

A STUDY OF ROBERT BROWNING'S EPICHRAMATIC POEMS
DEALING WITH MURDER AND SUICIDE

by

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INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

Robert Browning, one of the greatest English poets of the nineteenth century, searched into the minds of people and found realistic pictures never before described by a poet. One of the more interesting features of his nondramatic poetry was Browning's unraveling of motives for murder and suicide. Through considerable research, Browning wrote a wealth of material on this subject. In these poems the plot contained the chief motive for death and the events which led to the death of one or more of the characters.

Crime is definitely a medium for the explanation of some of Browning's attitudes. Through the discussions of the poems dealing with murder and suicide and the analyses of Browning's attitudes, an attempt is made to see how important this morbid theme was to Browning. Was tragedy a common occurrence in his poetry, and why did he choose to write about such themes? This thesis relates the plot in which a murder or suicide occurred and then dwells upon the methods Browning used to show his attitudes.

SYNOPSIS OF POEMS DEALING WITH MURDER AND SUICIDE

Some of Browning's poems, such as The Inn Album and The Ring and The Book, dealing with murder, cover many pages.

Others were considerably shorter and include My Last Duchess and Artemis Prologizes. The shorter poems contained little value as to a story; they related only a short incident, while the longer poems went into great detail as to the plot.

The underlying interest in Browning's murder poems is that he did not punish the murderer for his crime. His treatment of murder corresponded directly to his attitudes toward optimism, religion, and science, as will be shown later in this thesis. Browning's belief in one's success or failure in life is developed fully in the two poems, In a Gondola and Ivan Ivanovitch. As an optimist Browning never admitted that the murderer was entirely at fault; this is seen in In a Gondola and in Porphyria's Lover.

Browning's treatment of punishment might be said to be highly optimistic in the fact that the murderer or sinner received the punishment he deserved as in The Confessional and in Halbert and Hob. He realized fully that each person was at fault, and that failure through the means of some crime was better than that of desire without fulfillment; Porphyria's Lover portrayed this also.

In his suicide poems, The Red Cotton Night-Cap Country showed that life without satisfaction leads to frustration. This poem was the only one which contained a suicide; however, in The Inn Album and in Artemis Prologizes both a murder and a suicide occurred. The suicide in The Inn Album resulted from frustration similar to that of The Red Cotton

Night-Cap Country.

Doubtless Browning's poems were dependent upon his attitudes. His religious teachings were found in out-of-the-way places in Ivan Ivanovitch, Cristina and Monaldeschi, and in The Inn Album. As a scientist, he uncovered possibilities and ideas for a murder or suicide that could be committed by a criminal today, and his suicide poems presented as honest a case as are our suicide cases in the twentieth century. The Laboratory and A Forgiveness are examples of well-planned murders, while the description of Miranda's suicide in The Red Cotton Night-Cap Country is perfect.

Before there is an attempt made to study the murder cases, it would be wise to quote from an article by Sir Henry James, which said, "Browning had inherited a taste for tales of crime from his father."¹ This fact, no doubt, accounted for three of his poems which had a murder and also were based upon an historical background - The Inn Album, The Red Cotton Night-Cap Country, and The Ring and the Book.

The last issue to observe is the definition of murder and the qualifications concerning murder.

In Bouvier's Law Dictionary, the following information about murder is given:

¹ Sir Henry James, Cambridge History of English Literature, XIII, 88.

Murder: The wilful killing of any subject whatever, with malice aforethought, whether the person slain shall be an Englishman or a foreigner, must be of sound mind and memory.

Malice, either expressed or implied. It is this circumstance which distinguishes murder from every description of homicide.

Murder may be committed as the result of some illegal act, whether the design to take life is actually present or not.

It being contrary to the law of the land to commit suicide, if two persons meet together and agree to do so, and one of them dies, the other is guilty of murder.²

These qualifications do not include those murders which were based upon medieval settings as in Count Gismond, or upon myths as in Artemis Frologizes. These poems may be classified on the basis of the fact that some one was killed in each poem. Other than the basis for murder, no other comment may be made.

In his dramatic works, tragedy is commonplace. Pippa Passes, Strafford, King Victor, King Charles, A Blot in the 'Scutcheon, and Luria are all good examples of tragedy. However, his nondramatic poems portrayed a truer character representation in most cases, for they showed a more scrutinizing analyzation than do his early plays.

