Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister

POEM TEXT

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

SUMMARY

Argh!—there you go, my hated enemy! Yeah, go right ahead and

water your lousy flowers. If hatred could kill people, Brother Lawrence, good God, mine would surely kill you. Oh, what's that, your ornamental shrub needs a trim? Ooh, no, you'd better take care of that rosebush first! Aw, does its pot need a good watering? May *you* shrivel up in the fires of Hell!

At dinner, we sit next to each other—yes, yes, *hello*, *cheers*. I have to listen to all your brilliant observations about the weather and the seasons: *Oh, the cork trees aren't doing well; I don't think we're going to get any oak galls; how do you say "parsley" in Latin*? Well, how do you say "hogface" in Greek?

Oh yes, you have to have your plate polished and carefully stowed away on your own private shelf, along with a brand-new spoon and a private cup that you wash like it's a communion chalice before it's fit to touch *your* precious lips—a goblet marked "L" for "Lawrence." (Hee hee! One of his lilies just broke!)

Brother Lawrence is such a *saint*, isn't he? When the lovely Dolores and Sanchicha hang out on the river bank outside the convent telling stories and washing their hair—their beautiful shining black hair, thick as a horse's mane—don't I see Brother Lawrence's dull eyes glowing as lustfully as a pirate's? (Or, well, I would, anyway, if he didn't hide his lust so well!)

When he's done eating dinner, he never ever leave his knife and fork crossed on his plate, so far as I recall—the way *I* do, in honor of Jesus. I also always remember to praise the Holy Trinity by drinking my orange juice in three symbolic sips, thus basically spitting in the eye of those who believe in the Arian heresy that denies Christ's divinity; Brother Lawrence just gulps it down all at once!

Oh, how *nice*, he's going to give us a treat when his melons have ripened. The Abbot will have a melon all to himself, and the rest of us will get a slice. How are those melon vines doing, Brother? None reproducing? Not even one little fruit growing? How *odd*, considering how much trouble I've taken to kill all the flowers when no one is looking!

There's a fantastic Bible verse in Paul's letter to the Galatians: it lists 29 different ways you can be damned, one sure to get you if another doesn't. What if I were to trip Brother Lawrence up with this passage when he lies on his deathbed, just when he's sure he's on his way to heaven, and send him reeling into Hell for being a heretical Manichean?

Ooh, or I could use my nasty old book of French erotica, with its cheap paper and cruddy print. If you take the merest peek at it, you'll find yourself in the Devil's snares. What if I happened to dog-ear the particularly juicy page 16 and hide it in the sieve he uses to gather plums?

Or there's always a direct appeal to Satan! I could offer my soul to him, but leave a cunning loophole in the contract, so that he wouldn't realize I could get out of the deal until he'd already destroyed that rose-acacia that Brother Lawrence is so very proud of...(Maybe I'll summon Satan with some magic words right now.) *Hy, Zy, Hine*—oh, shh, the bells for evening prayers are ringing! *Full of Grace, hail, Virgin!*—argh, you dirty pig!

THEMES

HATRED, HYPOCRISY, AND SELF-LOATHING

The speaker of Robert Browning's poem, a friar in a Spanish monastery, takes a violent dislike to one of his religious brothers. Brother Lawrence, he insists, is a lustful, selfish, smug creep who deserves to go straight to Hell. However, as in many of Browning's dramatic monologues, the speaker is only telling on himself: in reality, all his accusations reflect his own failings and sins. The speaker's obsessive hatred for Brother Lawrence, the poem suggests, is a hypocritical projection of his own envy and self-disgust.

Everything that readers see of Brother Lawrence suggests he's a perfectly nice guy, a gentle gardener who likes to talk about his plants and share his melon crop with the community. In the speaker's eyes, though, Lawrence is a despicable sinner who eyes the local ladies as lustfully as a "Barbary corsair" (that is, one of a notorious band of pirates).

Yet it seems that Brother Lawrence's lust is all in the speaker's imagination. He just *knows* he'd see a naughty "glow" in his rival's eyes, he says, if only Lawrence would ever "let it show!"—the implication being that Lawrence never does. What's more, all of the speaker's furious accusations make it clear that *he's* actually the one who's ogling those ladies. He's the one lingering long enough to hear "Brown Dolores" and "Sanchicha" telling stories to each other, and he knows exactly the "blue-black, lustrous" thickness of their hair. In accusing Brother Lawrence, the speaker ironically reveals his own less-than-pious feelings.

In fact, all of the speaker's schemes against Brother Lawrence reveal his own pettiness and sinfulness. When he's not meanly spoiling things in Lawrence's garden, the speaker busily plots his rival's downfall, going so far as to imagine that he might somehow make a deal with the devil to ensure that Lawrence suffers. There's an obvious irony there—and in the speaker's idea that he might trick Lawrence into eternal damnation by slipping him a page from his own contraband supply of racy "French novel[s]." Everything the speaker imagines doing to Lawrence, in other words, involves infecting this apparently clean-living and genial man with the speaker's own grubby sins.

Perhaps, the poem hints, the speaker hates Brother Lawrence so very much because Brother Lawrence really isn't any of the nasty things the speaker is: lustful, prissy, cruel. The speaker's loathing for Brother Lawrence thus emerges from hypocritical self-deceit. There's nothing so hateful as your own sins, nothing

so infuriating as someone who doesn't seem to possess any of them, and nothing so unappetizing as facing the fact that you're the one in the wrong.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-72

FALSE PIETY AND EMPTY RELIGIOUS RITUAL

The speaker of "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister" has many complaints about how his hated enemy Brother Lawrence practices their shared religion. By all indications, though, the speaker doesn't have much of a grasp of what that religion actually means. Obsessed with correctness and fiddly mannerisms, he seems to have missed the idea that Christianity might be supposed to teach faith, hope, and love rather than rituals and routines. In this poem, shallow displays of piety are a smokescreen for hypocrisy and sin, and dogmatic adherence to religious practices says nothing about what kind of a person you are.

The speaker prides himself on his correct display of Christian manners. Unlike his hated enemy Brother Lawrence, he brags, he always remembers to leave his fork and knife in the shape of the cross "in Jesu's praise," and to drink his orange juice in "three sips" in honor of the Holy Trinity. The very pettiness of these rituals—which aren't even part of formal Christian practice, just folk tradition—suggests that the speaker is hung up on the idea that religious faith is mostly about fussy little mannerisms.

