Confessions

POEM TEXT

What is he buzzing in my ears?
"Now that I come to die,
Do I view the world as a vale of tears?"
Ah, reverend sir, not I!

What I viewed there once, what I view again
Where the physic bottles stand
On the table's edge,—is a suburb lane,
With a wall to my bedside hand.

That lane sloped, much as the bottles do,
From a house you could descry
O'er the garden-wall; is the curtain blue
Or green to a healthy eye?

To mine, it serves for the old June weather
Blue above lane and wall;
And that farthest bottle labelled "Ether"
Is the house o'ertopping all.

At a terrace, somewhere near the stopper,
There watched for me, one June,
A girl: I know, sir, it's improper,
My poor mind's out of tune.

Only, there was a way... you crept
Close by the side, to dodge
Eyes in the house, two eyes except:
They styled their house "The Lodge."

What right had a lounger up their lane?
But, by creeping very close,
With the good wall's help,—their eyes might strain
And stretch themselves to Oes,

Yet never catch her and me together,
As she left the attic, there,
By the rim of the bottle labelled "Ether,"
And stole from stair to stair,

And stood by the rose-wreathed gate. Alas,
We loved, sir—used to meet:
How sad and bad and mad it was—
But then, how it was sweet!

SUMMARY

What's that nonsense this priest is whispering in my ear? "Now that you're about to die, do you see the world as a place of trials and sorrows?" Dear Father: no, I most certainly don't!

What I once saw in the world—what I seem to see again, there where the medicine bottles stand at the edge of the table—is a suburban street, with a wall over here on the side of the bed where my hand lies.

That street, like those bottles, sloped, running downhill from a house you could catch a glimpse of over the garden wall... would you say my bedroom curtain is blue or green, if you see it with healthy eyes?

To me, at any rate, it looks like the blue sky of long-ago June above the street and the wall. And that furthest medicine bottle, the bottle of anesthetic, is the tall house at the top of the hill.

From a balcony up close to that bottle's cork, a girl looked for me one June. I know, Father, it isn't right I should tell you about this; forgive me, my poor old mind isn't at its best.

But, you see, there was a path...you could get there if you tiptoed right along the wall, to keep out of sight of all the eyes in the house but that girl's. The family called their house "The Lodge."

What right did a layabout like me have to come up their fancy street? But, if I kept really close to the friendly wall, it didn't matter if the family stared so hard that their eyes went round as the letter O: they still couldn't catch the girl and I together as she tiptoed downstairs from the attic up by the top of the anesthetic bottle and met me under the rose arbor at the front gate.

Oh dear, yes, we loved each other, Father—we used to meet with each other. How shockingly wrong and crazy of us—but, on the other hand, how very, very sweet it was.

THEMES

LOVE, MEMORY, AND CONSOLATION

Lying on his deathbed, the speaker of “Confessions” fondly remembers a secret romance from his youth.

He knows that it was "sad and bad and mad" of his young self to sneak out and meet a girl against her parents' wishes, but he also remembers their romance as deeply "sweet." It was so sweet, in fact, that he gets lost in his memories, transported from the sickroom around him to the street where he and his girlfriend used to canoodle. Memories of love, the poem suggests, offer some of the deepest pleasure and consolation there is.

The poem's speaker is a very sick man: the priest has come to hear his last confession, and his bedroom is stocked with "physic bottles" (that is, bottles of medicines). The presence of "Ether," a strong anesthetic, suggests that he might be in serious pain, too.

In spite of his suffering and his coming death, the speaker pooh-poohs the priest's idea that life is a "vale of tears": because he once had a secret love affair with the girl next door, he knows for a fact that life isn't *all* suffering. The mere memory of a long-ago "June" when he and his girlfriend used to "creep[]" out secretly to meet each other by a "rose-wreathed gate" assures him that life has plenty of pleasures.

In fact, the longer he reflects on this long-ago romance, the more he's swept away into his memories, until the sky-blue curtain over his window seems to become the "old June weather" and the bottle of anesthetic becomes the house where his girlfriend lived. Memories of love, in other words, transform his sickroom around him, making a place of pain and disease into a miniature stage set for his romantic past to play out on.