In order to summarize the themes of murder and suicide used in the poetry of Browning, one must first understand the story behind each of the poems in which a murder or suicide

² John Bouvier, Bouvier's Law Dictionary. 2281-2282.

occurs. Not all of Browning's poems were based on the same cause of crime, nor were they of the same type in regard to time, place, or situation involved.

Adultery was a predominant factor in the poetry of Browning. He seemed to dwell on the theme that murder or suicide was the only outcome of a situation involving adultery. Examples are shown in the following poems: Artemis Prologizes, A Forgiveness, Count Gismond, In a Gondola, The Inn Album, Porphyria's Lover, and The Red Cotton Night-Cap Country. To understand the similarity of these poems one must understand the characters and the situations with which they are faced. The common effect in all of these poems was found to be the weakening of an individual's will power through the means of illicit love. Developing this thought further, an attempt was made to point out the various crimes as they were indicated in the poem itself, with a story of the murder included as a means of explanation.

Other than The Ring and the Book, which will be developed in a later chapter, The Inn Album and The Red Cotton Night-Cap Country were two of Browning's longer poems. Both of these poems contain the story of a person who committed suicide because of a disappointment in love. The main character in each of these two poems also died as a result of the previous sin of adultery.

In The Inn Album the young woman's conscience was filled with the thought of having lived with an elderly man. Before

the suicide, she fell madly in love with a young man, but because of the stain upon her soul, she tried to avoid shame and humiliation by taking her own life. As the young woman died, she made one last confession of her crime.

I die now through the villain who lies dead,
Righteously slain. He would have outraged me,
So my defender slew him. God protect
The right! Where wrong lay, I bear witness now.
Let man believe me, whose last breath is spent
In blessing my defender from my soul!

In defense of the theory of suicide, Cooke, in A Guide Book to the Poetic and Dramatic Works of Robert Browning said:

...Her seducer has made his confession of his punishment, and has attributed, instead of misery, comfort and ease to her. She has to tell him, and the young man who has given her his whole heart, that the supposed comfort and ease has been to her simply hell; and tell, too, why she cannot accept the true love that, under other conditions, would have been her way back to heaven and life. What, then, can be her end? No higher power has she ever sought. Self-contained, she has sinned and suffered. She can no more. By her own hand she ends her life.³

The Inn Album contained the tragic tale of a young man and his former girl friend in an attempt to find happiness. The young man was being duped by an elderly former suitor of the heroine. The old man had stolen all of the youth's earthly possessions and had persuaded him to marry a woman to regain some money. Telling the youth a tale about one of his former mistresses, the old man unknowingly disclosed truths of the younger's ex-fiancee.

³ George Willis Cooke, A Guide Book to the Poetic and Dramatic Works of Robert Browning, 175.

The two men were to meet the forthcoming bride at the inn. As she approached, she had as her companion the young married lady who had been the former lover of both men. The older man, upon pretense, brought her into the inn in order to reclaim his love. Meanwhile the younger man still did not know that the woman was in the inn. He entered the room and saw the two together, realizing the former relationship which had existed between the two.

His rival left while the two true lovers exchanged promises. Then, as the young woman leafed through the inn album which led to her eventual suicide, the two men again held conference. Upon dispute for ulterior motive, the younger man choked the elder. The woman returned and thanked the youth at her dying breath. The death message was written by the elder man; the substance of it told the young woman that the youth still loved her. Unless she responded to the elder man's advances, the secret of her past life would be revealed to her husband. In order to avert this disaster, she took poison.

The theme of The Red Gotten Night-Cap Country is similar to that of The Inn Album. Although there was no third party involved, the guilt of adultery rested upon the male character in the poem. For a number of years he had been living outside of Paris in a suburb. In his company there lived a young woman, but they were united without the bonds of wedlock. Having been discovered in this rendezvous, Miranda jumped

from a balustrade into the street below. Hence, his life ended in tragedy. Before his fatal jump, he flung these words to the crowd:

"None of you married women have the right
To mutter 'Yes, indeed, she beats us all
In beauty,--but our lives are pure at least!'
Bear witness, for our marriage is no thing
Done in a corner! 'Tis The Ravissante
Repairs the wrong of Paris. See, She smiles,
She beckons, She bids 'Hither, both of you!'
And may I worship you, and yet love her?
Then!"-

A sublime spring from the balustrade
About the tower so often talked about,
A flash in middle air, and stone-dead lay
Monsieur Leonce Miranda on the turf.