Similarly, he's obsessed with nitpicky points of doctrine. In one of his many revenge fantasies, he plots to trip Brother Lawrence up with a difficult "text in Galatians" (that is, a Bible reading) on Lawrence's deathbed. If Lawrence reads the complicated verse the wrong way, it could be interpreted as heretical; of course, the speaker concludes, Lawrence would get sent straight to Hell for such a slip. To this speaker, religious faith (and the fate of your very soul) is more about narrow, rigid *correctness* than about ethics, or about trust in a loving God, for that matter.

Whatever faith means to the speaker, it's certainly got nothing to do with being a good person. He spends most of his time playing mean tricks on Brother Lawrence (for instance, pinching off the flowers on Lawrence's beloved melon plants), daydreaming about how he might get him sent to Hell, and lusting after the ladies washing their hair at the water trough out front. His religious belief, such as it is, hasn't given him any self-awareness, compassion, virtue, or capacity for reflection.

Treating religious faith mostly as a set of rituals and booby traps, the hypocritical speaker reveals the limits of both his character and his piety, coming across as nothing more than a nasty child. An obsession with the *forms* of religion, the poem hints, can be a handy cover for a stunted, spiteful, selfish, and deeply irreligious attitude.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 33-40
- Lines 49-56
- Lines 57-72

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-8

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

"Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister" begins with one of the most famous moments of onomatopoeia in English poetry: a guttural "Gr-r-r." This growl (and Browning's fondness for onomatopoeia in general) displeased some Victorian literary types, who saw such noise-making as brutish and unpoetic. That, of course, is exactly the point here. By starting this poem with a growl, Browning suggests that his speaker—a monk in a Spanish monastery—is more a beast than a holy man.

The speaker's outburst is directed at one "Brother Lawrence," a fellow monk he watches from the shadow of the cloister (a sheltered walkway surrounding the garden at the heart of the monastery). Brother Lawrence doesn't seem to be doing anything so very objectionable: he's tending flowers, taking gentle care of his roses and myrtles. But the speaker registers his every move with venomous sarcasm:

> What? your myrtle-bush wants trimming?
> Oh, that rose has prior claims—
> Needs its leaden vase filled brimming?
> Hell dry you up with its flames!

The speaker, these lines suggest, hates every single thing Brother Lawrence does; his most innocuous action is reason enough for the speaker to damn him. This disproportionate hatred tells readers a lot more about the speaker than it tells them about Brother Lawrence. As is so often the case in Robert Browning's dramatic monologues, the speaker here will unwittingly tell on himself, revealing his own pettiness, nastiness, and self-deception with every word he says.

The poem's percussive trochaic tetrameter—that is, lines of

four trochees, metrical feet with a DUM-da rhythm—feels as insistent as the speaker's hatred. Listen to the rhythm of the stanza's last two lines:

> Needs its | lead en | vase filled | brimming?
> Hell dry | you up | with its | flames!

Notice how stresses shape line 8's meaning as well as its rhythm. When the speaker mutters "Hell dry | you up | with its | flames," the trochaic meter stresses the word "you," connecting the speaker's curse to the roses that Brother Lawrence is so carefully watering: in essence, he's saying *May* you *be as shriveled and burnt in Hell as your roses are well-watered on earth*.

LINES 9-16

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

The poem's first lines might have left readers wondering what on earth Brother Lawrence could have done to inspire such hatred in the speaker. When readers first get a glimpse of him, he's doing nothing worse than gardening.

As it turns out, all that gardening is part of the speaker's problem. Every single day, the speaker complains, he has to sit next to Brother Lawrence at dinner and listen to him describe how things are going out there. Brother Lawrence is a bottomless well of:

> Wise talk of the kind of weather,
> Sort of season, time of year:

Not just the speaker's sarcasm about that "wise talk," but the very shape of these lines suggests that Brother Lawrence's conversation is not exactly varied: the speaker's echoing parallelism (highlighted above) stresses the idea that Brother Lawrence only talks about one thing.

Here, like a bratty teenager, the speaker begins to mock Brother Lawrence by quoting him—perhaps, readers might imagine, doing a cruel imitation of his voice as he worries about his inadequate "cork crop" and the failure of his "oak-galls."

These lines suggest that Brother Lawrence's gardening isn't purely decorative. If he's growing cork trees (from which corks are made) and harvesting oak galls (used in tanning leather and brewing ink), he's in charge of practical cash crops that might bring the monastery some income. He might be a little dull, but he's helpful, too.

The speaker isn't moved by this helpfulness. Instead, he sneers at Brother Lawrence's intellectual limitations. When Brother Lawrence asks, "*What's the Latin name for 'parsley'?*" he reveals that he's perhaps not the most scholarly of men: an educated Catholic monk should certainly know his Latin, and a keen gardener, in particular, should know his Latin plant names.

These lines, then, suggest that Brother Lawrence is a humble, down-to-earth guy—not the sharpest tool in the shed, perhaps, and not the most sparkling conversationalist, but an enthusiastic, pragmatic, helpful man who loves his garden. The portrait the speaker unconsciously paints of *himself*, meanwhile, isn't flattering. When he mutters to himself "What's the Greek name for 'Swine's Snout'?" in response to Brother Lawrence's innocent questions about Latin names, he comes across as both snobbish and childishly mean.

At this point in the poem, readers might still have a little sympathy for the speaker. After all, these men are monks: they live in the same enclosed community, and they see each other every day. Minor annoyance with a slightly boring acquaintance might well fester into rage if you just couldn't get away from the guy.

On the other hand, this speaker's fuming doesn't seem very, well, monkish. His hatred for Brother Lawrence is both disproportionate and uncontrolled. The love, patience, and mercy his religion should supposedly have taught him really haven't stuck.

LINES 17-24

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

The speaker has already spent two stanzas stewing over his outsized and unreflective hatred for Brother Lawrence. As it turns out, he was just building up steam. Now, he turns his ire on Brother Lawrence's dining habits.

Imagine his long onomatopoeic "Whew!" at the start of his complaints as a long, insulting whistle—an "*Oooh*, aren't *we* the fancy one." That use of the sarcastic collective "we" is meant as a taunt, too.

