

Exploring the Dark Shades in the Poetry of Robert Browning

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ABSTRACT

This research paper aims to highlight the hidden facets that brought a plausible effect to the name of Robert Browning. Optimist, realist, mystic, he is widely known yet all these traits unveils only one aspect of his peculiar personality. The paper will bring into light the grotesqueness, tyranny, dark humour, and abnormal psychology of a human personality that are important yet unnoticed elements in the works of this genius. Browning has a keen interest in the representation of his unusual characters. He is considered to be a great artist and a master in giving a vivid and powerful portrayal of the inner side of human beings, their moral and mental qualities. This paper will explore the concealed but the most striking characteristics of human race and the tragic themes in the poetry of such an intellectual person.

Keywords: Grotesque, Dark Humour, Abnormal Psychology, Destructive Love and Death

INTRODUCTION

Robert Browning born on May 7 , 1812 in London, is a prolific Victorian- Era poet and playwright. He is widely recognized and well noted for his mastery of dramatic monologue and psychological portraiture. He had an inquisitive nature and was endowed with psychological insight. He learned to read and write when he was five years old and he was ready with his first literary work at the age of twelve. In such a short span of time, he composed his first work. In the duration of his life, he wrote eight plays and fifty-one (51) poems. He too composed many songs during his journey since beside literature, he was interested in music alike his mother and he inherited this talent from her. But he made his career in literature as a renowned writer, poet and playwright. Throughout his life, he wrote many notable works. Some of them are, “My Last Duchess”, “The Pied Piper of Hamelin”, “Porphyria’s Lover”,

“The Lost Leader”, “Meeting At Night”, “Hilde Roland To The Dark Tower”, “Fra Lippo Lippi” and “The Laboratory.” Indeed, ideal love, self- realization, art and religion, language and communication are the very explicit themes that ideally flows and are prevalent in his poems. But the poems like My Last Duchess, Porphyria’s Lover, The Laboratory and Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister grabs the attention of the readers, leaves an everlasting effect on their minds and briefly emphasizes on the

concept of irony, absurd mentality, dark humour and strong characterization in his works. He died on December 12, 1889 in Venice. He was buried at Westminster Abbey in the poet's corner.

Porphyria's Lover is a well-known poem which was first published in 1836 but later appeared in *Dramatic Lyrics* (1842). It was first ever short dramatic monologue of Robert Browning that brought a great popularity and glory to him. It is one of his most famous poems and dramatic monologue. This poem gives us a deep insight to the unusual behaviour, the madness and the abnormal psychology of a lover who has an intense desire of having power and possession over his beloved, driven by the same disorderly forces, he ultimately murders her. The characters are well-drawn and the story line is interesting.

The next poem is *My Last Duchess*. It first appeared in 1842 and has been taken from Browning's volume *Dramatic Lyrics*. It has twenty-eight (28) rhyming couplets of Iambic Pentameter. Robert was very much interested in combining two forms or experimenting with two different genres and here also he has toyed with some characteristics of stage plays and some of romantic verses. Thus, creating a totally different type of poetry. The poem will bring in forth the vicious character and the unethical conduct of a Duke who killed his

Duchess because he could not endure her prudent and compassionate nature. This poem is a fine example of Robert's powerful and imposing choice of words and phrases. The next poem, *The Laboratory* is a metaphysical poem which again follows the form of dramatic monologue. Written by Robert Browning, it was first published in June 1844 in *Hood's Magazine and Comic Miscellany* but later it appeared in *Dramatic Romantic and Lyrics* in 1945. The poem is set in seventeenth-century. The scene took place in France and this time is the period before revolution which means it was the time when monarchy was still prevalent. The narrator in this poem is a woman who has been betrayed in love by his lover and through the eyes of Robert Browning we come across the vengeful psyche of this frustrated woman who is conspiring a heinous act of killing her rivals. This poem is well known for the exhilaration of the writing. The rhyming scheme is very much regular and follows the pattern of ABAC. Last poem is *Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister*. This poem was first published in *Dramatic Lyrics* (1842). It is written in trochaic tetrameter and consist of nine, eight-line stanzas with the rhyming scheme of ABABCDCD. The poem depicts the grumblings of an envious monk towards a fellow monk, "Brother Lawrence", who fails in trivial ways to obey Christianity. And thus the narrator's hatred towards his immorality gives rise to his desirous longing of killing him and damning his soul forever. Though the poem looks a bit historic and religious at the first place but yet another proves to be Browning's another poem that explores mental hypocrisy. The poem is not technically a dramatic monologue as the speaker is talking to himself and not to the audience, so it would be appropriate to call it a "Soliloquy."

