

The Psychopathology of Envy: A Nietzschean Reading of the Monk's Ressentiment in Browning's *Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister*

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Abstract

Robert Browning's *Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister* (1842/2009) is a defining Victorian dramatic monologue that probes the human psyche's dark corners, especially the collision of religious piety and moral hypocrisy. Through an unnamed monk's voice, the poem exposes a mind consumed by hatred, yet traditional labels like "envy" or "evil" fail to explain his psychological contradictions. This essay argues the monk embodies Friedrich Nietzsche's *Ressentiment*—a chronic, repressive hatred rooted in powerlessness. Using Nietzsche's master-slave morality framework, this study analyzes how the monk, paralyzed by inner weakness, twists resentment toward Brother Lawrence into imagined moral revenge, ultimately poisoning his own spirit. This analysis reveals the poem's critique of how repressed hostility corrupts individual consciousness and moral-religious systems, with enduring relevance to modern struggles with powerlessness, moral grandstanding, and ideological polarization.

Keywords: Robert Browning, *Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister*, Friedrich Nietzsche, resentment; master-slave morality

Robert Browning (1812–1889) revolutionised Victorian poetry through the dramatic monologue—a form centred on a single speaker's unscripted address to an implicit audience, revealing psychological depth via tone, contradiction, and unintended self-disclosure (Hirsch, 1964). Unlike lyric poetry, which emphasizes the poet's voice, the dramatic monologue creates a distinct "character-voice," allowing Browning to explore moral ambiguity without explicit

judgment. Works like *My Last Duchess* and *Porphyria's Lover* exemplify this, and *Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister*—first published in *Dramatic Lyrics* (1842)—follows suit.

Set in a Spanish monastery, the poem unfolds as an unnamed monk's obsessive diatribe against Brother Lawrence. The conflict is not rooted in Lawrence's wrongdoing: through the monk's lens, Lawrence is a figure of quiet contentment—tending his myrtle-bush and rose, discussing crop conditions over meals, and savoring simple pleasures like watered orange-pulp. Instead, the monk's rage stems from visceral resentment of Lawrence's unforced vitality. His opening line—"Gr-r-r—there go, my heart's abhorrence!" (Browning, 1842/2009, line 1)—is an animalistic snarl, signaling a psyche frayed by unexpressed frustration and setting the stage for a study of psychological distortion.

Scholarly discourse has long reduced the monk to surface-level labels like "hypocritical" or "envious." G.K. Chesterton (1903) framed him as a caricature of Catholic formalism, obsessed with ritual purity (e.g., post-meal knife-fork placement, sacrificial rinsing of tableware) while nurturing a "soul rotten with malice." E. K. Brown (1948) viewed him as a case of moral self-deception, noting how his pious claims mask sadistic desires. Sandra Gilbert (1984) linked his rage to Victorian masculinity anxieties, arguing he resents Lawrence's "soft" virtues (tenderness toward plants, geniality over trivial talk) as threats to patriarchal identity.

Yet these interpretations fail to address critical paradoxes: Why does the monk direct hatred at Lawrence's virtues (calm attentiveness, unselfconscious joy) rather than flaws? Why does he rely on fantasy over direct action? Why does his resentment deepen his sense of imprisonment? These gaps demand a framework that explains the mechanics of his hatred—not just its existence. Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of *Ressentiment* fills this role, offering a

lens to unpack the monk's psychological complexity.

Nietzsche's *Ressentiment*—articulated in *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887)—is a systematic psychological state arising from powerlessness. It emerges from the “slave revolt in morality,” where the weak, unable to act on hostility toward the strong, invert value systems to claim moral superiority (Nietzsche, 1887/1998, p.36). To understand this, we first distinguish Nietzsche's two moral frameworks:

Master Morality: Originating with the “strong” (physically or socially dominant), master morality defines “good” as self-affirming traits—strength, joy, spontaneity, and courage. “Bad” is a secondary category, describing weak traits (timidity, poverty) without hatred. Masters focus on self-cultivation, not the weak: “The noble type of man experiences itself as determining values; it does not need approval; it judges, ‘what is harmful to me is harmful in itself’” (Nietzsche, 1887/1998, p.26). Their morality is active, rooted in confidence rather than resentment.