Brother Lawrence, the speaker complains, thinks an awful lot of himself: you can see it in the way he takes care of his precious dishes, "burnish[ing]" (or highly polishing) his plate and keeping a personal spoon and cup.

Here again the speaker's rage is all out of proportion with Brother Lawrence's behavior. All he's really saying is that Brother Lawrence takes good care of his humble possessions.

When he whines that Brother Lawrence washes his cup "like something sacrificial" before it's "fit" for him to drink from it, he's finding a way to take umbrage with the simple fact that Brother Lawrence does his dishes carefully.

Alongside unmonkish spite, these lines reveal some unmonkish envy. The speaker notes that Brother Lawrence has his own cup, "marked with L." to show it's his. Even so small a status symbol as a personal cup burns the speaker up inside.

More subtly and more complicatedly, the simile of the goblet "rinsed like something sacrificial"—that is, as if it's a communion chalice, the ceremonial cup used to serve wine at Mass—might suggest that the speaker envies a genuine *holiness* in Brother Lawrence, who treats all the humble things around him (his dishes, his plants) with reverence and care.

As the stanza ends, Brother Lawrence suffers a small gardening mishap, breaking the stem of a lily. This moment reminds readers that the speaker is obsessively thinking back on all these aggravating dinnertime scenes while he watches Brother Lawrence tending his garden. As that prized "lily snaps," the speaker giggles spitefully at Brother Lawrence's misfortune, his thin "He-he!" making him sound like a mean child.

LINES 25-32

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

The speaker isn't just salty because Brother Lawrence bores him and has his own private goblet. He's also enraged because other people think Brother Lawrence is saintly.

"*Saint*, forsooth!" the speaker spits—that is, *Saint, indeed!* His italics (indicating that he's quoting someone) suggest he's heard whispers that Brother Lawrence is very holy. But he's not impressed. He thinks he's got plenty of evidence that Brother Lawrence is no saint, and he's prepared to show his receipts.

Brother Lawrence, he declares, is no chaste and virtuous monk, but a lustful old goat who's always staring at the ladies who wash their hair at a water tank outside the monastery. Once again, though, what the speaker says doesn't mean what he thinks it means. Listen to his imagery in his description of those ladies:

> [...] brown Dolores
> Squats outside the Convent bank
> With Sanchicha, telling stories,
> Steeping tresses in the tank,
> Blue-black, lustrous, thick like horsehairs,

The speaker himself, these vivid lines show, has a suspiciously exact memory of what goes on at that water tank. He's stared long and hard at Dolores, Sanchicha, and their abundant dark hair. The asyndeton of "blue-black, lustrous, thick like horsehairs" suggest he's taking lascivious pleasure in lingering over each and every one of those adjectives.

He damns himself even more thoroughly with his closing words:

> —Can't I see his dead eye glow,
> Bright as 'twere a Barbary corsair's?
> (That is, if he'd let it show!)

In other words, he accuses Brother Lawrence of staring at these ladies as lustfully as a "Barbary corsair"—a ruthless pirate. But he can't quite claim that he's *seen* Brother Lawrence doing so; he just *knows* his rival is lusting after the ladies, even though he's forced to admit that Brother Lawrence never "let[s] it show."

It doesn't take a psychology degree to gather that the speaker is projecting his *own* forbidden lusts onto Brother Lawrence here. He doesn't just hate his enemy for being boring, then, or envy him for being thought saintly. He despises him because he can't bear how much he despises *himself*. The real force of his fury comes from the fact that he knows he's a worse man and a worse monk than Brother Lawrence is.

That might sound pretty grim, but the poem's tone here feels more wickedly funny than anything. Note, for example, Browning's gleefully inventive rhyme between "horsehairs" and "corsair's," a witty surprise that you just have to chuckle at.

While this poem is a dark tale of self-deception and self-hatred, it's also a satirical comedy poking fun at the unholiness of so-called holy men—and perhaps at a general human reluctance to admit to one's own weakness, pettiness, and envy.

LINES 33-40

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

Already, the speaker has revealed that he's a spiteful, grubby-minded person whose loathing for Brother Lawrence is driven by his own self-hatred. Now he reveals another of his outstanding qualities: he's nitpicky, dogmatic, and obsessed with empty ritual.

If Brother Lawrence is such a *saint*, he goes on, then why does he never remember to set his knife and fork down "cross-wise," as the speaker always does, "in Jesu's praise"? Brother Lawrence, in other words, doesn't reverently arrange his cutlery in the sign of the Cross when he's eating. Nor does he drink his orange juice in "three sips" to symbolically honor the Holy Trinity and "frustrate" the Arian heresy—that is, the theory that Christ wasn't always part of the Trinity, but a later creation of God's. Instead, Lawrence thoughtlessly "drains his at one gulp."

This is obviously absurd. It simply doesn't *matter* how the speaker arranges his cutlery or sips his juice; these sniffy little rituals are meaningless on every level, not part of actual Christian practice, not revealing anything but the speaker's prissiness. The speaker's allusion to the Arian heresy suggests he's got a solid grasp of the doctrines of his religion—the letter of the law. But his awareness of basic Christian principle (and it is basic—the institutional Church rejected the Arian heresy way back in the year 325) doesn't mean he's a pious man in any way that matters. His complaints that Brother Lawrence doesn't perform these little rituals merely make him sound like a child.

These lines make a jab not just at this speaker, but at empty dogmatism in general. Rituals and scrupulously "correct" attention to doctrines, the poem suggests, have very little to do with a genuinely religious attitude.

Notice, too, that the speaker might be availing himself of some of Brother Lawrence's services to the community even as he decries his godless table manners. Where, after all, did that "watered orange pulp" come from if not Brother Lawrence's gardens?

LINES 41-48

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

The speaker recalls himself from his sniffy critiques of Brother Lawrence's table manners and looks back into the garden, where Brother Lawrence is attending to his melon patch. Now, the speaker reveals a whole new corner of his resentments:

> Oh, those melons? If he's able
> We're to have a feast! so nice!
> One goes to the Abbot's table,
> All of us get each a slice.

Here, he's not just annoyed at Brother Lawrence's generous eagerness to share the (literal) fruits of his labors, but at the fact that he himself won't get as much melon as the Abbot—the head of the monastery—will. These lines suggest that the speaker chafes at any suggestion he's not the most important and pious person in the world, any sign that someone is *above* him. This makes him a pretty bad fit for a life of monastic obedience and service.