Three of above the four poems are written in the form of dramatic monologue. In English Literature, during the time of Victorian period, the dramatic monologue was launched by Robert Browning. 'Monologue' is a Greek word which basically means 'a self-conversation' or 'a speech delivered by single character.' And here also in these poems one person is giving a speech and revealing different aspects of his or her life. Thus, bringing into light, their own temperament and their own characteristics. Taking these poems into account, this paper will explore the dark shades of poetry by

Robert Browning that did a big favour to him in becoming one of the foremost Victorian poets of his as well as of the contemporary era.

In the poem of *Porphyria's Lover*, the major theme of death of death has been highlighted. It is an exhilarating love story where the speaker is an insane person who is so obsessed with his beloved believing that it is the only way to keep her with him forever. "I listened with heart fit to break." (Robert Browning) This line depicts the mental instability of the narrator where his condition gets so heart broken and devastated by the bad weather and he feels grief-stricken by the outside condition. The poet has also drawn our attention towards the problem of class distinction that becomes one of the crucial cause of the lover's anxiety and instability and leads Porphyria to death. The poems help the readers to know that Porphyria is a fairly lady belonging to an upper class family and the narrator living in the cottage is probably from a lower class society. This brings fear in the mind of narrator of getting separated from his lover due to social unjust. The narrator loses his stability while pondering upon this aspect.

Porphyria after arriving the cottage, comes closer to the narrator. Blushes and starts making love to him. As they embrace each other, the narrator acknowledges her perfect, pure and devotional love for him. But very soon he discovers that her passionate attempt is to hide her pride and self-esteem. He believes that her high status, vanity, sensuous beauty and aesthetic qualities would not allow her to love him completely. He want to have a complete possession over the blooming young lady and her love. His fondness is too deep that it crosses every limit. Unable to constrain his overwhelming desire, his terrible thoughts take place and he strangles her to overcome his passion of being her only lover.

Here, the poet describes the most distorted and darkest side of the narrator's mind. He takes her long yellow hair, wraps it around her throat thrice, chokes her breath till she finally dies. Her love is so dear to him that he murders her to keep her with him for eternity and considers his action a prideful and passive one. Through this complete multi layered character of Browning, we encounter such vicious conflicts in one's mind that can take love to such insecure, absurd and devastating level that is capable of taking one's life. We come across a lucid but negative psyche of a human being. Now coming to the poem *My Last Duchess*, here we have three characters, the Duke, the messenger, and the last duchess. The Duke speaks throughout, the last duchess is dead and the messenger remains silent all the time. The basis of this poem is on a true Italian story. In the poem, the duke of Ferrara desires to marry for the second time and one of the neighbouring count (The Count of Tyrol) wants his daughter to get married to him and therefore he sends his messenger to negotiate the proposal of marriage. The entire poem revolves around the Duke's addressal to the messenger while giving him a tour to his palace.

The duke then unveils the portrait of his duchess and invites the messenger to have a look at it. From here the duke will give a detailed character sketch of his wife which according to him is foolish and immoral but consequently discloses his own conduct which is greedy, brutal and full of vanity.