The speaker's memories of his forbidden love, the poem suggests, are better than any anesthetic, giving him enduring consolation and sweetness that can sustain him even through the painful end of his life.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-36

THE THRILL OF FORBIDDEN LOVE

The priest who comes to hear the speaker's last confession on his deathbed expects him to say that the world is a "vale of tears"—to soberly reflect on his sins and prepare to leave this world for a better one. The speaker, perhaps to the priest's surprise, refuses. Instead, he tells a story about how an illicit romance from his youth was one of the best things that ever happened to him. Through the speaker's happy memories, the poem suggests that it's not a sin to fall in love, even love that conventional morality forbids. For that matter, the poem suggests that forbidden love often triumphs over rules and restrictions!

The priest who visits the speaker at the beginning of the poem has a preconceived notion of what the speaker might want to talk about. He immediately asks if the speaker "view[s] this world as a vale of tears" (in other words, whether he sees the world as a miserable place). The speaker waves this grim suggestion away as an irritating "buzzing," and insists that he doesn't see things that way at all. To this speaker, life has been more a joy than a slog through suffering and sin.

That's especially clear in the speaker's description of a secret love affair he enjoyed in his youth. He confesses this tale to the priest with a rueful "Alas," showing he knows he should feel *some* remorse for it, but his detailed memories of how he and his girlfriend used to sneak out together make it clear that he remembers these events with much more fondness and pleasure than regret and shame.

His girlfriend's family were snobbish and conventional: they "styled their house 'The Lodge,'" giving their suburban home a fancy name, and didn't want a "lounger" like the speaker sniffing around their daughter. The speaker knows that, by both the priest's and the family's standards, this romance was "sad and mad and bad." That doesn't stop him from remembering it mostly as deeply "sweet."

Through this speaker's fond, wistful voice, the poem thus argues that plenty of forbidden or unconventional love might really be part of what makes life worth living—and that no stern priest or watchful parent can get in its way. In this light, the sinful old world isn't just a grim "vale of tears" people must slog through on their way to Heaven, but a place of many delights.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-36

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

What is he buzzing in my ears?
"Now that I come to die,
Do I view the world as a vale of tears?"
Ah, reverend sir, not I!

This dramatic monologue—a poem spoken in the voice of a particular character—begins with its speaker, a sick old man, lying on his deathbed. He might be ill, but he still has enough energy for an outburst of irritation: "What is he buzzing in my ears?"

The irritating whisperer here, it turns out, is a priest, who (as the poem's title suggests) is probably here to hear the speaker's last confession. He's begun with a traditionally priestly question, asking the speaker if he "view[s] the world as a vale of tears" now that he's at the end of his life. He might mean to encourage the speaker to repent for his past sins and look hopefully toward heaven; the old line about life as a "vale of

tears" alludes to a hymn to the Virgin Mary, asking her to take care of all the poor sufferers down on earth.

This speaker, however, isn't willing to play along. Does he view the world as a place of sorrow, suffering, and trials? No! Even as he respectfully addresses the priest as "reverend sir," he clearly takes a different view of the world (and seems annoyed to be interrupted in his own thoughts by these pious "buzzing[s]."

The rest of this poem will explain how the speaker *does* see the world: as a place of many joys, some of them ones the priest wouldn't approve of. Right from the start, the poem's shape suggests this deathbed confession won't be a tragic one:

- The bouncy accentual meter doesn't stick to any one flavor of metrical foot, like dactyls or trochees. Instead, it uses a predictable number of stresses arranged in unpredictable patterns, alternating between four-beat lines (as in "Do I view the world as a vale of tears?") and three-beat lines (as in "Ah, reverend sir, not I!")
- That choice makes the poem feel flexible, conversational, and lighthearted: there's no rigidly regular meter here, just a jaunty, propulsive beat.
- A singsongy ABAB rhyme scheme supports that upbeat feeling.

This speaker's last thoughts on earth, these choices suggest, will be of happy things (and perhaps slightly irreverent ones).

LINES 5-11

What I viewed there once, what I view again
Where the physic bottles stand
On the table's edge,—is a suburb lane,
With a wall to my bedside hand.
That lane sloped, much as the bottles do,
From a house you could descry
O'er the garden-wall;

The dying speaker has firmly told the visiting priest that he doesn't "view the world as a vale of tears," as the priest seems to. Now he explains how he *does* "view the world," with a bit of teasing polyptoton that picks up on the priest's language: "What I viewed there once, what I view again," he says, is a particular street in a particular suburb, long ago.