Perhaps, though, it's easier for the speaker to hate Brother Lawrence—his equal in status, if not in goodness—than the Abbot. Taking against the guy who runs your monastery might prove dangerous. Hating an ordinary fellow monk, on the other hand, gives you plenty of room to maneuver.

So far, readers have only seen the speaker muttering to himself about how much he despises Brother Lawrence. Now, it becomes clear that he's acted on his hatred, too: he's been quietly "nipp[ing]" all the flowers off Brother Lawrence's melon vines "on the sly," making sure they'll never bear fruit.

Listen to the way these nasty, gleeful rhetorical questions paint a picture of the scene:

> How go on your flowers? None double?
> Not one fruit-sort can you spy?

This series of similar questions suggest that Brother Lawrence is looking, frowning, from one barren vine to another: every time he checks a new plant, the speaker says, *Oh dear me, nothing there either?* He's practically munching popcorn as he enjoys his rival's disappointment.

LINES 49-56

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

The speaker isn't content merely to take out his feelings on Brother Lawrence's melons. He wants to spoil not just his garden, but his afterlife. Here, his nitpicky dogmatism will come in handy: he knows just the "text in Galatians" (that is, the Bible verse from Paul's Letter to the Galatians) with which he can trip Brother Lawrence up and send his soul to Hell. That's a pretty speedy escalation from nipping the buds off melon vines.

The speaker's plot to damn his rival once again suggests that his perspective on his religion is at once childish and pettily legalistic. Critics have never agreed on precisely which "text in Galatians" the speaker alludes to, but the idea that Brother Lawrence might be made to "trip on it" and fall into one of "twenty-nine distinct damnations" might suggest either that:

- It's a tricky passage that, misinterpreted, might seem to say something heretical;
- Or that it lists so many possible damnations that there *must* be one the speaker can entrap Brother Lawrence with.

The speaker plays out the whole scheme in his mind. He'll wait until Brother Lawrence is "just a-dying," lying on his deathbed, "sure of heaven as sure can be." Then, he'll spring his trap, catching Brother Lawrence out with one of those twenty-nine damnations once it's too late for him to repent.

He imagines this metaphorical booby trap in violently physical terms. He'll:

> Spin him round and send him flying
> Off to hell, a Manichee [...]

In other words, he'll make Brother Lawrence stumble into Manichaeism, a religion that arose alongside Christianity and posited that equal forces of good and evil eternally duked it out for control of the universe. Christianity, by contrast, declares that there's a single, omnipotent, loving God. Perhaps this vision lends some weight to the "misreading" interpretation. Brother Lawrence might accidentally sound like a "Manichee" if he misspoke the "text in Galatians," which—considering he's not the most adept scholar—he might.

The speaker's sadistic vision of the deathbed scene suggests, yet again, that he has only the narrowest, pettiest, most legalistic vision of his religion. The kind of God who'd damn Brother Lawrence for stumbling over a Bible verse on his deathbed would be, not a loving and forgiving one, but a mean-spirited bean-counter—in other words, a fellow not unlike the speaker himself.

LINES 57-64

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

If the speaker's plan to entrap Brother Lawrence into a deathbed heresy doesn't work, he's got another idea lined up. He just so happens to have a "scrofulous French novel"—that is, the kind of book a celibate monk really shouldn't have—that he thinks he could slip Brother Lawrence a page of. "Simply glance at it," he gloats, and you'll find yourself writhing in "Belial's gripe," the grips of the Devil himself. *Ooh la la.*

The irony here is obvious. The *speaker* is the one with this cheap and sordid volume squirreled away somewhere in his monastic cell, and he knows it well enough to be aware that the "woeful sixteenth print" (page 16, that is) is where the really juicy stuff happens. But he doesn't seem concerned that *he* will go to Hell for owning this contraband French erotica, though goodness knows he's spent plenty of time with it.

His plot to get this book under Lawrence's nose has a kind of goofy child-logic to it. What he'll do, he figures, is open one of the lidded sieves that Brother Lawrence uses to "gather his greengages" (his plums, that is) and hide the book in there, open, of course, to the "woeful" page 16. Surprise!

Readers are left shaking their heads over both the speaker's logical inconsistencies and his increasingly ludicrous plans. Once again, he seems to see God as a sort of stern and petty headmaster, a guy who will damn Brother Lawrence for accidentally seeing a page of a dirty book—but who won't, for some reason, condemn the speaker for owning and slavering over the said book. The speaker must suppose that God is on his side.

Notice the way the alliteration in this passage evokes the speaker's beastliness. Guttural /g/ sounds thread all through the stanza—"grey," "glance," "grovel," "gripe," "gathers his greengages." The speaker seems almost to be grunting like a pig as he describes both his sexy book and his dastardly plot.

The imagery of the novel itself, with its "grey paper" and "blunt type," also gives readers a surprising hint at when this poem takes place. So far, the poem could be set any time since Catholic monasteries have existed. But a cheap printed "French novel" dates the poem to what would have been, for Browning, the relatively recent past: the speaker wouldn't have had access to such a thing before the 18th century at the earliest.

This story, then, isn't just a quaint tale of naughty monks in the olden days. It's a contemporary commentary on enduring human problems: empty dogmatism, self-deception, and plain old thoughtless cruelty.

LINES 65-72

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

As the final stanza begins, readers have come to know the speaker pretty well: he's a mean, petty, foolish, self-righteous, self-deceiving, and irreligious sinner ironically hidden under a monk's hood. By now, there's not much you'd put past him. Still,

his final big idea here comes as a darkly funny surprise. "Or, there's Satan!" he says brightly. Yes, one can always turn to Satan for help! Why didn't he think of that earlier?

His new plan is that he might sell his *own* soul to Satan, but leave a "flaw in the indenture"—a loophole in his contract. That way, he can wriggle out of his damnation as soon as Satan has done what he wants. And what he wants, apparently, is not for Satan to drag Brother Lawrence to Hell or otherwise torment him. Instead, he merely wants Satan to wither Brother Lawrence's prize "rose-acacia." *That'll* show him.

Before readers can laugh too long at the disproportionate dangers and results of this final harebrained scheme, Browning introduces words that scholars have bickered about since this poem was published: "*Hy, Zy, Hine.*" Nobody is certain what these nonsense words might mean. Two of the more plausible explanations:

- They might be the first words of a magic spell, the speaker's attempt to summon Satan.
- Or, considering they're italicized like the speaker's other quotations, they might be more mockery of Brother Lawrence. Maybe, for instance, the poor gardening monk is trying to identify a plant in his bad Latin.