When the messenger is quite amazed by the passionate look in the duchess' eyes, to know the reason he turns to the duke with curiosity. The duke here hints at the bad character of the duchess by saying

that this ardent glow in her eyes and the blush on her face is not solely because of the presence of her husband but majorly also because of the comments and pleasing statements of the painter whose name was Fra Pandolf and who was appreciating her beauty. Her gentle nature is negatively portrayed as an unethical one. But in the process of doing so, he is unveiling his own insecure and suspicious conduct. Sir, 't was not Her husband's presence only, called that spot of Joy into the Duchess cheek; perhaps Fra Pandolf chanced to say While standing before the painting, the duke further goes on to say that the duchess was too stupid to be pleased with trifles.

For example, a branch laden by with cherries, or the scene of the setting sun or a mule gifted to her by her admirer. Here the duke takes proud in saying that he belongs to an aristocratic and reputed family whose history could be traced back to nine hundred years. He has gifted his wife with heavy ornaments which she wears in her neck but he considers the behaviour of his wife to be foolish for giving the same kind of importance to the gifts presented to her by him as presented by any other admirer.

The duke seems to be jealous of tender and courteous nature of the duchess because he himself lacks it. He is quite frustrated at her sense of indiscrimination. He considers her childish but himself is so conceited that he decides not to lower his dignity to express his thoughts and her apparent faults and mistakes to her. Otherwise, it could have stopped him from committing this execution.

He was not happy at his blissful smiles and her kind manners became this much intolerable to him that out of frustration and bitterness he gave orders to murder her. Thus, he reveals his own cruel, inhuman, dominating and arrogant conduct while defaming the benevolent nature of the duchess. She is a courteous woman and full of etiquettes but he is a wicked person who is full of wrong doings. In the poem, Robert Browning has successfully shown his skills in presenting the grotesqueness and abnormal psychology of his lead character. Through this character in the poem, there prevails hypocrisy and tyranny.

Further, talking about the poem, The laboratory reveals us the unforgiving and deadly mentality of a woman who is sitting in the laboratory of an old chemist and planning the murder of her rivals in love i.e. her husband and his lover who are present at a nearby royal court. She is wearing her mask and watching the apothecary through the haze of smoke who is making her the poison. There is a faint white smoke in the atmosphere therefore they are looking at each other through the glass masks. From here the readers get the hint that something wicked and sinister is cooking inside the mind of this woman which is going to happen very soon.

“Which is the poison to poison her, prithee?” (Robert Browning) And finally the mystery is solved when Robert Browning draws the curtains from the evil intentions of this lady. She is preparing the poison to kill her husband and his lover because she has been holding animosity in her heart after getting abandoned by her lover. She is so insecure and infuriated that she is constantly recalling her lover's deeds done in the past and the wrongdoings that he must be doing at the present moment. She thinks that the new couple must be laughing at her condition and imagining that she is lamenting her destiny. They must be thinking that she has gone to an old church where she will be crying and pleading to god. But in reality her plans are way too bigger and destructive.

She is sitting there comfortably. Neither she finds any weirdness in the dreadful act of preparing poison nor she is in hurry. Rather she is curiously watching the chemist who is making the concoction and mashing up his ingredients into a powder. Because of course a good evil plot needs no hurry and no worry. The lady is further fascinated by the blue colour of the poison inside the bottle and thinks that the colour of the potion will surely make it taste good and sweet. Here the limit crosses everything, when she is finding goodness and looking at the better aspect of such a vicious task of killing. She is nowhere guilty of her misdeeds rather finding them more prideful and amazing.

She suddenly dwells into daydreaming and starts imagining herself to be the sole owner of these poisons that she considers to be the treasures of life. She further thinks that how much fun it will be if she get the opportunity to kill many people through it. Certain lines in the poem show the absurd personality of this woman who is finding such sinful task pleasurable and hints at her evil desire of killing people in masses. Her two target seems to be Elise and Pauline who are enjoying at the royal court. But she is more excited and feeling thrilled in murdering Elise. With full interest and curiosity she is preparing the medicine that will destroy the body of Elise. She is quite an insecure and mischievous person who will avenge herself by the bloodshed that will satisfy her wickedness and cruelty.