When Miranda, the jeweler, jumped from the balustrade, he was running away from his inner conscience. As a weak character, ashamed of his adultery he had committed, he lived in the outskirts of Paris away from the gossiping crowds. For years he and his mistress had lived together as an average married couple. The discovery of the sin in his life was more than his weakened soul could take, so he committed suicide.

Browning offered no alternative or solace in this poem. As a reporter he issued to the reader only the straight facts, omitting personal feelings altogether. True to form, this poem was written as only Browning could write it; however, the theme for this poem was taken from an actual happening.

In Count Gismond and Porphyria's Lover is found the fact that neither of the women in these poems committed adultery; however, in Count Gismond the woman is accused, but in Porphyria's Lover she has succumbed to the desires of her lover.

The murder in Count Gismond took place when the Count slayed Gauthier for the false accusations made against the Count's future wife. Gismond then left the populace with his lady, midst the cheers of the crowd. No punishment was involved because the setting of this poem was in medieval times.

In Count Gismond only an accusation of slander had been made. Although slander could be classed as a form of crime, death cannot be the motive for punishing slander in the courts of today. The setting was at a public gathering where the future countess was to be crowned the Queen of May. Jealous cousins, a fervent crowd, the two men (Gismond and Gauthier), and the Queen of May were the people involved.

Before the coronation occurred, Gauthier set forth his accusations, and Gismond stepped from the crowd to reclaim the virtues of the young woman. The result led to the murder of Gauthier by Gismond.

Gismond flew at him, used no sleight
O' the sword, but open-breasted drove,
Cleaving till out the truth he clove.

Which done, he dragged him to my feet
And said, "Here die, but end thy breath
In full confession, lest thou flee
From my first, to God's second death!
Say, hast thou lied?" And, "I have lied
To God and her," he said, and died.

Having thus killed Gauthier with a fencing sword, Gismond redeemed his lady fair and went on his way with her.

When the lady was publicly accused by the scoundrel, Gauthier, I suppose many men said, "What a pity that so fair a woman should be so foul." Others said gravely, "This matter ought to be judicially examined." Gismond

was the only man who realized that a defenseless orphan was insulted, and the words were hardly out of Gauthier's mouth when he received the "fist's reply to the filth."⁴

Browning wrote that the punishment for this crime was a reward, by making the young lady the wife of Gismond. Beyond a doubt a murder had been committed. However, in medieval times no law punished a knight who fought in honor of a lovely woman. Browning made no excuses, and the reader of the poem is to suppose that murder was in good taste.

In Porphyria's Lover, the heroine was strangled by her lover:

...I found
A thing to do, and all her hair
In one long yellow string I wound
Three times her little throat around,
And strangled her.....

Porphyria had been to a party at her home and had taken a moment to run to her lover's small cottage. He was of a lower social station than she. In spite of this fact they remained in close relationship with each other. Porphyria had always been secretive about this affair. (By this statement is meant that she had never acknowledged her lover to the world.) On this particular night, however, circumstances of weather and mood aroused her emotions so that on her arrival at the cottage, she was willing to accept whatever her lover might demand. Jealous of each moment with her and hesitant to accept this new show of love, impulsively he wound her hair about her neck and choked her. Nevertheless, he did not feel

⁴ William Lyon Phelps, Robert Browning and How to Know Him, 178.

at all upset about his crime, nor did he have an urge to run from the murder he had committed. Instead, he remained in the same position in front of the fire with his arms about Porphyria. In the last two lines of the poem are indicated the main characteristics of Porphyria's Lover.

And all night long we have not stirred,
And yet God has not said a word!

Here again Browning refused to punish the murderer by means of law. He left the results of the case in the minds of his readers. This method was one of Browning's favorite instruments of writing found in all of his poetry. He set the scene for murder; it was committed, and then he relied upon God's judgment for punishment for the tragedy. Porphyria's Lover, as was Count Gismond, was a dramatic monologue.