Slave Morality: Emerging from the “oppressed” or “weak,” slave morality is reactive. It defines “evil” as the masters' strengths (e.g., strength = brutality, joy = frivolity) and “good” as their own weaknesses (e.g., weakness=humility, suffering=righteousness). The weak cannot defeat the strong in reality, so they defeat them in thought: “The slave's eye is not favorable to the virtues of the powerful: he looks askance at the proud man, and mistrusts the joyful man” (Nietzsche, 1887/1998, p. 30).

Ressentiment fuels slave morality through three interrelated mechanisms:

Imaginative revenge: The weak avoid direct confrontation, instead internalizing revenge as spiritual or delayed punishment (e.g., afterlife suffering). Their tactics are indirect:

“His soul squints; his spirit loves hiding places, secret paths, and back doors” (Nietzsche, 1887/1998, p.35).

Value inversion: They redefine the strong’s virtues as vices and their own vices as virtues. For example, strength becomes “bullying,” joy becomes “selfishness,” and weakness becomes “compassion.” This inversion lets the weak feel superior without changing their circumstances (Nietzsche, 1887/1998, p.38).

Spiritual poisoning: Repressed hatred festers inward, making the resentful bitter, gloomy, and self-hating. “*Ressentiment* is the spirit of revenge turned inward... it eats away at the soul like a slow poison” (Nietzsche, 1887/1998, p.39).

1. The Monk as a Carrier of *Ressentiment*

The monastery functions as a microcosm of Nietzsche’s slave-master dynamic, with the monk embodying the “slave” and Lawrence the “master.” This dynamic is not based on formal power but on vitality and self-affirmation—traits that define Nietzsche’s moral categories.

The monk’s powerlessness is evident in his repressed rage. His opening “Gr-r-r” (Browning, 1842/2009, line 1) reveals a primitive anger tamed by monastic rules that demand silence, humility, and self-denial. Denied the ability to act on his anger, he fixates on ritual minutiae to assert control over his powerless life. He criticizes Lawrence for prioritizing his myrtle-bush over other plants (“What? your myrtle-bush wants trimming? / Oh, that rose has prior claims —”; Browning, 1842/1009, lines 5-6) and mocks Lawrence’s curiosity about trivial knowledge (“What’s the Latin name for ‘parsley?’ / What’s the Greek name for Swine’s Snout?”; Browning, 1842/2009, lines 15-16). These trivial obsessions are not signs of piety but compensations: the monk cannot dominate Lawrence through strength, so he tries to dominate

him through moral nitpicking—a classic “slave” strategy.

Lawrence, though never directly appearing, is framed as a “master” figure through the monk’s descriptions. He tends his myrtle-bush and rose with quiet attention (Browning, 1842/2009, line 5), discusses the weather and cork/oak-gall crops during meals (Browning, 1842/2009, lines 9-14), and drains his watered orange-pulp in one unselfconscious gulp (Browning, 1842/2009, line 40). These traits—natural vitality, contentment, and ease with life—are precisely what the monk lacks. Lawrence’s indifference to the monk deepens the resentment: he “knows nothing” of the monk’s hatred (implied in the monk’s one-sided rant), confirming the monk’s invisibility and powerlessness. For the resentful “slave,” being ignored is worse than being hated—it erases their sense of self.

The monk’s entire monologue is a practice of Nietzschean value inversion—a systematic effort to redefine Lawrence’s virtues as vices, allowing the monk to claim moral superiority. He does not deny Lawrence’s goodness; he poisons it, framing traits he envies as sins.