Whatever's going on here, the bell for "Vespers"—evening prayer—interrupts it. The poem ends on *another* italicized mystery: a garbled prayer, half a Hail Mary (the *plena gratia* part, which means "full of grace") and half a hymn of praise (*Ave Virgo*, "hail, Virgin"):

- Is the speaker mixing up his own prayers because he's still brooding on his hatred for Brother Lawrence (or because the Devil is already in him, muddling the sacred words)?
- Or is this Brother Lawrence speaking again, revealing the limits of his language skills once more?

Whatever the answer, the praying doesn't go on for long. The speaker ends his rant with the same onomatopoeia he began with: "Gr-r-r—you swine!" That circular repetition closes the poem into a loop, making the speaker's mind feel as claustrophobic as the cloister. (Note that "claustrophobia" and "cloister" share the same Latin root!) The speaker is trapped both in this monastery—clearly the least suitable place in the world for him—and in his own malice.

Perhaps the mysteries of these last few lines get at the darker side of this blackly comic poem. Throughout, the speaker has projected his own sins onto gentle, generous Brother Lawrence. The fact that it's hard to tell who's saying what here at the end might remind readers that the speaker's most dangerous flaw is his mixture of self-hatred and self-deception—his inability to face himself, his insistence on handing off his own sins to innocent bystanders. When he mockingly refers to Brother Lawrence as "we," he's closer to the truth than he knows.

SYMBOLS

BROTHER LAWRENCE'S GARDEN

Just about every flower Brother Lawrence grows has a symbolic meaning. Roses represent love, lilies purity (and often the Virgin Mary herself): this is a garden of virtues, not just delightful sights and smells. Brother Lawrence's affectionate, diligent care for his plants suggests that, while he's not necessarily the sharpest tool in the shed, he might be truly saintly, tenderly cultivating both the world around him and his inner life.

For that matter, readers might see something of no lesser garden than Eden itself in Brother Lawrence's cloister. This is a peaceful, fruitful paradise haunted by a dangerous serpent: the lurking speaker.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Water your damned flowerpots, do!"
- **Lines 5-7:** "What? your myrtle-bush wants trimming? / Oh, that rose has prior claims— / Needs its leaden vase filled brimming?"
- **Line 63:** "When he gathers his greengages,"
- **Lines 69-70:** "that rose-acacia / We're so proud of!"

POETIC DEVICES

ONOMATOPOEIA

Victorian poems (and poems in general, really) don't often start with growls. The speaker's first onomatopoeic outburst—"G-r-r-r"—thus feels startling, daring, and funny, flinging the reader straight into the speaker's world of petty grudges and gritted teeth. With three whole /r/s, this first "Gr-r-r" doesn't just set the poem's tone, but its pace, inviting readers to draw the sound out. The speaker, lurking in the shadows of the cloister, has little to do but savor his rage; his long growl suggests he might even perversely relish his hatred for his fellow monk.

Other moments of onomatopoeia help to evoke the speaker's thin, whining voice. When he complains about Brother Lawrence's fastidious dish-washing, for instance, he begins with a "Whew!"—a sound readers might imagine in the sarcastically musical tone one would use to say, *Oooh, aren't* we *fancy*. Not long afterward, when Brother Lawrence has a minor gardening mishap, the speaker laughs at him: "He-he! There his lily snaps!" That "he-he" evokes a high-pitched giggle, a creepy

little sound from a creepy little man.

The speaker's growl reappears at the end of the poem, when he interrupts his halfhearted prayers to the Virgin Mary with a muttered curse: "Gr-r-r—you swine!" There's something ironic about a man who spends so much time grunting and growling calling someone *else* a "swine." Throughout the poem, the speaker's involuntary noises suggest he's a little man ruled by his own brutish lusts and rages.

Where Onomatopoeia appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Gr-r-r"
- **Line 17:** "Whew!"
- **Line 24:** "He-he!"
- **Line 72:** "Gr-r-r"

IRONY

Like many of Browning's dramatic monologues, this "Soliloquy" oozes irony. The poem's speaker is meant to be a holy man, a monk who's dedicated his life to God. But his self-deception, lust, and rage make it clear that, as Shakespeare's Feste puts it, "*cucullus non facit monachum*"—"the robe doesn't make the monk."

Right from the start, this monk isn't very monkish. When readers meet him, he's lurking in the cloister wishing damnation on his fellow monk Brother Lawrence. As the poem goes on, his justifications for this hatred seem less and less clear. Brother Lawrence's major crimes seem to be that he doesn't know his Latin especially well, likes talking about his garden, and washes his dishes.

The speaker's all-consuming hatred is clearly motivated by something deeper: his inability to admit to his *own* sinfulness and weakness. When he accuses Brother Lawrence of lusting after the ladies who wash their hair outside the monastery, readers gather that it's *he* who's doing the lusting, then projecting his own naughty desires onto his rival. Brother Lawrence, in other words, is just the speaker's moral patsy: the speaker, unable to bear his own failings, internally frames Brother Lawrence for his crimes.

The speaker's religion, therefore, has taught him nothing: he hasn't become more loving, more patient, or more self-aware during his time in the monastery. Perhaps that's because, in another ironic twist, he doesn't seem to understand the foundations of Christianity itself. He's very good on fussy little religious rituals and dogmas, always sure to drink his orange juice in three sips to symbolically honor the Holy Trinity, aware of all the ways you can wander into a heresy. But he seems to see Christianity *only* as a set of rules: he's got the letter of the law, but none of the spirit. His understanding of his religion is so childishly transactional that he even imagines selling his soul to Satan, but leaving a loophole in the contract so he can wriggle out of the bargain.

This monk's religiosity, in other words, is entirely to do with rules and regulations—how to stick to them when it makes you feel superior, how to evade them when it suits your purposes. Through this self-deceiving speaker, Browning critiques the kind of religious belief that's all dogma and no faith.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-72

ALLUSION

The speaker's allusions to Christian dogmas and heresies paint a depressing picture of his narrow, legalistic view of religion.