Continuing with adultery, the common theme of Browning's murder and suicide poems, A Forgiveness showed that revenge could grow into hate despite the changing attitude of an individual. A very rich man, satisfied with his family, his home, and his position, returned home one night to find a prowler in his garden. Thinking him a thief, the husband attempted to stop the intruder. The wife, fearing her husband's intentions, interfered with the struggle between the men. She told her husband that she was a partner of an illicit love affair with the man in question. For the next three years the husband and wife continued to live under the same roof, but their marriage was held together by name only. At the end of

three years, after a banquet at the palace of king, she asked to be taken into her husband's secret room where she used to go in the earlier period of her marriage. He led her there where she admitted that she was still in love with him. But, he had grown to despise her and could never accept her love under any terms. He advised her to swear by blood that she was still in love with him. Through a prick above the heart, he killed his wife with a poisoned pen:

And she wrote the words
I read them. Then--"Since love, in you affords
License for hate, in men, to quench (I say)
Contempt--why, hate itself has passed away
In vengeance--foreign to contempt. Depart
Peacefully to that death which Eastern art
Imbued this weapon with, if tales be true!
Love will succeed to hate. I pardon you--
Dead in our chamber!"

True as truth the tale.
She died ere morning.

In a confession to the priest, the husband admitted the murder of his wife. Evidently this act bothered his conscience for many years. The priest did not commit himself; for, similar to many other of Browning's poems, A Forgiveness was also silent as to the means of punishment. The murder was premeditated and, of course, it should be punishable by law. The setting for this poem could have been previous to the nineteenth century or could have been contemporary with Browning, for many of Browning's poems were timeless as to a period of history. Nevertheless, this crime went unpunished.

Browning had very little to do with classic themes in his poetry. However, one of his poems dealing with murder

or suicide was taken from the ancient Greek myths.⁵ Artemis

Prologizes told of the unfinished tragedy about Hippilutos.

Browning never completed this poem.

When from the gaping wave a monster flung
 His obscene body in the coursers' path.
 These, mad with terror, as the sea-gull sprawled
 Wallowing about their feet, lost care of him
 That reared them; and the master-chariot-pole
 Snapping beneath their plunges like a reed,
 Hiplitos, whose feet were trammelled fast,
 Was yet dragged forward by the circling rein
 Which either hand directed;.....

.....
 ... then fell the steeds
 Head foremost, crashing in their mooned fronts,
 Shivering with sweat, each white eye horror fixed,
 His people, who had witnessed all afar,
 Bore back the ruins of Hippolutos.

There was no punishment for this crime. Theseus was a god, and he could do as he commanded. The people grieved for Hippilutos and he was eventually brought back to life. Browning's knowledge of the classics led to the writing of this poem; thus its content is different from the other poems dealing with murder and suicide.

In the poem, In a Gondola, there were three jealous men-- a husband, a brother, and a father. Two young people, very much in love in spite of the fact that the young woman was

⁵ In Greek mythology there was a woman named Phaedra, whose husband was Theseus. She had fallen in love with her stepson, Hippilutos. (without her husband's knowledge.) When Hippolutos refused her advances, she double-crossed him by hanging herself and accusing Hippolutos of improper advances toward her. Theseus banished his son from the country. Through persuasion, Poseidon, or Neptune, the god of the sea, frightened Hippolutos' horses by the sea and the young man died. When Theseus discovered his mistake, he became a grief-stricken father mourning the dead son.

married, were in a gondola together. Conscious of the fact that at any moment they might be discovered by one of The Three, they cautiously kissed far from the shore. In pretense of their love, they assumed the characteristics of types and nationalities of other love-sick people. They loved in the manner as they desired. As their departure grew nearer, they came toward the shore where the woman demanded one more kiss. At this moment the man was stabbed with a dagger from behind by one of The Three. As he died he swore:

heart to heart

And lips to lips! Yet once more, ere we part,
Clasp me and make me thine, as mine thou art!
(He is surprised, and stabbed.)
It was ordained to be so, sweet!--and best
Comes now, beneath thine eyes, upon thy breast.
Still kiss me! Care not for the cowards! Care
Only to put aside thy beauteous hair
My blood will hurt! The Three I do not scorn
To death, because they never lived; but I
Have lived indeed, and so--(yet one more
kiss)--can die!