Lawrence’s calm attentiveness to his plants—an expression of master morality, reflecting inner strength—is reframed by the monk as worthy of damnation. He sneers, “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!” (Browning, 1842/2009, lines 5-8). The monk cannot accept that Lawrence’s care for plants is genuine, so he attributes it to triviality worthy of hellfire. This inversion lets him cast his own rage as “righteous piety”: “I focus on God, not silly flowers—unlike this trivial man.”

Lawrence’s casual approach to post-meal rituals—an act of unselfconscious ease—is

reframed as impiety. The monk fumes that Lawrence “never lays knife and fork cross-wise” as he does “in Jesu’s praise” (Browning, 1842/2009, lines 33-36). He contrasts his own ritual of sipping watered orange-pulp in three sips to “illustrate the Trinity” with Lawrence’s habit of draining his in one gulp (Browning, 1842/2009, lines 37-40). This inversion lets the monk cast his rigid ritualism as “devotion”: “I honor the Trinity through every act—unlike this impious man.”

Lawrence’s quiet enjoyment of the monastery’s shared feasts—an act of gentle participation—is reframed as greed. When discussing upcoming melon feast, the monk’s tone drips with sarcasm: “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.” (Browning, 1842/2009, lines 41-44). The monk implies Lawrence’s eagerness for the feast is selfish, even though the meal is shared by all. This inversion lets him cast his own bitterness as “abstinence”: “I resist worldly pleasures—unlike this glutton.”

Each inversion serves a critical purpose: it transforms the monk’s weakness (inability to find joy, rigidity, bitterness) into strength (piety, devotion, abstinence) and Lawrence’s strength (joy, ease, participation) into weakness (triviality, impiety, greed), creating a false sense of moral superiority that masks his inadequacy.

Denied direct action against Lawrence, the monk enacts Nietzschean imaginative revenge—elaborate fantasies that use the monastery’s moral and religious rules as weapons. These fantasies are not random; they are calculated to exploit Lawrence’s innocence and the monastery’s sacred norms, turning the system the monk claims to uphold against his “enemy.”

The monk plans to trick Lawrence into encountering his “scrofulous French novel”—a

text he deems corrupting—fantasizing: “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?” (Browning, 1842/2009, lines 57-64). This fantasy is cruel in its indirectness: the monk does not harm Lawrence physically but uses a supposedly “sinful” text to condemn him spiritually. By framing a moment of innocent gathering (of greengages) as an opportunity for moral corruption, the monk enacts revenge without lifting a finger—a classic “slave” tactic.

He imagines exploiting a biblical text to damn Lawrence, fixating on “a great text in Galatians” that “entails / Twenty-nine distinct damnations” (Browning, 1842/2009, lines 49-51). His fantasy escalates to tripping Lawrence “just a-dying”—when Lawrence is “sure of heaven as sure as can be”—to “spin him round and send him flying / Off to hell, a Manichee?” (Browning, 1842/2009, lines 53-56). This fantasy weaponizes religious doctrine, turning a sacred text into a tool of harm; the monk hopes to twist Lawrence’s impending salvation into damnation, letting theological technicalities do the “punishing” for him.

The monk’s most elaborate fantasy blends a pact with Satan and destruction of the monastery’s prized plant: “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! ” (Browning, 1842/2009, lines 65-70). He is willing to bargain with evil to destroy what the monastery (and by extension, Lawrence) values—both the rose-acacia (a symbol of shared beauty) and spiritual purity. His rant collapses into chaos, shifting abruptly to a call for Vespers, revealing how his revenge fantasies have unraveled his grasp on ritual and reason.

2. *Ressentiment*'s Self-Poisoning and the Poem's Significance

The monastery's walls are not just a physical barrier—they are a metaphor for the monk's mental cage. His *Ressentiment* has made him unable to see beauty or joy in the world around him: Lawrence's flowers are worthy of hellfire, shared melon feasts are objects of sarcasm, and even the monastery's Vespers ritual becomes a backdrop for his rage. He cannot enjoy the monastery's quiet, find comfort in his faith, or connect with others. His monologue is a private rant, directed at no one—evidence of his isolation.