He sees this street more clearly in his mind's eye even than the sickroom around him. Gesturing to "where the physic bottles" (that is, medicine bottles) "stand / On the table's edge," he speaks as if he can see the street floating over the table right now. The bottles even become a useful illustration. Arranged in order of height, they "slope," just like the street the speaker's describing.

At the top of this hilly street, the speaker remembers, there was an important house. Readers get a sense that it was both meaningful and a bit out of reach: the speaker could "descry" (or catch a glimpse) of it only from over the "garden wall."

These words suggest that trying to get a look at this house over that wall was a habit for this speaker—and that he lived rather lower down the hill than whoever lived up there. Perhaps there's a hint of symbolism there. Whoever lived up in this house on the hill might have been *higher* than the speaker in some way: fancier or richer, perhaps.

LINES 11-16

is the curtain blue
Or green to a healthy eye?
To mine, it serves for the old June weather
Blue above lane and wall;
And that farthest bottle labelled "Ether"
Is the house o'ertopping all.

The speaker interrupts himself for a moment to ask the priest whether his sickroom curtain looks "blue / Or green to a healthy eye." This moment of imagery gives readers a glimpse of the speaker's sickroom, but also feels like an odd digression at first. In fact, the speaker is only asking because he wants more stage dressing for the story he's about to tell. The curtain looks blue to him, he decides, even if it doesn't look blue to the priest—so it'll be the perfect backdrop, a blue that "serves for the old June weather" that once hung above the street he was just describing.

Similarly, the bottles on the table become his miniature stage set. The "farthest bottle labelled 'Ether'" now transforms into the house he was describing in the previous stanza, the house at the very top of the hill.

Both the curtain and the "bottle labelled 'Ether'" speak to just how ill the speaker is. His eyes are failing to the extent that he can no longer tell blue from green. The ether bottle suggests that he's in serious pain (ether is a powerful anesthetic). But these signs of his illness hardly seem to matter to him once they become part of the stage on which his memories play out.

In other words, the memories the speaker is about to describe—the memories that make him feel life *isn't* a vale of tears—are carrying him away, offering a consoling escape from his illness. Perhaps he was already in this other world when the priest bustled in and started "buzzing in [his] ear."

LINES 17-20

At a terrace, somewhere near the stopper,
There watched for me, one June,
A girl: I know, sir, it's improper,
My poor mind's out of tune.

Using the ether bottle as a model of the highest, tallest house on the long-ago street, the speaker at last reveals why this house was so important to him. As astute readers might already have guessed, this was the house where a girl used to "watch[] for [him], one June." The speaker's fondest memory is a summer

romance—just a fling, really, if it lasted only for "one June."

Perhaps this doesn't come as a big surprise to the reader, but the speaker still seems a little shy about it. Look carefully at his phrasing as he introduces the subject:

> At a terrace, somewhere near the stopper,
> There watched for me, one June,
> A girl: [...]

That "girl" doesn't appear until right at the end of the setup here. The speaker could have just as easily said, "At a terrace, somewhere near the stopper, / A girl once watched for me," just for instance. Instead, he starts with the idea that *someone* "watched for him," only slowly building up to the big reveal.

He's quick, then, to assure the priest that "I know, sir, it's improper," and to make excuses for himself, claiming that his "poor mind's out of tune," he's not thinking straight. But he seems to have been thinking straight enough so far! There might be just a hint of teasing in this line: a sense that he knows the *priest* will think such a relationship was "improper," but that he himself has other ideas about it.

LINES 21-24

> *Only, there was a way... you crept*
> *Close by the side, to dodge*
> *Eyes in the house, two eyes except:*
> *They styled their house "The Lodge."*

Perhaps the speaker isn't so abashed about his "improper" summer romance as he assured the priest he was. Instead, he takes delight in remembering exactly how he got away with visiting his sweetheart that long-ago June.

Part of the impropriety of this romance, it turns out, was to do with all the unfriendly "eyes in the house"—a moment of synecdoche that suggests the girl's family (and maybe other members of the Victorian household—the cook, the housekeeper?) were on the alert for any unwanted boyfriends sniffing around. The only "two eyes" the speaker *didn't* have to "dodge" were his girlfriend's.