The Three had not wanted their wife, sister, or daughter to become involved with another man. When the romance could not be broken up by persuasion, the men resorted to force. This crime warranted punishment, but Browning ended the poem at the death of the young man. He stated, however, that the youth had lived completely, while The Three lacked the necessary incentive which would make their lives enjoyable.

Branching off from murder committed as a result of adultery, there were other causes of murder found in Browning's poetry. These included the murder of a wife or a husband, or murder derived from indirect sources and infanticide.

In My Last Duchess, the Duke of Ferrara scorned his latest wife. Although he indirectly spoke of her death as unnatural, he never told his courtly visitor that a murder had actually taken place. Jealousy was an important factor in this poem. He had become jealous of each small affection his wife gave to other men. Then he had her killed by some of his men. My Last Duchess had been subjected to comment and opinions by critics of Browning to a great extent. Even though the element of murder was not always discussed, many of the critics maintained that the Duke in a fit of jealousy did kill the Duchess or arranged to have her killed. The poem itself told the true story of the Duke's inward feeling toward his last duchess:

...Oh sir, she smiled, no doubt,
Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without
Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;
Then all smiles stopped together...

Thus the Duke obliterated his former wife by having her killed by some of his henchmen.

In The Laboratory the motive for murder is similar. The woman was obsessed only with the desire to kill for revenge, which was aroused from jealousy. The woman at the chemist's had not committed murder yet, but from all indications this seemed to be her intention. Her husband had fallen in love with another woman, and his wife was extremely jealous. She did not intend to kill her husband, but she would kill the woman who was infatuated with him.

The murders in My Last Duchess and The Laboratory dif-

ferred in the time they were committed. In My Last Duchess, the murder had already been committed before the reader knew that the Duchess' "smiles had stopped". In The Laboratory the murder was soon to be committed. However, there was no doubt in The Laboratory as to the woman's intentions. This could be seen through the insane hatred of the future murderer. The plot, the motive, and the details were given by means of expert writing.

Soon at the King's, a mere lozenge to give
And Pauline should have just thirty minutes to live!
But to light a pastile, and Elise, with her head
And her breast and her arms and her hands,
 should drop dead!

No explanation was given when the names of both women were mentioned in the poem. It might be supposed that the woman at the laboratory was desiring to kill more than one woman who had stolen her husband's love. But Fotheringham explained the motive in this manner:

.....The first is an utterance of passionate intensity in a situation that gives passion scope. It depicts the ruthless jealousy of one who is taking a cruel pleasure in watching behind a mask every detail of the preparation of a deadly poison for one who is her rival in love, who has "snared" her lover. She is impatient till it be ready, and will give all she has for it. Every line and phrase is keen with bitter fire, and tense with eager hate.⁶

In Halbert and Hob, another poem containing murder, two men, father and son, became aroused, and by their tempers a fight was started. The father ordered the son out of the house,

⁶ James Fotheringham, Studies of the Mind and Art of Robert Browning, 223.

and their oaths came to blows. The father then realized the danger of a fist fight through a memory of such a fight in his youth. Finally, the fight came to a halt. The son was found the next morning an idiot; the father had died. No crime had taken place, but why did the father die? Could the wounds inflicted by the son be the cause of death, thus making the son a murderer, or could the father have died from some type of internal bleeding or ailment? Browning did not answer these questions, although he seemed to believe that the father and son received the punishment they deserved.

Criminals, then? Why, no: they did not murder and rob;
 But, give them a word, they returned a blow--
 old Halbert as young Hob;
 Harsh and fierce of word, rough and savage of deed,
 Hated or feared the more--Who knows?--
 the genuine wild-beast breed.

By presuming that Hob, the son, was a murderer, the poem would then contain a crime. If so, the murderer, though sane at the time of the fight, had become insane through human emotions and the deeds that he committed. Thus, in our law courts of today, he would stand no trial.

In the poem, Cristina and Monaldeschi, the main characters were taken from history.⁷ Queen Cristina knew that Monaldeschi had committed fraud and treason against her; meanwhile, he attempted to build up her hatred for an innocent person. The discovery of the Marquis' misconceptions by the

⁷ Cristina was the queen of Sweden from 1644-1648. During one of her visits to France, she caused the death of her lover, Marquis Monaldeschi.