As Nietzsche notes, "The man of resentment lives in a world of his own making—a world of hatred and suspicion" (Nietzsche, 1887/1998, p. 42). The monk is not trapped by the monastery's rules; he is trapped by his own hatred. He could leave the cloister, but he cannot escape his resentment—making his imprisonment self-inflicted.

The monk's *Ressentiment* has not just poisoned his psyche—it has corrupted his religious beliefs. What was once a source of comfort has become a tool of hatred. He uses his knowledge of religion not to seek salvation, but to justify revenge—a perversion of faith that aligns with Nietzsche's critique of "slave morality." His obsession with cross-wise knife-fork placement and three-sip orange-pulp is no longer pious; it is a way to judge Lawrence's "impiety." He uses monastic rules as a measuring stick to declare himself "more holy" than Lawrence, even as his heart overflows with malice. This is the corruption of ritual: it becomes a performance of piety, not an expression of it.

His prayers are not acts of devotion but vengeance. His final shift to Vespers—"St, there's Vespers! Plena gratiâ / Ave, Virgo! " (Browning, 1842/2009, lines 71-72)—is perfunctory, a ritual he mocks by following it with a snarl ("Gr-r-r — you swine! "; Browning,

1842/2009, line 72). This is not a prayer of love; it is a prayer of hatred. The monk uses God as a tool of revenge, imagining that Lawrence's "sins" (his joy, ease, and attentiveness) will be punished. As Nietzsche writes, "The man of resentment creates a God in his own image—a God who hates the strong and punishes the virtuous" (Nietzsche, 1887/1998, p. 43).

The poem's climax reveals *Ressentiment*'s futility. The monk's final words collapse into a chaotic mix of ritual and rage: he abruptly shifts from Satanic plotting to calling for Vespers, ending with a snarl: "St, there's Vespers! Plena gratiâ / Ave, Virgo! Gr-r-r — you swine! " (Browning, 1842/2009, lines 71-72). This is not victory but madness. Lawrence remains unharmed—still tending his flowers, still at peace—while the monk is consumed by his own hatred. He has not defeated the "master"; he has destroyed himself.

Nietzsche's warning rings true here: "The man of resentment does not defeat his enemy—he defeats himself" (Nietzsche, 1887/1998, p. 44). The monk's tragedy is that he mistakes hatred for power. He thinks his fantasies of revenge make him strong, but they only make him bitter and isolated.

Browning's mastery of the dramatic monologue humanizes Nietzsche's abstract theory of *Ressentiment*. Unlike philosophical treatises, the monk's voice—raw, contradictory, and unapologetically bitter—invites readers to experience the suffocating weight of repressed hatred. When he snarls at Lawrence's flower-tending or rants about knife-fork placement, we do not merely read about *Ressentiment*; we feel its irrationality, its pettiness, and its capacity to distort even the simplest acts of life. This literary power bridges the gap between philosophy and human experience: Nietzsche defines *Ressentiment* as a theoretical construct, but Browning shows us how it feels to be trapped in its grip—how it turns joy into sin, ease into

impiety, and faith into a weapon.

Moreover, Browning's portrayal of the monk's psychological decay is a masterclass in character development. The monk is not a one-dimensional villain; he is a tragic figure. His hatred stems not from inherent evil, but from vulnerability—from a sense of inadequacy that he cannot name, let alone confront. When he fixates on Lawrence's flowers or rants about orange-pulp sipping, he is not just being petty; he is lashing out at a world that makes him feel small. This complexity makes the poem more than a critique of religious hypocrisy—it is a meditation on the universal human struggle with insecurity and powerlessness.