Through his strong characterization, Robert Browning has subverted the idea of a conventional woman. A woman who is looked upon and considered as the epitome of love, affection and sympathy is portrayed in this poem as a barbarous person who takes a villainous form and is ready to commit every kind of sin to take her revenge by murdering her competitors who had deserted her in love. The extreme level of grotesqueness is auspiciously jolted down by Robert Browning in this poem through the wicked personality of his main character who has been jilted in love and ultimately this love takes the form of destruction.

Lastly, the poem comes "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister." As the title itself suggests it is narrated by an unnamed Spanish monk. It highlights the envy and hatred of the narrator towards his fellow monk, "Brother Lawrence." The setting is a monastery where in the morning time Sir Lawrence is watering plants as per his daily routine. Sir Lawrence has done no harm to the narrator but he shows a strong hostility for him. Without saying a single word, he just growls looking at him. "Heart's abhorrence" is a word that is indicating at strong hatred in his heart for the fellow monk. Sir Lawrence seems to be a fine man who is busy minding his work. But strange is the enmity of the narrator who dislikes him so much that he says that if hatred would be capable of killing men, then Brother Lawrence must be dead because of his animosity.

"Needs its laden vase filled brimming? Hell dry you up with its flames!" (Robert Browning) In the next few lines where Sir Lawrence is watering flowers in their vase, the narrator points him and says ironically that flowers don't need any further watering. The tone he uses here is quite sarcastic. And in the very next line he mentions his desire of to see Brother Lawrence burning in hell. Sir Lawrence has not done anything wrong or unsound but the narrator's attitude towards him is abnormal and weird. He cannot tolerate his presence and without any logic his bitterness is budding. He expresses his antipathy at such unusual petty quality of Sir Lawrence. "While Brown Dolores Squats outside the

convent bank With Sanchicha, telling stories, Steeping tresses in the tank, Blue-back, lustrous, thick like horsehairs.” (Robert Browning) These lines hints readers at narrator’s formed judgement about Sir Lawrence’s lustful gestures towards the two ladies Brown Dolores and Sanchicha who are from the neighboring convent. Though Sir Lawrence’s actions don’t prove it firmly, but in his mind the speaker denies to consider him as a monk for monks rigidly follow chastity. According to him, Brother Lawrence is checking out on women and therefore makes his image of a licentious person but he himself has dirty novels “my scrofulous French novel”, so how he himself has abided by the rules and vows of chastity. Here, we believe that he has failed to stand by the laws of Christianity and condemning Sir Lawrence for the violation. In the last few lines, the readers get to know the zenith of his animosity that he is ready to sell his own soul to Satan in exchange of getting the extreme pleasure of damning Brother Lawrence in the hell. He will get utter relief after seeing Sir Lawrence inflicted with pain. This brings into light his evil and ungodly notions that even being a part of such pure, virtuous and religious place, there is harbouring in him such vicious beliefs.

In this poem, Robert Browning highlights the queer and unacceptable qualities of the human psyche. The lead character is a monk in a monastery but his unpleasant and detestable attitude towards his own fellow monk contradicts his own reality. His true identity is revealed through the gruesome thoughts going on in his head. The entire poem is pointing out at his ghastly mentality. He pretends to be an upright, religious and a prudent person but very cruel is his actuality. Thus, through one more poem Browning shows the darker side of a human being that could be totally opposite to his apparent personality.

CONCLUSION

On the basis of above mentioned observations, it can be concluded that Browning’s genius, vitality and dynamism permits him to create a massive range of human emotions and conditions. His intent was to focus his gaze upon life in such a way that describes and demonstrates the negative and darker shades of human nature.

The above mentioned points adds to the existing interpretation and also throws light to some unknown facets of the works written throughout his life. Such poems of Browning are rich in the themes of irony, strong characterization, dark humour, suspense, revenge, thrill, murder and devastating image of death. It also focuses on social commentary, historical settings and challenging vocabulary and syntax through his strange forms of writing.

With his ultimate intellect, unlikeliness and peculiarity, he had made many contributions to Victorian social and political discourse and brought himself fame and a great glory to his name. His poems are very popular and are read worldwide till the date.

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