Queen led to the decision of murder. A priest was called to administer the last rites. Monaldeschi was tricked into appearing before the Queen with the fraudulent letters, and reasonable evidence of his misdemeanors was given. The Queen, having aroused and righteously affronted Monaldeschi, had him put to death by three men.

Friends, my four! You, Priest, confess him.
 I have judged the culprit there:
 Execute my sentence! Care
 For no mail such cowards wear:
 Done, Priest? Then absolve and bless him!
 Now--you three, stab thick and fast,
 Deep and deeper! Dead at last?
 Thanks, friends--Father, thanks! Aghast!

Monaldeschi begged the priest for his life, but that was in vain. At the command of the Queen, Sentinelli had the count put to death. Throughout her life she was reprimanded for being a partner in this crime; however, she was never punished. This murder was premeditated. It was of definite historical value, because it showed how a monarch can kill a subject upon her desire to do so.

In The Confessional a grief-stricken young girl confided a secret to a priest. The priest to whom she confessed was guilty of the murder of her lover. The lover had been a leader in a revolt against the church; thinking that a confession would free the lover of punishment, the young woman told the priest of her lover's heresy. But instead of freeing him, the priest had him killed and then placed the girl in prison. When she was aware that her lover would never return,

she was driven frantic and cursed the priest and his hired murderers.

I told the father all his schemes,
Who were his comrades, what their dreams;
"And now make haste," I said, "to pray
The one spot from his soul away;
Tonight he comes, but not the same
Will look!" At night he never came.

... --and here,
No earth, not so much space as pens
My body in their worse of dens
But shall bear God and man my cry,
Lies--lies, again--and still, they lie!

Cenciaja and Ivan Ivanovitch are among the few of Browning's murder poems in which the murderers received punishment. Browning obtained the facts for Cenciaja from a manuscript of memorial of Italian crime. It was also based upon the plot in Shelley's The Cenci. Browning brought out more evidence against the Pope and possibly showed the characters in a truer light than Shelley. Cenciaja portrayed the sixteenth century attitude of the economic value of the Roman Catholic Church in regard to honesty, love, and other fundamental Christian attitudes.⁸ Cooke, stated in regard to this poem:

...The pope, according to this narrative, was likely to grant a pardon to Beatrice Cenci; but just then the Marchesa dell'Oricolo, a widow, was murdered by her younger son, Paolo Santa Croce. The young man sought to secure the rights of this older brother, but when his mother refused to grant him these, he became a matricide. He succeeded in making good his escape; but a letter written to his older brother seemed to implicate him also; and he, though wholly innocent, was charged with being an accessory to the crime, and was wrought upon until he was driven into insanity, made confession, and beheaded.⁹

⁸ George W. Cooke, A Guide Book to the Poetic and Dramatic Works of Robert Browning, 75.

⁹ Ibid.

Continuing in explanation, Browning took for his main character, the Pope, who had been previously the executioner in Shelley's poem. Browning's poem told the substance of the murder:

By which advice informed and fortified
 As he professed himself--since bound by birth
 To hear God's voice in primogeniture--
 Paolo, who kept his mother company
 In her domain Shbiaco, straightway dared
 His whole enormity of enterprise,
 And, falling on her, stabbed the lady dead;
 Whose death demonstrated her innocence.....

The story of Ivan Ivanovitch is laid in Russia during the reign of Peter the Great in the latter part of the seventeenth century. A village had caught fire, and a woman was sent with her three children to her native village some miles away. During the trip a pack of wolves attacked the sled in which the woman and her children were riding. She was so weak in character that she let the wolves eat each of the three children in order to save herself from death.

The poem said in regard to the murder of one of her sons:

... "If one must go, 'tis men
 The Tsar needs, so we hear, not ailing boys! Perhaps
 My hands relaxed their grasp, got tangled in the wraps:
 God, he was gone!"

After the mother Louscha had told her story, she collapsed and was recognized by her friend, Ivan Ivanovitch, a wood cutter. He listened to her story, and then upon his own judgment of evil chopped off her head with an axe.

The man was scant of words as strokes. "It had to be:
I could no other: God, it was, bade 'Act for me!'"
Then stopping, peering round--what is it now he lacks?
A proper strip of bark wherewith to wipe his axe.