Describing the unfriendly family as "eyes," the speaker also suggests that they cared a lot about how things *looked*. That impression only gets stronger when the speaker remarks, almost as an aside, that this family "styled their house 'The Lodge.'" In other words, it wasn't enough that their hilltop house was probably one of the fanciest on the street. They also had to give it a name. They couldn't just be Number 12, they had to be *The Lodge*.

This suburban family, in other words, was probably a little more well-to-do than the rest of the street. Certainly, they were snobbish. The speaker's interest in their daughter might not just have been "improper" from a priest's point of view, but from a classist Victorian's point of view: what was this kid from the bottom of the hill doing sniffing around *their* daughter?

LINES 25-32

> *What right had a lounger up their lane?*
> *But, by creeping very close,*
> *With the good wall's help,—their eyes might strain*
> *And stretch themselves to Oes,*
> *Yet never catch her and me together,*
> *As she left the attic, there,*
> *By the rim of the bottle labelled "Ether,"*
> *And stole from stair to stair,*

The speaker knows that, by his girlfriend's family's standards, his young self was nothing more than a useless "lounger" (or layabout) who had no "right" to walk "up their lane," let alone flirt with their daughter. Luckily, like Pyramus, he had the help of a friendly wall to protect him from the snobbish family's glares. Pressed right up against this wall, he could make his way safely by no matter how hard the family looked for him.

He seems to take as much pleasure in that victory now as he did then. Take a look at the little joke in these lines:

> [...] their eyes might strain
> And stretch themselves to Oes,

Here, he's saying that the family's eyes could stretch until they were round as the letter "O" and still not catch him and his girlfriend. He's also throwing in a quick pun: "eyes" sounds just like "I"s (especially next to those "Oes").

This is just a throwaway joke, but that's exactly what makes it meaningful. Such a joke characterizes the speaker, suggesting that his mind is as quick and nimble as his feet—and that he takes great pleasure in all his tricksiness. Perhaps this memory is fun for him, not just because it's nice to remember the girl he had a crush on one summer, but because it's nice to remember how quick and witty and skillful he was in his youth. (The same could be said of his girlfriend, who sneaks down from her attic "from stair to stair," creeping out without attracting anyone's notice.)

Such memories might be especially consoling for the speaker because he's in so much pain now. Once again, the "bottle labelled 'Ether'" appears here, still playing the role of the girlfriend's house, still reminding readers that this guy isn't going *anywhere* now.

LINES 33-36

> *And stood by the rose-wreathed gate. Alas,*
> *We loved, sir—used to meet:*
> *How sad and bad and mad it was—*
> *But then, how it was sweet!*

At long last, the speaker remembers, he and his girlfriend would be reunited. Once she made it down the stairs and he made it along the wall, they'd stand together "by the rose-wreathed

gate"—an idyllic image of young love framed in flowers.

Here, though, the speaker stops short; readers never get to see the couple kiss. That's because the speaker remembers who he's talking to here—the priest, remember him?—and cuts his memory off with a summary: "Alas, / We loved sir—used to meet." This is more like the usual language of a confession.

But readers might suspect that the speaker's rueful "Alas" is less about how he knows he shouldn't have had this secret romance and more about how this romance is now only a long-ago memory. That suspicion might grow as the speaker closes his tale out with these lines:

> How sad and bad and mad it was—
> But then, how it was sweet!

Not one word the speaker has said so far suggests that he truly feels anything was "sad and bad and mad" about this romance. His intense internal rhyme and polysyndeton—not just "sad, bad, and mad," but "sad **and** bad **and** mad"!—might even make him sound a touch mocking here. Sure, he *knows* he shouldn't have had a clandestine relationship with a girl whose parents hated him. Yet the only really "sad" thing here seems to be that this sweet June romance is so long ago and far away now.

SYMBOLS

GOING UPHILL

Whenever the speaker sees his girlfriend, he has to scramble uphill to do it: she waits for him in the attic of the tallest house at the top of a hilly street. All that elevation symbolizes the social distance between the couple. The girlfriend's snobby family, who call their house "The Lodge" and keep a suspicious eye out for no-good boyfriends, see themselves as *above* the speaker (and probably most people on their street, too).