The monk's *Ressentiment* is not a relic of the Victorian era; it is a persistent feature of modern social and political life. One of the most striking parallels is the phenomenon of moral grandstanding on social media. Like the monk, many individuals who engage in grandstanding lack the power to effect tangible change in issues they care about (e.g., inequality, climate change). Instead, they resort to imaginative revenge: publicly shaming others for perceived "sins" (e.g., posting about a vacation, expressing a moderate opinion), labeling them "evil" or "immoral," and fantasizing about their "downfall" (e.g., being "cancelled" or ostracized).

This is *Ressentiment* in digital form: value inversion (vacation = greed, moderation = apathy), imaginative revenge (public shaming), and self-poisoning (obsession with others' "wrongdoings" leading to anger, anxiety, and social isolation). Studies have shown that individuals who frequently engage in moral grandstanding report higher levels of psychological distress, as their sense of self-worth becomes tied to judging others (West, 2020)—a modern iteration of the monk's reliance on Lawrence's "sins" to feel morally superior.

What makes *Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister* so unsettlingly modern is its reminder

that *Ressentiment* is not the province of “evil” people—it is a temptation for anyone who feels powerless. The monk is not a monster; he is an ordinary person driven to extremes by his sense of inadequacy. He hates Lawrence not because Lawrence is bad, but because Lawrence’s happiness exposes his own unhappiness. This is the danger of *Ressentiment*: it preys on vulnerability, turning insecurity into hatred and self-doubt into moral superiority.

In a world marked by rising inequality, political alienation, and social fragmentation, the poem’s warning is urgent. It tells us that the antidote to *Ressentiment* is not more moral judgment, but self-awareness—not to invert values to feel better about ourselves, but to confront our own weaknesses and cultivate genuine self-affirmation. As Nietzsche writes in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883), “He who cannot affirm himself will always resent those who can” (Nietzsche, 1883/2006, p. 89). The monk’s tragedy is that he never learns this; he spends his life resenting Lawrence instead of confronting the emptiness within himself.

For modern readers, the poem asks a critical question: Will we repeat the monk’s mistake? Will we let our sense of powerlessness turn into hatred, or will we find the courage to affirm ourselves—even in a world that often makes us feel small? The monk’s madness is a cautionary tale: *Ressentiment* may feel like a path to power, but it always leads to self-destruction.

3. Conclusion

This essay has argued that Robert Browning’s *Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister* is a profound exploration of Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Ressentiment*—a psychological state that arises from powerlessness and manifests in value inversion, imaginative revenge, and self-poisoning. By framing the monk as a “slave” in Nietzsche’s master-slave dynamic, we have uncovered the

mechanics of his hatred: his repressed vitality (slave weakness), his systematic inversion of Lawrence's virtues (value inversion), his elaborate revenge fantasies (imaginative revenge), and his eventual self-destruction (spiritual poisoning). These elements do not merely describe a character; they reveal a universal psychological pattern—one that explains how powerlessness can twist morality, corrupt faith, and destroy the self.

Browning's achievement lies in his ability to transform Nietzsche's abstract philosophy into a human story. The monk is not a theoretical construct; he is a living, breathing figure whose rage and pettiness feel familiar. We may not hate our neighbors for gardening or sipping juice, but we have all felt the sting of inadequacy, the temptation to judge others to feel better about ourselves, or the frustration of being powerless to change our circumstances. In this way, the poem becomes a mirror—forcing us to confront the *Ressentiment* within ourselves.

Finally, the poem's modern relevance underscores the enduring value of literature and philosophy as tools for understanding the human condition. Nietzsche gives us the language to name the monk's pathology; Browning gives us the empathy to feel it. Together, they warn us of the dangers of hatred—even when wrapped in the cloak of virtue—and invite us to choose a different path: one of self-awareness, compassion, and genuine self-affirmation. As the monk's madness shows, *Ressentiment* may offer the illusion of power, but it is always a defeat—for the hater, first and foremost.

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