The villagers took the body of the woman to the priest who heard the story related again. He assumed that Ivan did the right thing. Phelps said of Louscha:

...The woman in this poem was a monster of wickedness and did not deserve to live. She started with three children and arrived with none. Now there are some things in life for which no apology and no explanation suffice.¹⁰

Thus each poem has been analyzed. With regard to characters, motives, and incidents, Browning has woven the struggles for human understanding around the minds of mentally ill or disturbed individuals.

A DISCUSSION OF THE MURDER IN THE RING AND THE BOOK

A considerable portion of the discussion of murder in Robert Browning's nondramatic poems should deal with The Ring and the Book. Browning took the basis of the story from the well-known Old Yellow Book. He had found a copy of the Old Yellow Book in a small book shop in Florence in the summer of 1862. It contained the record of the murder by Count Guido Franceschini of Pompilia, his wife, and her parents, Pietro and Violante Compacini, in January, 1698.

The poem consists of ten dramatic monologues in each of which the story of the murder and of the events and motives

¹⁰ Phelps, op. cit., 286.

which led up to it, is told from a different point of view. The trial of Count Guido took place in Rome in 1698 before the governor of Rome. A short summary and an account of the chapters include: I. The Ring and the Book, the prologue; II. Half-Rome, a speaker who sympathizes with Count Guido; III. The Other Half Rome, a speaker who sympathizes with Pompilia; IV. Tertium Guid, a socialite who speaks as a third party and is neutral; V. Count Guido Franceschini, who speaks in his defense before the Criminal Court; VI. Guiseppe Caponsacchi, a young priest who answers Guido; VII. Pompilia, the young wife who gives a simple and humble explanation of the murders; VIII. Dominus Hyacinthus de Archangelis, the defense attorney who attacks Pompilia; IX. Juris Doctor Johann-Baptista Bottinius, the prosecuting attorney who speaks in favor of Pompilia; X. The Pope, who sanctions Guido's death; XI. Guido, a statement from the prison cell just before he is led to his execution; XII. The Book and the Ring, epilogue. The "ring" is the symbol for clearing the murders--such as the execution of Guido and the righting of the wrong. The "book" gave the facts in which Browning based his poem, thus the title was derived.

A short summary of the story will explain the circumstances under which the murders took place. Guido Franceschini, of Arezzo, Italy, being a nobleman's son, decided to find a wealthy bride. Through local gossip the name of Pompilia Comparini was mentioned as having an enormous dowry.

Immediately the count, through his brother, bargained with Pompilia's mother who agreed to the marriage between the count and her daughter. However, the marriage took place without the knowledge of the father. Pompilia was thirteen at the time.

After the elderly couple had given their entire savings to Guido as a dowry, they were necessitated to live with the newly weds. This arrangement did not prove satisfactory, and in a short time they returned to Rome. In order to regain their losses that Guido had stolen, they asked for a trial on the basis that Pompilia was not their legal daughter, but a daughter of a washerwoman. They obtained a lawyer, and a trial was held. Their property, however, was not returned.

Pompilia, tiring of the duke's methods and manners of living, desired a divorce. Guido did not recognize this desire and managed to introduce his wife to a young priest, Guiseppi Caponsacchi. After this introduction, the young couple became exceedingly friendly. Upon discovering that she was pregnant, Pompilia made an attempt to join her parents in Rome. Caponsacchi aided in the attempt but they were caught by Guido. Guido sent Pompilia to a convent, and Caponsacchi was stripped from his holy orders and banned from his native country for two years.

Near the time of the child's birth, Pompilia was sent to her parents' home by the sisters of the convent. Guido followed Pompilia to her home in order to steal the child who had

claim to all of both parents' finances. On arriving in Rome, Guido found that Pompilia had cleverly hidden the child. Guido and a group of murderers lay siege to the villa killing the grandparents. Then Guido stabbed Pompilia in the back twenty-two times. Pompilia lived to relate the tale in court and to confess her sins.

...The surgeon cared for me,
To count my wounds,--twenty-two dagger-wounds,
Five deadly, but I do not suffer much--
Or too much pain,--and am to die tonight.

Browning's poem gave only the situation as experienced by the characters in the course of the trial. Guido answered in being accused of murder:

I killed Pompilia Franceschini, Sirs;
Killed too the Comparini, husband, wife,
Who called themselves, by a notorious lie,
Her father and her mother to ruin me.

