

## THE PORTRAYAL OF HIDEOUS VICTORIAN SOCIETY IN BROWNING'S : 'THE LABORATORY'

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### Abstract

*Society has always played a significant role in shaping our thoughts: creating stereotypes and restricting our imagination. Victorian society's attitudes and culture, focused on highly moralistic, straitlaced language and behaviour. Browning startled Victorian readers with psychological and psychopathic realism. Themes of jealousy, revenge and murder (in association with 'love') in his works gives us a chance to glance inside the head of a psychopath. This paper shall study how Robert Browning exposes the ugly side of the beautiful emotion, 'love'.*

*Browning's poem 'The Laboratory', is based on a real-life figure, a French woman Madame- Brinvilliers, a notorious serious killer who had her head chopped off in the 17th century. But, in a very subtle way Browning through this poem illustrates the gruesome truth about society in the 19th century. The poem in its simplest ways depicts the appalling effects of romantic treachery. How a simple human emotion 'jealousy' could turn a person towards sadism. It makes us familiar with the twisted psychology of a killer or, in other words, the helplessness of an intelligent woman who just can't take it anymore. This paper shall question the ideas of good or bad. Is there really a line between righteous anger and insanity or that just hinges on the norms of society? Why did the woman take revenge from her romantic rival instead of the man who cheated on her? Isn't the serene feeling of 'love' behind the stimulation of hate?*

**Keywords:** *Revenge, Jealousy, Female-Psyche, Treachery, Victorian Age*

Over the years, human beings have managed to revolutionize every aspect of their lives in every possible way one can imagine. Yet, if we go back and study Shakespeare and compare it with a present scenario, we can see that in centuries gone by everything has changed but human emotions are still the same. Works of the earlier centuries are still studied and found as relatable to us as they were at that time.

Browning's 'The Laboratory', is a fictional account of a serial killer Madame de Brinvilliers, during the reign of King Louis XIV of France. The poem was published in the Victorian Era, an era when human emotions were explicitly put to control in the name of morals and principles. The age is known to be famous for its ethics and integrity.

But, if we study these centuries and the morals looked upon over the years, we will find that the ethics that were the pillars of the society of a particular time period were perceived different for men and women. Ironically, men were given the label of being superior and women were subjected to

them as being inferior of the lot, though the pillars on which the society was held were in the hands of women.

Over the years, people have been criticizing as how women cannot be trusted or two women can never be friends, completely ignoring the fact that it is the society which has taught them to envy each other, to not show kindness to one another.

Jealousy is the emotion that a lover experiences when faced with the possibility of losing a beloved to a rival. It makes people act in a crazy manner and become paranoid. Browning in his poem 'The Laboratory', gives us a chance to see people in situations that we all have felt or know about, feeling the way we have, but acting in an extremely fanatical way that no one can imagine. This poem also raises questions and somehow makes one think if the lady in the poem was justified or not. This paper will discuss such questions and will try to understand the concept of the grey. There is love and hate both inside each and everyone one of us as this world is full of dark emotions.

Jealousy is a powerful and complex emotions experienced at the loss, real or imagined, of something or someone one believes is theirs. Novelists over the years have used jealousy to explore the relationship between writer and reader, as well as between fiction and reality. The most intriguing part is how this emotion of jealousy operates differently in men and women.

From the age-old epic Mahabharata, where a woman becomes impure even after a touch of a man whereas, a king can have as many wives as he wants to be in bed with, to the stories considered a bit modern like Hamlet, women are blamed for every misdeed that takes place and is prone for the wrong use of emotions. At every step woman are made to believe inferior and are dominated by men in every aspect of their life.