The girlfriend herself has no such scruples: she's eager to creep *down* the stairs and out into the street to meet the speaker by the "rose-wreathed gate." In other words, the two meet in the middle, on level ground: their summer romance flattens out their class difference.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-11:** "That lane sloped, much as the bottles do, / From a house you could descry / O'er the garden-wall;"
- **Line 16:** "Is the house o'ertopping all."
- **Line 17:** "At a terrace, somewhere near the stopper,"
- **Lines 30-33:** "As she left the attic, there, / By the rim of the bottle labelled "Ether," / And stole from stair to stair, / And stood by the rose-wreathed gate."

POETIC DEVICES

IMAGERY

The speaker's imagery gives readers a simultaneous picture of his cluttered sickroom and his childhood hometown.

As the poem begins, the speaker is lying on his deathbed, irritated by a priest "buzzing" in his ears—an image that suggests the priest is coming in close to whisper a few last sober questions to this sick man. It seems to take the speaker a moment to figure out exactly what's going on. Both his ears and his eyes are fuddled by his illness; he can no longer even tell if his curtains are "blue / Or green to a healthy eye."

Even as his capacity to see the world around him fades, he has a keen vision of his past. That vague bluish greenish curtain becomes a clear June sky, "blue above lane and wall," when he starts remembering the street where his secret girlfriend lived. The speaker's memories of the June when his girlfriend used to sneak out and meet him involve a clear map of *exactly* how he used to get to her house, "creeping very close" to a convenient concealing wall and meeting her under a picturesque "rose-wreathed gate."

As compared to his vague impression of his not-altogether-pleasant surroundings now, the speaker's images of his past feel simultaneously precise and rose-colored, tinted with his nostalgia for a sweet summertime romance.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "What is he buzzing in my ears?"
- **Line 9:** "That lane sloped, much as the bottles do,"
- **Lines 11-12:** "is the curtain blue / Or green to a healthy eye?"
- **Lines 13-14:** "the old June weather / Blue above lane and wall;"
- **Lines 26-27:** "by creeping very close, / With the good wall's help,"
- **Line 33:** "the rose-wreathed gate"

REPETITION

Repetitions lay some extra emphasis on the poem's poignant or dramatic moments.

A moment of anaphora, for instance, launches the speaker into the memories that will fill most of the poem:

> What I viewed there once, what I view again

This repetition brings the speaker's past into the present. His memories of a happy, clandestine June romance are more present to him than the sickroom around him now; he can "view" what he once "viewed" as plain as day.

As he drifts into his memories, he uses that sickroom as a kind

of miniature stage set on which to play out his past. A row of medicine bottles becomes the lane he used to sneak along to meet his girlfriend; the "farthest bottle labelled 'Ether'" becomes her family's elegant home. That "bottle labelled Ether" will return in line 31, the repetition reminding readers that the speaker is close to death, and probably suffering: ether is a potent anesthetic. Though the speaker seems more interested in past pleasure than present pain, this repetition gives this poem a poignant edge, stressing that the speaker's fond memories of this girl might be the last and best consolation he has.

Of course, he knows that by most of society's standards, his youthful romance (forbidden by his sweetheart's parents) was "sad and bad and mad." The polysyndeton there works alongside those punchy internal rhymes to suggest that the speaker isn't being altogether sincere as he condemns his young self: there's something a little hyperbolic about those forceful "and"s and those forceful rhymes.

That sense that the speaker isn't totally repentant is even clearer in the poem's closing moment of anaphora:

> How sad and bad and mad it was—
> But then, how it was sweet!

In these two similarly-structured phrases, sweetness gets the last word.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "What I viewed there once, what I view again"
- **Line 15:** "that farthest bottle labelled "Ether""
- **Line 23:** "Eyes in the house, two eyes except:"
- **Line 31:** "By the rim of the bottle labelled "Ether,""
- **Line 35:** "How sad and bad and mad it was—"
- **Line 36:** "how it was sweet!"

PUN

A neat little pun evokes the speaker's youthful satisfaction when his enemies—that is, his girlfriend's parents—fail to catch him.

The speaker recalls that his girlfriend's family was none too fond of him; if they spotted him when he snuck out to meet with their daughter, he would have been in big trouble. Luckily for him, a handy (and personified) "good wall" was there to "help." When he was in its shadow, it didn't matter how hard his enemies looked for him:

> [...] their eyes might strain
> And stretch themselves to Oes,
> Yet never catch her and me together,

In other words, "they could stretch their eyes so wide open that they looked like the letter O, and still not catch us."

