."

Tully (Line 77, Line 79) - Another name for Cicero, a great Latin writer.

Ulpian (Line 79) - Another Latin writer—but one far less talented and famous than Cicero.

The blessed mutter of the mass (Line 81) - In other words, the low chant of prayers at Mass, the daily Catholic religious ceremony.

God made and eaten (Line 82) - This is an allusion to transubstantiation: the Catholic belief that communion bread and wine turn to the literal body and blood of Christ during Mass.

Stupefying (Line 84) - Dazing, narcotic.

Dying in state (Line 86) - To "die in state" is to have one's deathbed put in a public place so visitors can come and honor the dying person.

Crook (Line 87) - An ornamented staff with a curve at one end, traditionally carried by bishops. Crooks are modeled on the hooks shepherds used to steer their sheep, and symbolically represent the bishop's role as a shepherd caring for his "flock" of parishioners.

Mortcloth (Line 89) - The expensive, often richly embroidered cloth used to cover a body or a coffin.

Great laps and folds of sculptor's-work (Line 90) - In other words, the bishop arranges his own bedclothes so they look as if they're carved in stone.

Yon tapers dwindle (Line 91) - In other words, "those candles over there shrink."

Agate urns (Line 97) - Vases carved from agate, a striped stone.

ELUCESCEBAT quoth our friend? (Line 99) - In other words: "Aha, does Gandolf's tomb read 'He was illustrious'?" The Bishop is snobbishly criticizing, not just what the Latin inscription on Gandolf's tomb says, but how it says it: he thinks the particular form of the Latin verb used here is in poor taste!

Impoverished (Line 106) - Poor, deprived.

A vizor and a Term (Line 108) - More classical references. A "vizor" is a helmet; a "Term" is an armless statue of the god Terminus, traditionally used to mark boundaries.

Lynx (Line 109) - A kind of wild cat, often associated with the god Bacchus.

Entablature (Line 111) - The platform that will hold up the bishop's effigy (that is, the stone statue that represents his dead body).

Gritstone, a-crumble! (Line 116) - In other words: "Cheap sandstone, crumbling away!"

Altar-ministrants (Line 121) - Altar servers—people who help the priest conduct the Mass.

Leers (Line 123) - Stares, either lustfully or maliciously.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Bishop Orders His Tomb" is one of Browning's famous dramatic monologues. That means that it's a poem in the form of a speech—lines that could have been taken straight out of a play, and which are delivered to some specific audience who never actually says anything in the poem. Browning often uses this form to explore (and criticize) human nature. No need for a narrator to comment on the action: the Bishop's own greedy, selfish, hypocritical voice condemns him.

Like a monologue from a Shakespeare play, this poem is written in one long stanza of blank verse (that is, unrhymed iambic pentameter—more on that under Meter and Rhyme Scheme). Besides drawing on English theatrical tradition, this form helps to characterize the Bishop: the long unbroken stanza makes him sound obsessive, even crazed.

METER

"The Bishop Orders His Tomb" is written in blank verse—in other words, unrhymed iambic pentameter. Iambic pentameter means that each of the poem's lines is built from five iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm. Here's how that sounds in line 6, for example:

> What's done | is done, | and she | is dead | beside,

Iambic pentameter is one of the most common meters in English-language poetry, given that a lot of spoken English naturally falls into an iambic rhythm. It's also flexible: the speaker can easily change up the rhythm for emphasis. Listen to what happens in lines 32-33, for example, in which the Bishop insists that his sons position his marble tomb so that he can comfortably sneer at his old rival Gandolf from the grave:

> Put me | where I | may look | at him! | True peach,
> Rosy | and flaw- | less: how | I earned | the prize!

Making his demands, the Bishop begins his lines with a forceful, attention-grabbing trochee—the opposite foot to an iamb, with a DUM-da rhythm. And he closes line 32 with a punchy spondee, a foot with a DUM-DUM rhythm, evoking his obsessive, greedy pleasure in the thought of the pink marble that will enclose his dead body. Note that it's possible to scan these lines a bit differently (some might read "Put me" as another spondee, for instance), but there's definitely a more urgent rhythm happening. The changed meter here makes the Bishop's voice spring off the page.

For all these reasons, blank verse is a good choice for a poem in the form of a monologue. It's no wonder, then, that a lot of readers will be familiar with blank verse from Shakespeare, whose plays often used the form; the famous "To be or not to be" speech from *Hamlet* is one good example.

In choosing blank verse, Browning thus makes his Bishop sound *theatrical*. The Bishop speaks in the same form as Shakespeare's Lear or Leontes, and his long speeches, like theirs, reveal a lot more about his character than he might have intended.

RHYME SCHEME

"The Bishop Orders His Tomb" is written in blank verse, so it doesn't use a rhyme scheme. That makes the Bishop's speech sound natural and conversational; it's as if readers are listening in as he lectures his sullen sons about exactly how he wants his tomb to look. (Of course, the rumbling meter and the Bishop's lofty tone mean he sounds pretty theatrical, too.)