Two of the speaker's allusions refer to controversies in early Christian history:

- When he drinks his orange juice, the speaker declares, he always does so in three sips to honor the Holy Trinity—and thus to "frustrate" the "Arian" heresy. The Arian heresy, which arose in the first centuries of the Christian church, denied that Christ was an eternal part of the Trinity, arguing instead that he was created by God later on.
- Later on, when the speaker imagines tripping Brother Lawrence up with a complex Bible verse, he gloats that he'll trick him into behaving like a "Manichee"—that is, a Manichaean, an adherent of a religion just predating Christianity. Unlike Christianity, which holds that an omnipotent and loving God created the universe, Manichaeism suggests that equally balanced forces of good and evil duke it out in an eternal battle.

The speaker is clearly up on the controversies that surrounded the birth of Christianity, and he knows his Church's dogmas. However, he doesn't really understand what they mean or why they matter. Instead, he behaves as if the really important thing about being a Christian is making sure you drink your juice correctly and say your Bible verses accurately—as if faith were only a set of rules.

That shortsightedness becomes even clearer when he refers to "a great text in Galatians"—that is, a Bible passage from Paul's Letter to the Galatians. One of his big plots against Brother Lawrence involves getting him to misinterpret this complex "text"; stumble over it, he says, and God will certainly send you straight to Hell. This plan imagines God as a narrow-minded, meanspirited bean-counter not unlike the speaker himself.

Though he's devoted to certain kinds of nitpicky religious practices, the speaker's other allusions suggest that he's not all that strict with himself. For instance, he has a "scrofulous French novel"—that is, a naughty book—hidden away in his cell. Really, he's lustful as a "Barbary corsair" (one of a notorious band of North African pirates), though he tries to deny his

desires by projecting them onto poor old Brother Lawrence.

Worse than that, he's willing to entertain the notion of making a deal with Satan himself. His mysterious chant at the end of the poem—"*Hy, Zy, Hine*"—may be his attempt to summon the Devil (though scholars have been arguing about what on earth Browning might have meant by those nonsense words for well over a century).

He's interrupted only by the chime of the "Vespers" bell, the bell announcing evening prayer. Distracted by his hatred (and perhaps his demon-summoning), he mixes up his words, mashing up bits of a Hail Mary ("*plena gratia*," or "full of grace") with a hymn ("*Ave, Virgo*," or "Hail, virgin!"). Clearly, his scrupulousness only goes so far.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 30-31:** "—Can't I see his dead eye glow, / Bright as 'twere a Barbary corsair's?"
- **Lines 37-40:** "I the Trinity illustrate, / Drinking watered orange pulp— / In three sips the Arian frustrate; / While he drains his at one gulp!"
- **Lines 49-51:** "There's a great text in Galatians, / Once you trip on it, entails / Twenty-nine distinct damnations,"
- **Lines 55-56:** "Spin him round and send him flying / Off to hell, a Manichee?"
- **Lines 57-58:** "my scrofulous French novel / On grey paper with blunt type!"
- **Lines 70-72:** "Hy, Zy, Hine / 'St, there's Vespers! / Plena gratia / Ave, Virgo!"

SIMILE

The speaker's similes, like so many of his words, reveal more about him than he might have intended.

One of the speaker's many complaints about Brother Lawrence is that he's snobbishly scrupulous about his dishes. Brother Lawrence, he whines, is always polishing his dinner plate, using a gleaming new spoon, and drinking from a goblet "rinsed like something sacrificial." That simile hints at what really annoys him about Brother Lawrence: his fellow monk, to all appearances, really is a pious and gentle man. If he rinses his cup "like something sacrificial," he's washing it as carefully as if it were a communion chalice, the cup used to serve the wine at Mass. In the speaker's sullen eyes, this smacks of pride. However, Brother Lawrence's conscientiousness with his dishes and his garden alike suggests that he, unlike the speaker, sees the whole world as sacred. To him, even an ordinary cup is worthy of care.

The speaker isn't interested in such gentle ministrations, though. He'd rather spy on "Dolores" and "Sanchicha," the ladies who bathe at the trough outside the monastery. Their hair, he says, is "blue-black, lustrous, thick like horsehairs," a simile that suggests he feels a distinctly animalistic desire for these hearty, healthy, horsey women. He accuses Brother Lawrence of watching them with a glow in his eye as "bright as 'twere a Barbary corsair's"—that is, of gazing as lustfully as a pirate. Clearly, though, the speaker is the only piratical ogler here.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 21:** "Rinsed like something sacrificial"
- **Line 29:** "thick like horsehairs,"
- **Lines 30-31:** "—Can't I see his dead eye glow, / Bright as 'twere a Barbary corsair's?"

REPETITION

The speaker's repetitions give readers a peek into his claustrophobic little mind, making it clear he's trapped in his own resentment and subconscious self-hatred.

The poem begins and ends on the same onomatopoeic "Gr-r-r," growls that suggest that the speaker spends most of his life boiling with fury. Between those framing growls, his repetitions evoke everything from exasperation to obsession.

Listen, for instance, to his parallelism when he complains of Brother Lawrence's dinner conversation:

> [...] I must hear
> Wise talk of the kind of weather,
> Sort of season, time of year

The echoing phrasings here—which essentially say the same thing in three different ways—make the speaker sound deeply weary with Brother Lawrence's favorite topic: how the weather is treating his beloved garden.

More parallelism makes the speaker sound creepily lascivious as he describes what he'd rather be thinking about:

> [...] While brown Dolores
> Squats outside the Convent bank
> With Sanchicha, telling stories,
> Steeping tresses in the tank,
> *Blue-black, lustrous, thick* like horsehairs,

Parallel verbs here—"telling" and "steeping"—suggest the speaker has made as much of a habit of watching this lovely pair as they have of washing their hair out front. His long string of adjectives describing their "blue-black, lustrous, thick" tresses lingers on the sight just as his lustful gaze does.

Later on in the seventh and eighth stanzas, the speaker plots possible traps for his hated rival. His anaphora in these lines suggests he's obsessively flipping through mean ideas: how about "If I trip him" with a deathbed scriptural error? How about "If I double down" a particularly juicy page in a book of erotica and hide it in his plum-basket?