That mention of the letter O introduces a pun on those "eyes," turning them into letter "I"s! This is a quick, clever, throwaway joke—but it neatly characterizes the speaker. He's just as pleased to get away with a swift pun as he is to get away with an unseen kiss or two under the "rose-wreathed gate": his language is as brisk, neat, and limber as his sneaking.

This pun thus helps to support the poem's general tone of mingled nostalgia and mischief. This speaker enjoyed doing something slightly naughty then, and he enjoys talking about his past naughtiness now.

Where Pun appears in the poem:

- **Lines 27-28:** "their eyes might strain / And stretch themselves to Oes"

SYNECDOCHE

A moment of synecdoche paints a picture of the snobby, suspicious, conventional world the young speaker and his sweetheart are up against.

When the speaker remembers sneaking over to his girlfriend's house, he gives a lot of details about how he stayed out of sight, "creeping very close" to a convenient sheltering wall and waving to his girlfriend as she waited in an attic window. All that subterfuge was necessary because her house was full of watchful "eyes."

These eyes are a synecdoche for their disapproving owners: the girl's parents, certainly, and perhaps other members of the household, like suspicious siblings or menacing housekeepers. The idea of all these vigilant figures also helps to give an idea of the time period: this is clearly Browning's own 19th century, when young ladies were most certainly not meant to have secret boyfriends!

By reducing the watchers in the house to their eyes, the speaker suggests that these aren't just mistrustful people jealously guarding the young lady, but people who are concerned above all with how things *look*. With their fancy house (pretentiously dubbed "The Lodge") and their disapproval of "lounger[s]" like the speaker, these living eyeballs seem snobbish, mean, and rather shallow. They have all the eyes; the speaker and his girlfriend have all the heart.

The speaker's challenge, then, is to evade those shallow eyes while meeting the only "two eyes" that matter to him: his girlfriend's.

Where Synecdoche appears in the poem:

- **Lines 21-23:** "you crept / Close by the side, to dodge / Eyes in the house, two eyes except"

ALLUSION

The poem's allusions help to set the stage for the speaker's tale, conjuring up a sternly moral Victorian world.

The priest who comes to hear the speaker's last confession in the first stanza asks him a conventional question: does the speaker "view the world as a vale of tears?" (In other words: does he see the world as a place of trials and sufferings?) That language is borrowed from an ancient Christian hymn, "Salve Regina," in which humanity asks for the Virgin Mary to relieve their suffering in this "valley of tears." The implication is that the world is a pretty tough place, one that most people might be relieved to leave behind for the joys of heaven. This speaker, however, seems pretty comfortable in this world: he firmly tells the priest that he's found more pleasure than tears here.

That might seem particularly remarkable in light of the fact that this speaker is dying—and by all indications, dying in pain. Among the medicine bottles on his table, the biggest is the one full of ether (a powerful anesthetic). All that painkiller suggests that the speaker is suffering, but he refuses to let his pain reshape his opinions of life or take away the bliss of his remembered romance.

Ether also helps to set the scene. When Browning wrote this poem, ether (and anesthesia in general) was a relatively newfangled technology; because it can be dangerous, it's rarely used now. The ether bottles make it clear that this poem takes place in Browning's own world.

So does a specific brand of class snobbery. The girlfriend's parents don't just dislike the speaker because it's "improper" that he should hang around their daughter. They also seem to dislike him because he's a "lounger," a layabout, and they're the suburban upper crust. When the speaker remembers that "they styled their house 'The Lodge,'" he's hinting at a particular kind of snobbishness: this family, who live in the fanciest house in the street, have also given their house a name that sets it apart from the *rest* of the street. They're not just Number 27, no: they're *The Lodge*.

As the speaker remembers, though, neither God nor man could keep him and his girlfriend apart! The poem's allusions to Victorian convention all suggest that love easily overthrows whatever obstacles you put in its way.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "Do I view the world as a vale of tears?""
- **Line 15:** "And that farthest bottle labelled "Ether""
- **Line 24:** "They styled their house "The Lodge.""

VOCABULARY

Reverend (Line 4) - Honored, holy.