Jealousy is often accompanied by feelings of helplessness, with increasing doubts in sense of self and increased paranoia. Writers like Robert Browning, help us understand the psyche of people who let their negative emotions lead them to react violently to their situations and leaves his to think whether their actions were wrong or not? 'The Laboratory', narrated by a young woman to an apothecary, who is preparing her a poison with which she will kill her rival at a nearby royal court. In lay man words, it is a story about her lover, who left her for another woman and the ensuing revenge. The poem reveals her to be a woman of power and intelligence using erroneous ways to get her way or the vulnerability of the lady of such a strong mind when it comes to losing her love interest. This poem raises questions like why did the woman choose to kill her romantic rival instead of the lover who cheated on her? Society's workings have taught women to envy each other and to mull over each other as competition, which majorly is the reason of arousal of such negative emotions inside the mind of a woman. So, was this anger righteous or was it the fault of lady keeping in mind that that is what she had been taught over the years?

Another thing that comes to our mind while reading the poem is that why the woman used poison to kill her rival. During the reign of King Louis XIV of France, the Affair of the Poisons was a major murder scandal in France which took place in 1677–1682. During it, a number of prominent members of the aristocracy were implicated and sentenced on charges of poisoning and witchcraft. So, we can see that the woman used the way which was already in trend at that time. Another interesting thing we can assume

here is that, the woman used poison instead of a sword or a knife because of the biased view of the society that considered these weapons to be also used by men only.

According to Freud's Psychoanalytic Theory, "The 'Id' is the part of the mind, which holds all of human being's most basic and primal instincts. It is the impulsive, unconscious part of the mind that is based on desire to seek immediate satisfaction. The id does not have a grasp on any form of reality or consequence." "In order for people to maintain a realistic sense here on earth, the 'Ego' is responsible for creating balance between pleasure and pain. It is impossible for all desires of the id to be met and the ego realizes this but continues to seek pleasure and satisfaction." And, "The 'Superego' can be considered to be the conscience of the mind because it has the ability to distinguish between reality as well as what is right or wrong." These three together make up our personality and define who we are.

If we look onto the times of the story where the woman choose to take up revenge using poison because everyone was doing so or how she had hatred for the other women inspite of the wrong doings of her own lover , what we can imagine is that , maybe there was no 'superego' present or even if it was there, 'id' won over it to the extent that she turned into a sadist and a killer. So, what now comes to our mind is that whether what she was doing was justified or is it still very hard to accept the fact that human hatred can force someone to go to that extent. And, Is there really a line between righteous anger and insanity or that it just hangs upon the hinges of the norms of the society?

One of the famous quotes of the most celebrated fiction novel Harry Potter, "We've all got both light and dark inside us. What matters is the part we choose to act on. That's who we really are", gives us the concept of 'Grey', i.e., that none of us are totally good nor completely evil.

In most cases, one side has better reasons and more good people than on the other. The protagonists usually fight for this better side. While the audience roots for the better side, they still have sympathy for the opposition, and often specific characters from the other side will be seen as Worthy Opponents. The woman in the poem belongs to the 'other side' and indeed, Browning made us more compassionate with her situation and also let the readers ponder as to whether her behaviour was justified or not.

Robert Browning's another astounding work, 'My Last Duchess', also depicts a similar or negative shade of love, jealousy. The poem is about the Duke of Ferrara who is also the narrator of the poem. Although he is on his best behaviour, the Duke of Ferrara demonstrates many sociopathic tendencies as he recalls the time he shared with his now-deceased Duchess. Apparently, the Duchess was easily pleased: she smiled at everything, and seemed just as happy when someone brought her a branch of cherries as she did when the Duke decided to marry her. She also blushed easily. The Duchess's genial nature was enough to throw the Duke into a jealous, psychopathic rage, and he "gave commands" that meant "all smiles stopped together", in other words, he gave orders to kill his wife. This poem is based on real-life figures depicting the shady emotions that accompany 'love.' Robert Browning indeed portrayed human emotions and helped the readers to get in touch with the dark-side, the side people do not talk about. Victorian Era was the age in which these poems were published but in a subtle way these questions and thoughts still prevail in the society and leave us spell-bound.

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