

Discussion of the
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Robert Browning ubiquitous examination of religious authority and its shortcomings becomes apparent within the very title of *The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church*. The religious reference to Saint Praxed carries ironic connotations, as whilst Saint Praxed herself was chaste, the monologist subverts his priestly requirements and engages in sexual acts. Therefore Browning here highlights the hypocritical nature of the religious figures of the time. While religious authorities of Browning's time period espoused values of loving one's neighbour, both *The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church* and *Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister* deconstruct such doctrines as further evidence of religious duplicity. Ironically referencing his own "Peace", the Bishop of the former poem exclaims "God curse the same!". Emphasized by the exclamation mark, the vituperative application of the Catholic deity against the Bishop's nemesis, Gandolf, is depicted by Browning to demonstrate the disrespect and disregard of supposedly devout figures for the very cornerstones of their faith. In a similar fashion, the narrator of the *Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister* refers to Brother Lawrence as a "Manichee", a non-vocative pejorative epithet used in order to denigrate Lawrence as an adherent to dual religions, and therefore of inferior commitment to Christianity. However, the narrator himself references "Galatians" as a justification for the prospective murder of Lawrence, and is therefore used by Browning to undermine the use of biblical texts as authorities.

Along with this deconstruction of religion, Browning's poems are linked by their depiction of moral decay, clear within the initial line of *Confessions*. The "buzzing" in the ears of the narrator is in fact an intertextual reference to

Christopher Marlowe's *Dr Faustus*. Due to this, the gerund used by Browning invokes a satanic presence in the death-bed confession of the narrator, and suggests an underlying malevolence in the narrator's being. In addition to this, the anapaests within the line "Do I view the world as a vale of tears?", indicative of a discomfort in speaking on the matter at hand, also serve to differentiate it from the other lines in the stanza. This demarcation is used by Browning to suggest that the narrator's perspective upon life has entered a realm of alterity – solidified by the facetious nature of his unctious due to his lack of remorse – and signifying the moral decay at hand. The Bishop of The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church, while idiosyncratic, presents a further example of this aforementioned decay. The simile "Blue as a vein o'er the Madonna's breast...", sexualizes the Virgin Mary, and the concluding aposiopesis is added by Browning to signify a venture into sexual fantasy regarding the "Madonna", a notion wholly morally void for a religious figure. This mental and moral corruption is mirrored in the language of the poem, as the Bishop refers to a congregation as a "conflagration". A symbolic solecism, Browning here highlights that the failure of the Bishop to adequately articulate himself coincides with his failure to acknowledge his immorality. A similar degree of egocentricity and tarnished self-awareness is evident in the Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister. While attempting to illuminate his devotion in speaking of his focus upon "Jesu's praise" in the fifth stanza, by the sixth the narrator approaches Brother Lawrence's flowers and "Keep[s] them close-nipped on the sly!" With the exclamation mark highlighting enthusiasm of the narrator, the adverbial phrase "on the sly" is used by Browning to demonstrate the narrator's concession to deception, despite his supposedly moral foundations.

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Ultimately, Browning explores love in its various expressions, and its ability to be applied to a wide spectrum of divergent human experiences.

Confessions narrates a scandalous love story that transgressed the socio-religious boundaries of the time, from this perspective exploring love to exceed hegemonic restrictions. Browning develops emotional weight for the relationship through romanticising its setting; the “ rose-wreathed gate” in particular functions as a poetic cliché that nevertheless fortifies the love present between the narrator and the partner. Succeeding this, the tricolon of monosyllabic rhyming adjectives in “ How sad and bad and mad it was” is implemented by Browning to reduce the negative experiences of life linguistically. The final line of the concluding stanza, “ But then, how it was sweet!” nostalgically emotionalizes the positive memories of love through the exclamation mark. Conversely, the Bishop of The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed’s Church bestows superficial and materialistic elements of his life with his love. Browning’s preponderance of references to minerals such as “ basalt” and the valuable gemstone “ lapis lazuli” highlight that even when confronting his own transience, his focus and adoration remains solely upon the material elements of life on earth. Furthermore, the pathetic fallacy evident in the narrator referring to his “ brave Frascati villa” is included by Browning to signal both the narrator’s compromised mental state, as well as adulation for his material belongings, rather than the humanity that surrounds him, such as his illegitimate son Anselm.