SPEAKER

This dramatic monologue's speaker is the greedy, selfish Bishop of the title. Lying on his deathbed, all the Bishop can think about is making sure his tomb is the most splendid in the church—and, in particular, that it's far *more* splendid than the tomb of his old rival, Gandolf.

The Bishop has clearly been a hypocrite all his life. He

addresses this monologue to his numerous sons—sons whom he definitely shouldn't have had, considering he's meant to be a celibate Catholic priest. And even as he rolls out clichés about the brevity of life and the emptiness of wealth, he has no thought of the afterlife; he's obsessed with status and power in *this* world. In short, he's an empty, selfish, hollow man.

SETTING

The poem is set beside a 16th-century Bishop's deathbed, where his illegitimate sons sullenly gather to listen to his last wishes. But readers are left to imagine the elegant "state-chamber" where the Bishop lies; the Bishop's mind is firmly on his church, St. Praxed's, where he hopes his lavish tomb will be erected. Through the Bishop's descriptions of St. Praxed's "aery dome"—and his dreams of the rosy marble, smooth black stone, and rich blue lapis that he intends his tomb will be built from—readers get a much clearer vision of a richly ornamented Italian Renaissance church than a sweaty-sheeted sickbed.

The poem is thus set more in the speaker's imagination than in his actual surroundings. And in part, that's because the speaker isn't too wild about the physical reality of death: he'd much rather dream of a palatial tomb than attend to his failing body and his empty soul.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

The English poet Robert Browning (1812-1889) was most famous in his time for not sounding much like a poet. His contemporaries were confused by his most distinctive works: dramatic monologues like this one, in which Browning inhabited a character like an actor playing a part. Even Oscar Wilde, a big Browning fan, famously said that "[George] Meredith is a prose Browning, and so is Browning." The Victorian literary world was much more at ease with the melancholy lyricism of Tennyson or the elegance of Elizabeth Barrett Browning (Browning's wife, and a much more famous poet) than with the novelistic storytelling of Browning's work.

But it's on his earthy, vibrant dramatic monologues that Browning's continued reputation rests. His most famous poems are a veritable gallery of villains, from the greedy Bishop of St. Praxed's to murderous Italian dukes to equally murderous lovers. By making these hideous men speak for themselves, Browning explored the darkest corners of human nature—and took a particular interest in the ways that people justify their terrible deeds to themselves. Villains, Browning's monologues suggest, don't tend to think that they're villains.

Browning's poetry wasn't all theatrical murder and greed, though; he also wrote tenderly about humility and heroism, homesickness, and heartbreak.

"The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church" first appeared in Browning's important 1845 collection *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics*—a collection that would deeply influence 20th-century Modernist poets like Ezra Pound. And Browning still moves readers to this day: his life and work inspired contemporary writer A.S. Byatt to write her acclaimed novel *Possession*.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In writing the tale of this Italian Renaissance bishop, Browning was likely inspired by his own time in Italy. He traveled extensively there as a young man, and in 1846 he outright moved to Florence so he could marry his beloved Elizabeth Barrett. The couple couldn't marry in England because Elizabeth's tyrannical father was not a fan of the match; he would have preferred to keep Elizabeth, a famous (and high-earning) poet, under his own roof.

This poem draws on Browning's familiarity with both Renaissance art—which, as the Bishop describes, often mixes Christian and classical imagery—and Renaissance religious corruption. Rome in the 16th century was indeed a place where a supposedly pious bishop might well father dozens of sons, jockey for power and status, and amass villa upon villa.

This poem isn't just a critique of Renaissance-era religious hypocrisy, however, but of hypocrisy all through the ages. Browning, an astute social critic, was not particularly a fan of the wealthy and powerful of his own era, either—of whom there were many.

The Victorian age in England was marked by a huge divide between a wealthy upper class and an impoverished lower class, and by a belief that England's upper classes should rightfully rule the world because of their innate superiority. Browning's dramatic monologues tend to point out that those who are *supposed* to be paragons of virtue are more often deeply selfish hypocrites—and that any nation that believes too deeply in its greatness is likely to be blinded by self-righteous frenzies.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Browning's Reception — Read a Victorian reviewer's take on Browning, and learn more about how Browning's contemporaries understood his poetry. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/may/14/robert-browning-poem-review-1873)
- The Poem Aloud — Watch an actor performing this dramatic monologue as if it were a scene from a play. (https://youtu.be/5-IN48Xzh70)

- The Browning Museum — Visit the website of Baylor University's Browning Museum, an archive and library devoted to Browning and his wife and fellow poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning. (https://www.baylor.edu/library/index.php?id=973825)
- A Brief Biography — Visit the Poetry Foundation to learn more about Browning's life and work. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/robert-browning)
- Browning's Legacy — Read an article exploring how Browning's poetic reputation has changed since his death. (https://blog.oup.com/2012/12/robert-browning-bicentenary-2012/)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ROBERT BROWNING POEMS

- Home-Thoughts, from Abroad
- How they Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix
- Life in a Love
- Meeting at Night
- My Last Duchess
- Porphyria's Lover
- The Lost Leader
- The Patriot

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