Maybe one of the speaker's most telling repetitions, though, is his obsession with pig-based insult. Three times, he calls Brother Lawrence a "swine"—twice implicitly (by ironically asking what the Greek for "Swine's Snout" is and by alluding to Lawrence's "chaps," a word meaning "jaws" but often used to refer to pigs' cheeks) and once explicitly (in the poem's closing words: "Gr-r-r—you swine!"). This piggy fixation suggests that the speaker sees Lawrence as greedy and bestial—and that, somewhere deep down, he knows that *he's* a selfish swine.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Gr-r-r"
- **Lines 11-12:** "kind of weather, / Sort of season, time of year"
- **Line 16:** "Swine's Snout"
- **Lines 27-29:** "telling stories, / Steeping tresses in the tank, / Blue-black, lustrous, thick like horsehairs,"
- **Line 53:** "If I trip him"
- **Line 61:** "If I double down its pages"
- **Line 72:** "Gr-r-r," "you swine"

VOCABULARY

Abhorrence (Line 1) - Hatred—here used to mean something more like "the person I hate most."

God's blood (Line 4) - An old-fashioned oath. You'd say this in the same way that you'd say "by God."

Salve tibi (Line 10) - A dinnertime greeting (spoken in Brother Lawrence's imagined voice) meaning "Hail to you!"

Plenteous (Line 13) - Bountiful, abundant.

Cork (Line 13) - A kind of light, spongy wood used for lots of things—most obviously, for making the kind of corks you find in bottles.

Oak-galls (Line 14) - Black, bulbous parasitic growths on oak trees. Used to make ink and to tan leather.

Swine's Snout (Line 16) - "Swine's Snout" was a 19th-century name for dandelions. There's a double joke here, then: in asking the Greek name for the plant, the speaker half-veils an insult to Brother Lawrence in an innocent horticultural question.

Burnished (Line 17) - Highly polished.

Fire-new (Line 19) - Brand new—as if just out of the fires of the blacksmith's forge.

Furnished (Line 19) - Supplied, equipped.

Ere 'tis fit (Line 22) - In other words, "before it's suitable."

Chaps (Line 22) - Jaws. The word is often used to describe a pig's cheeks in particular; the speaker is fond of using porcine insults for Brother Lawrence!

Forsooth (Line 25) - Indeed. (The speaker means this sarcastically, as in: *Saint? Oh yes* indeed, *Brother Lawrence is a saint!*)

Steeping tresses in the tank (Line 28) - That is, soaking their long hair in a water tank.

Lustrous (Line 29) - Shining and silky.

As 'twere (Line 31) - As if it were.

Barbary corsair (Line 31) - A pirate from the Barbary Coast in the north of Africa. The pirates of Barbary had a reputation for being especially fierce, dangerous, and lustful.

Refection (Line 33) - Dinner.

Jesu's (Line 36) - Jesus's.

In three sips the Arian frustrate (Line 39) - That is, "By sipping my drink three times, I symbolically reject the Arian heresy, which denied the Holy Trinity."

Fruit-sort (Line 46) - The nub of a melon just starting to grow.

Close-nipped (Line 48) - That is, nipped off right at the source. The speaker plucks the buds of Brother Lawrence's melon vines before they can grow melons.

Galatians (Line 49) - A book of the Bible.

Manichee (Line 56) - A Manichean—a heretic who believes in an eternal battle between equally balanced forces of good and evil, rather than a good and all-powerful God.

Scrofulous (Line 57) - "Scrofula" is a nasty skin disease; if this novel is "scrofulous," it might both look raggedy and disgusting and contain less-than-wholesome stories.

French novel (Line 57) - A euphemism for a racy, scandalous book—perhaps even pornography.

Grovel (Line 59) - Helplessly crawl.

Belial's gripe (Line 60) - That is, the devil's grip.

Sixteenth print (Line 62) - That is, page 16—presumably a racy part.

Greengages (Line 63) - A kind of plum.

Ope a sieve and slip it in't (Line 64) - That is, "Open a sieve and slip the sinful novel into it."

Indenture (Line 67) - A legal agreement or contract.

Blasted (Line 69) - Withered.

Hy, Zy, Hine (Line 70) - Nobody is sure what Browning meant by this! Two of the more persuasive arguments:

- The speaker is chanting a spell to summon the Devil. (The previous lines, in which he imagines selling his soul to Satan, support this interpretation.)
- Brother Lawrence is trying to say something in mangled Latin and the speaker is mockingly quoting him. (These words, like the speaker's other quotations, appear in italics; the muddled prayer at the end of the poem might be more of Brother Lawrence's poor scholarship.)

'St (Line 71) - Shh!

Vespers (Line 71) - Evening prayers, marked by a bell.

Plena gratia, ave, Virgo! (Lines 71-72) - Here, the speaker gets his prayers a bit confused—or perhaps Brother Lawrence does, and the speaker is quoting him again. (Critics disagree!) Whoever speaks here seems to be saying a version of a Hail Mary, which in Latin begins "Ave Maria, gratia plena"—"Hail Mary, full of grace"—but mixes up both the order and the wording, addressing Mary by her title ("Virgo," or "virgin") rather than by name.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister" is one of Robert Browning's famous dramatic monologues—that is, poems spoken in the voice of a character, like speeches in a play. As in so many of those monologues, the speaker here tells on himself: as he fumes about how awful his fellow monk Brother Lawrence is, he reveals only that he himself is a spiteful, small-minded creep.

His outburst of rage is built from nine octets (or eight-line stanzas) with a thumping trochaic meter and a crisp alternating rhyme scheme. The poem's combination of a tight, measured stanza shape and sheer length evokes the pressures inside and outside the speaker. Enclosed in this monastery, sitting next to Brother Lawrence at dinner every night, he can't escape his own rage; anger curdles and overflows into his every waking moment.

METER

"Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister" uses emphatic, stress-first trochaic tetrameter. That means that the lines are built from four trochees, metrical feet with a DUM-da rhythm. Here's how that sounds in line 1:

Gr-r-r—there | go, my | heart's ab- | horrence!

This line alone just about explains why Browning might have chosen this meter: if you want to start a poem with a "Gr-r-r," it behooves you to start it with a punchy stress, too. Urgent trochees in shortish lines make it sound as if the speaker is consumed with rage as he fumes about Brother Lawrence and his lousy garden.

Notice, too, how that first growl sets the poem's pace. If you really draw the "Gr-r-r" out, then the rest of the words seem to want to be read unhurriedly, at a steady boil of hate.