Physic bottles (Line 6) - Bottles of medicine.

Descry (Line 10) - Catch a glimpse of.

O'er (Line 11) - A contraction of "over."

Ether (Line 15, Line 31) - A strong anesthetic (still a fairly newfangled technology when Browning wrote this poem!).

O'ertopping (Line 16) - Rising over the tops of. In other words, this house was at the very top of the hill, higher than any other.

Terrace (Line 17) - An open balcony (here, one up at the top of the house near the attic, where the girlfriend can watch for the speaker unseen!).

Styled (Line 24) - Officially titled. (There are connotations of snobbishness here: it's a rather haughty move to give your suburban house a fancy name of its own.)

Stretch themselves to Oes (Line 28) - In other words, the girlfriend's parents might look for the sneaky speaker so hard that their eyes became as round as the letter O.

Stole (Line 32) - Crept, sneaked, tiptoed.

Mad (Line 35) - In the sense of "crazy," not "angry."

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Confessions" is one of Browning's trademark dramatic monologues: poems spoken in the voice of a particular character. This speaker, a dying man confessing the story of his young love to a priest, tells his tale over the course of nine jaunty quatrains (or four-line stanzas).

This deathbed confession sounds more cheerful than contrite. The poem's bouncy accentual meter and singsong ABAB rhyme scheme make it clear that the speaker doesn't feel too remorseful about how he and his beloved "used to meet" in spite of her parents' disapproval. He's relishing these memories even as he makes his last confession to the (perhaps rather reproachful) priest.

METER

"Confessions" is written in accentual meter. That means that the lines don't stick to a single kind of metrical foot (like iambs or trochees), but they do use a regular number of stresses. Here, the speaker alternates between lines with four stressed beats and lines with three stressed beats, as in the first stanza:

> What is he buzzing in my ears?
> "Now that I come to die,
> Do I view the world as a vale of tears?"
> Ah, reverend sir, not I!

This flexible meter helps the speaker's voice to sound light, natural, and jaunty. He's not sticking to a strict, elegant form;

rather, he's telling a tale he knows by heart, perhaps getting some naughty fun out of shocking the priest he's "confessing" to. The bouncy, propulsive rhythm suggests he's getting caught up in his fond memories, carried happily away into the past.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem's rhyme scheme runs like this in each stanza:

ABAB

This singsong pattern makes the speaker's deathbed confession sound awfully cheerful. He might be telling an "improper" tale of illicit love to a scandalized priest, but he clearly doesn't feel much remorse: the simple sweetness of his rhymes reflects the simple sweetness of his memories.

One of the poem's most distinctive rhyme moments doesn't come from its end rhymes, but a run of internal rhymes in the poem's final stanza:

How **sad** and **bad** and **mad** it was—

All those short, flat rhymes in a row sound a tiny bit silly, a tiny bit mocking: the speaker clearly finds his youthful romance's "sweet[ness]" far more lasting and important than its sadness, badness, and madness.

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is an elderly man lying on his deathbed—a sweet old fellow who nonetheless seems to enjoy shocking the priest who comes to visit him. The speaker might know that, in some sense, his youthful relationship was "sad and mad and bad" in the eyes of the world, but to him, its remembered delights outweigh any worries about propriety or sin.

Readers might be tempted to see a little of Browning himself in this character. Like the speaker, Browning enjoyed a forbidden love affair, though his was a serious and lasting one: he eloped to Italy with his wife, fellow poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning, after her father forbade the couple to marry. Perhaps in a nostalgic mood himself, he published this poem three years after his wife's death.

SETTING

The poem takes place in the speaker's sickroom, where he lies dying. Through his eyes, readers see this cluttered room of "physic bottles" transformed into the suburban street he grew up on, the place where he and a girl-next-door enjoyed a secret summer romance.

The speaker's impressions of that street are a lot clearer than his impressions of his bedroom. He's not sure whether his curtains would look "blue / Or green to a healthy eye," and he only sometimes remembers that the "bottle labelled 'Ether'" is indeed a medicine bottle, not his girlfriend's elegant family home.

He remembers *very* clearly, however, the geography of the street where his girlfriend lived—and the classism that tried to keep the two of them apart. The girl's family, he notes, "styled their house 'The Lodge," pretentiously giving their home its own name, and felt a "lounger" like him had no right to come anywhere near their daughter. To his delight, that didn't stop her from sneaking out to meet him!

