

# Aberrance in two poems by robert browning



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As scholars often note, the Victorian Period was known for its didacticism, especially the struggle between faith and moral decrepitude. Whereas the Romantics idealized their world, the Victorians questioned their surroundings, choosing to politicize their literature so as to be reactionary against the societal norm. Although the polemics of Victorianism were prevalent in poetry, fiction, philosophy, and nonfiction, their influence was never felt more strongly than in the questionable, often satirical morality of Robert Browning's narrators.

Out of all Victorian poetry, the verse of Robert Browning is most reprimanding against moral conventions. Using historical figures as models for his critiques against the present, Browning mastered the art of the monologue and soliloquy, two styles of poetry especially useful in critiquing the character traits of his contemporaries. Whereas poets like Matthew Arnold or Alfred, Lord Tennyson focused their polemics against ideas—human misery in “Dover Beach” and staid philosophies of living in “Ulysses”—Browning wrote against individual entities and personalities, particularly nobles and clerics. Browning's indictment against officials in the Anglican Church can be found through the aberrance of his narrators in “The Bishop Orders his Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church” and “Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister.” Browning paints these narrators as vain and vindictive personalities, character traits antithetical to a bishop or Spanish monk.

In “The Bishop Orders his Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church”, the reader sees a frail man on his deathbed whose only concerns are his posterity.

Traditionally, bishops in the Renaissance concerned themselves with spiritual affairs, favoring a reward in heaven above any earthly delights. Browning's

bishop, however, is so concerned with earthly affairs that all heavenly matters appear null to him. He prides himself on the “agate,” “granite,” “basalt,” and “marble” that will construct his tomb, something he sees as worthy of veneration. This tomb serves as a stark contrast to the locale that entombed Christ, something conventionally seen as barren and void of all superfluity. Although a tomb, especially premortem, is known as an absence of person-hood, the bishop steers the reader in a different direction. According to his meanderings, his tomb is an object that will, in essence, attempt to make him as immortal as the deity for which he claims to have lived his life.

The bishop’s disregard for the affairs of the afterlife are also present in the egalitarianism with which he treats the dead. At the end of the poem, the bishop says, “Old Gandolf, at me, from his onion-stone / As still he envied me, so fair she was!” His depiction of Gandolf’s corpse indicates the egalitarian mindset with which he views the physicality of death; however, this depiction succeeds over 100 lines of self-celebration. Although death, itself, acts as an equalizer, the bishop’s tomb acts as a celebrant of a singular life, something antithetical to both the church and Victorian concepts of morality. When he wonders to himself, “Do I live, am I dead?”, he is, in essence, conflating death with life. His life has become so extravagant that the prizes of salvation are clouded by the prizes of his past. This cloudy vision of paradise showcases his rampant egotism and lavishness, two traits that are not typically associated with bishops.

Although the narrator in “The Bishop Orders his Tomb at Saint Praxed’s Church” goes against a few tropes of typical clergyman, the monk in

Browning's "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister" absolutely shatters all notions of decency in a monastic lifestyle. The opening lines of the poem, "Gr-r-r—there go, my heart's abhorrence!" frames the monk as a man whose deviancy knows no bounds. Whereas most monks would find moral indecency to be abhorrent, the speaker of this poem finds the peripheral and saintly character Brother Lawrence to be abominable. The speaker claims that if hatred were able to harm someone physically, his hatred would be able to kill Lawrence, and later in the poem, he attempts to make a bargain with Satan himself for Lawrence's life. Such a disregard for human life coupled with a meticulous list of grievances portrays the speaker to be the antithesis of traditional monastic lifestyles.

Robert Browning's poems "The Bishop Orders his Tomb at St. Praxed's Church" and "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister" showcase not only the moral hypocrisy of people in religious life, but also the downfall of conventional morality during the Victorian Period. That these critiques of the hypocrisy of religious figures are monologues and soliloquies makes Browning's poetry much more personally incriminating than if it had been something closer to the ramblings of Matthew Arnold or Alfred, Lord Tennyson.