To emphasize the speaker's hatred and disgust even further, Browning often uses catalectic lines—that is, lines that drop a syllable, most often the last one. Listen to the speaker's unforgettable closing words in line 72, for instance:

Ave, | *Virgo!* | Gr-r-r—you | swine!

By ending on a single stressed syllable rather than a full trochee, Browning makes the speaker's final insult—"swine"—ring out with special vehemence.

RHYME SCHEME

An insistent rhyme scheme locks readers into the speaker's rage. The pattern runs like this:

ABABCDCD

All those tight alternating rhymes evoke the claustrophobia of a grudge. The speaker's hatred for Brother Lawrence is all he can think about (well, nearly—he can also think about pretty ladies washing their hair for at least a few lines). The rhymes, like his thoughts, don't stray far from a narrow path.

This rhyme scheme also helps to set the poem's darkly funny tone. The story of a monk plotting his innocent religious brother's downfall could have been a harrowing and gothic one, but the poem's language (and the speaker's petty foolishness) make this into a comedy. In witty rhymes like *abhorrence / Lawrence* and *horsehairs / corsair's*, Browning is clearly having fun, springing little surprises on the reader.

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker, a monk in a Spanish monastery, unforgettably introduces himself with a growl. That first "Gr-r-r" tells readers much of what they need to know about him: this supposedly holy man is in truth a guy who spends most of his time fuming, consumed with hatred for his fellow monk Brother Lawrence.

At first, readers might find this hatred confusing. Brother Lawrence sounds like a pretty mild character. Sure, he's no scholar: he doesn't know "the Latin name" for his plants, which an educated Catholic monk certainly should. But though he has his limitations, all readers see him doing is tending a flower garden, carefully washing his own dishes, and growing melons to share with his fellow monks.

The speaker's hatred for Brother Lawrence, readers gather, has a lot more to do with the speaker's own self-loathing than with anything Brother Lawrence has done. Everything the speaker accuses Brother Lawrence of is a projection of his own failings. It's *he* who lusts after the local girls "Sanchicha" and "Dolores" when they wash their hair outside the cloisters, *he* who's insufferably fussy about table manners, *he* who has a pathetically childish grasp of his own religion, *he* who has a well-thumbed naughty "French novel" hidden in his monastic cell. What he can't stand isn't so much Brother Lawrence as his own weakness.

His most fundamental and dangerous failing, then, is his self-deception: his inability to recognize and admit to his own

pettiness, lust, and sinfulness.

SETTING

The poem is set in the cloister—that is, the inner garden surrounded by covered walkways—of a Spanish monastery. Though such a monastery is in some ways a timeless setting, the mention of a "scrofulous French novel," a naughty work printed in "blunt type," suggests that the poem takes place in Browning's own 19th century, or at least not long before; the 18th century is likely the earliest time the speaker could have gotten his mitts on such a publication.

In the heart of the cloister, Brother Lawrence, the speaker's loathed enemy, grows vegetables and flowers, tending melons, myrtle bushes, and a prized rose-acacia alongside more practical money-making crops like cork trees and oak galls. The speaker lurks at the edge of this peaceful, fertile garden like a viper under a leaf, gloating every time his rival has a minor gardening mishap.

Perhaps something of the speaker's fury comes from the very fact that he's *cloistered*—a word that has come to mean "shut away from the world," not just "living in a building with cloisters." A monastery seems like altogether the wrong place for the petty, lustful speaker, whose faith seems to have offered him little more than a set of trivial table manners to fuss over and a sense that one might be able to make profitable bargains with Satan. On the other hand, Browning hints that a monastery is *exactly* where you'd expect to find characters like this speaker. This is only one of several Browning poems to suggest that Catholic culture might not always bring out the best in a guy.

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 enduring reputation rests. His most famous poems form a veritable rogues' gallery, with narrators from this spiteful monk to a murderous Italian duke to an equally murderous lover. By allowing these hideous men to 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. 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 heroism, homesickness, and heartbreak.

"Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister" first appeared in Browning's 1842 book *Dramatic Lyrics*, the third in an eight-volume series of Browning's works collectively titled *Bells and Pomegranates*. This collection would deeply influence 20th-century modernist poets like Ezra Pound. Browning still moves readers to this day: for instance, his life and work inspired contemporary writer A.S. Byatt to write her acclaimed novel *Possession*.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

This poem's speaker is only one of a host of religious hypocrites in Browning's verse. Alongside figures like the greedy, venal Bishop of St. Praxed's and the much more sympathetic (but still not very monkish) Fra Lippo Lippi, the fuming Spanish monk here forms part of Browning's critique of corrupted Christianity.

Browning was not the only 19th-century British artist whose work criticized, questioned, or altogether rejected Christian hypocrisy. He was following in the footsteps of earlier Romantic-era writers like William Blake and Percy Bysshe Shelley (one of his early heroes). These poets condemned the oppressions of the organized Christian church and turned toward revolutionary nonconformism (in Blake's case) or out-and-out atheism (in Shelley's).

Browning's particular attention to dubious *Catholic* speakers might have been born from his years living in Italy, where he and his beloved wife Elizabeth Barrett Browning eloped in order to escape her possessive father. The couple lived there for many years; Browning had plenty of time to reflect on corruption in the Church that formed so integral a part of daily Italian life.

Browning never quite reveals his own religious commitments (or lack thereof) in his poetry. But the corrupt holy men of his dramatic monologues make it clear that, whatever he himself believed, he absolutely detested petty dogmatism and hypocrisy.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Aloud — Watch a staged performance of the poem. (https://youtu.be/n1SlZidobhM)
- The Mystery of "Hy, Zy, Hine" — Read some of the many theories about what on earth Browning might have meant

by the nonsense words "Hy, Zy, Hine" at the end of the poem. (https://garethrees.org/2019/04/21/browning/)

- Dramatic Lyrics — Learn more about Dramatic Lyrics, the important collection in which this poem was first published. (https://www.bl.uk/learning/timeline/item126784.html)
- A Brief Biography — Learn more about Browning's life via the British Library. (https://www.bl.uk/learning/langlit/poetryperformance/browning/biography/browningbiography.html)
- More Browning Resources — Visit the Victorian Web to find a trove of Browning lore. (https://victorianweb.org/authors/rb/index.html)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ROBERT BROWNING POEMS

- Confessions
- 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

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