

Notes on Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister by Robert Browning:

Robert Browning is most famous for writing dramatic monologues like "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister." But what, you ask, is a dramatic monologue, anyway? We're so glad you asked! It's an experimental, hybrid poetic form that combines elements of drama and the theater with more traditional, lyric poetry. Browning's dramatic monologues often tell fun, eerie stories. The title of the volume in which "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister" was first published in 1842 reflects the hybridity (mixed quality) of Browning's poems: it was called *Dramatic Lyrics*.

The important thing to remember about Browning's dramatic monologues like "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister" is that the speaker of the poem is never Browning himself. (Which is a good thing. Trust us.) It's a fictional person (or, occasionally, a historical figure like the Duke in "My Last Duchess"), like a character in a play or in a Lady Gaga music video. And like the speakers of most of Browning's monologues, the speaker of the "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister" is definitely psychologically unstable.

Browning was an experimental in several different ways: he played with poetic forms by combining different types of poetry, and he explored the psychology of all kinds of different people in his dramatic monologues, allowing them slowly to expose their psychological instability through their own speech rather than through the descriptions of a narrator. If you've read some Edgar Allan Poe stories or poems, such as "The Tell-Tale Heart" or "The Raven," you're probably familiar with this technique.

Browning was an experimental poet, writing during a period when readers preferred more traditional poetry. During his lifetime, his wife, the poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning, was much more successful. (You probably know her from her poem "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.") Now he is remembered as one of the greatest poets of the Victorian period (the time during the reign of Queen Victoria in Britain, from 1837-1901). But at the time, no one was interested in reading poems in unfamiliar forms whose speakers were at best jerks and at worst psychotic murderers.

The speaker of "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister" probably isn't a murderous psychopath, like the speaker of "Porphyria's Lover" (though you never really know with Robert Browning), but he's still not someone you'd want to invite over for a cup of tea: he's a monk describing his jealous hatred of a fellow monk named Brother Lawrence.

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

On a superficial level, it's easy to enjoy reading "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister" because, hey, who hasn't felt a twinge of jealousy toward a classmate or teammate who always seems to know the answer and who never does anything wrong? They can be the nicest kids in the world, but that mean, nasty corner of you still kind of hates them, right?

But when you read this poem closely, the speaker's hypocrisy becomes more apparent. It's not simply jealousy. He's describing the supposed faults of his rival, Brother Lawrence (who seems blissfully unaware of how much the speaker hates him), but after a while you realize that the speaker has some serious rage issues. His jealousy seems based on nothing more than his own insecurity and moral hypocrisy.