The poem's setting suggests that memory—and especially happy memory—can often feel more real, more alive, and more compelling than the present.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Robert Browning (1812-1889) was a great Victorian writer—and one quite unlike those around him. Considered a minor poet for most of his early career, Browning became famous toward the end of his life for his wild dramatic monologues: theatrical poems spoken in the voices of characters ranging from murderous Italian dukes to good-hearted 16th-century soldiers. This poem's nostalgic, cheerfully naughty speaker (who first appeared in Browning's 1864 collection *Dramatis Personae*) is one of the sweeter figures in a gallery of scoundrels.

Many of Browning's contemporaries didn't quite know what to do with his poetry, which—with its experimental rhythms and sometimes earthy language—rarely conformed to the elegant standards of his time. Many suggested that he'd make a better novelist than a poet. Even Oscar Wilde, a great Browning enthusiast, couldn't resist quipping that "[George] Meredith is a prose Browning, and so is Browning." The Modernist poets of the early 20th century, though, admired Browning's poetry for the very strangeness and narrative vigor that put so many of the Victorians off.

Browning's greatest influence was, without question, his beloved wife, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, whose poetry he deeply admired. This literary duo critiqued and championed each other's work for 14 happy years of marriage. But like many Victorian writers, Browning also followed in the lyrical and imaginative footsteps of the earlier Romantic poets. As a young man, he particularly respected Shelley as both a poet and a radical political thinker.

While Browning was ahead of his time in many ways, more and more writers and thinkers learned to admire and appreciate his work as the 19th century rolled into its final years. His reputation has only grown since his death.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

This nostalgic speaker's memories of a forbidden love affair may well draw on Browning's own experiences. Browning was a deeply romantic man, and he lived out one of literature's most touching love stories.

In 1845, Browning paid his first visit to a rising star in the literary world: Elizabeth Barrett. Unusually for a woman writer of the time, Barrett had become wildly famous; Browning was only one of many readers to be moved by her soulful, elegant poetry. He wrote her a fan letter, and the two began a warm correspondence. Eventually, they fell deeply in love.

Barrett's tyrannical father was having none of it, however. Besides preferring to keep his talented daughter (and her earnings) to himself, he disapproved of Browning, who was several years younger than Barrett—unconventional in a Victorian marriage—and not yet a commercially successful writer himself. In order to defy Mr. Barrett, the couple had to elope; they left England for Italy in 1846. Outraged, Elizabeth's father disinherited her.

The newlywed Brownings, undaunted, set up house in Florence, where they would live happily for over a decade before Elizabeth fell ill. She died in Robert's arms at the age of only 55.

Browning would publish this poem three years after her death—perhaps in much the same nostalgic (and defiant) frame of mind as his speaker.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Aloud — Listen to a reading of the poem. (https://youtu.be/9u8fCPeixLk)
- A Brief Biography — Visit the Poetry Foundation's website to learn more about Browning's life and work. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/robert-browning)
- Browning's Legacy — Learn how Browning's work finally rose to acclaim at the end of his life (and enjoy novelist Henry James's witty mock-epitaph for him). (https://www.bl.uk/learning/langlit/poetryperformance/browning/josephinehart/aboutbrowning.html)
- Browning's Influence — Read an appreciation of Browning that discusses what he means to writers today. (https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/may/06/browning-poetry-bicentenary-dickens)
- Portraits of the Brownings — Visit the National Portrait Gallery's collection of Browning portraiture for a glimpse of the great (and forbidden!) love affair that may have inspired this poem: Browning's relationship with his beloved wife, fellow poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning. (https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/person/mp00603/robert-browning)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ROBERT BROWNING POEMS

- Home-Thoughts, from Abroad
- How they Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix
- Life in a Love
- Love in a Life
- Meeting at Night
- My Last Duchess
- Porphyria's Lover
- The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church
- The Laboratory
- The Last Ride Together
- The Lost Leader
- The Patriot

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Nelson, Kristin. "*Confessions.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 21 Jul 2022. Web. 27 Jul 2022.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Nelson, Kristin. "*Confessions.*" LitCharts LLC, July 21, 2022. Retrieved July 27, 2022. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/robert-browning/confessions.