There were two different attitudes developed in the sources of The Ring and the Book. The first was that Caponsacchi and Pompilia were guilty of an illicit love affair. The second was that Browning desired Pompilia be a young and virtuous girl whose claim to life on earth led only to misfortune. This attitude toward Pompilia is more probable. Yet she retained her care-free and optimistic attitude throughout her life.¹¹

As Browning saw it, the case was found entirely to be the fault of Guido and his followers. Browning offered mortal

¹¹ Arthur Symons, Introduction to the Study of Browning, 154-155.

punishment for Guido through these words of the Pope:

I, who write--

"On receipt of this command,
"Acquaint Count Guido and his fellows four
"They die to-morrow: could it be tonight,
"The better, but the work to do, takes time."

Browning's statement of his reason for writing this poem was always his regard for truth and life in the highest form. Again Browning formulated this idea in the words of the Pope:

So may the truth be flashed out by one blow,
And Guido see, one instant, and be saved.
Else I avert my face, nor follow him
Into that sad obscure sequestered state
Where God unmakes but to remake the soul
He else made first in vain; which must not be.

The legality of the court's procedure in the trial of Count Guido is not new to critics and readers of Browning. It has been cited clearly in an article written by F. D. Goodwin:

Of course, to one interested in the legal matters versically rendered by Browning, and the similarity of many points of remedial law, parallel with what seem to us absurdities in the substantive, are apparent. I have noted the deposition. But there are the Pauperum Procurator and the Advocatus Procurator, who, as the lay critics assume, were always allotted to the defendant in criminal cases, who appear here, not as similar appointees under English law, because of the actual poverty of Guido as well as his hirelings, but because of the accused's defence was itself a State charge, for under the Civil Law, of course, they are guilty until their innocence be established, and meanwhile their property reverts to the State (*sic*) and they must be defended by officers of the State. Yet note, as did Browning, that these appointers had their private practice, and that they took to their official duty the spirit of private attorneys, even as the Fisc, the prosecuting attorney, yielded even poor Pompilia's reputation to a narrow pursuit of Guido's infamy.

The most distinct difference between the two forms of remedial law is that under the Civil Law the defendant's attorney presents his pleadings first, because of the assumption of guilt above, noted, together with the evidence and written testimony. There was no formal trial, no day in court for Guido and from this peculiarity of the Roman Law springs The Book--and Browning's opportunity.

The differences in the substantive law are principally in the mitigating circumstances, around which Guido's defence was built, the *causa honoris* of an injured husband being the principal of five absurdities, and on this is his defence sustained against a statute forbidding the use of the saw-toothed blade to prevent internal healing, with which the coward wrought his crime (as though death could be mitigated by Law), and the precedents against employing others to murder.¹²

A DISCUSSION OF THREE ATTITUDES IN BROWNING'S POETRY

Three of Browning's attitudes stood out prominently in his greatest poems. Especially is this statement true in his poems dealing with murder and suicide. Such poems clearly show his optimism, his religion, and his scientific attitudes. Each of these attitudes is developed below.

Optimism

Browning's optimism was one of his highest qualities in his writing. He never felt that life was complete without a high regard to the feelings of man and God. In regard to man,

¹² F. D. Goodwin, "He Did the Murder in a Dozen Words: 'The Ring and the Book'", Post Lore, XXXVI (December, 1925), 590.

Browning thought that the hope for all things good, and for life eternal, lay in the imperfection of man. In God, one found the hope of everlasting peace; death was the salvation of man, while life led only to torture and to desire. His optimism lay in the experience of others and the method in which they tackled their difficulties and their burdens.

C. K. Chesterton said of Browning's optimism:

His optimism was the result of experience. These experiences were joyful and stood out in his memory by virtue of their own extraordinary intensity of color. He had the quality of detail in his optimism. That is of an ultimate and unshakable order which is founded upon the absolute sight and sound, and smell, and handling of things. The mysticism of his poetry was not of that idle and wordy type which believes that a flower is symbolical of life; it was rather of that deep and eternal type which believes that life, a mere abstraction, is symbolical of a flower. With him the concrete experience which God made always came first; his own deductions and speculations about them always second.¹⁵

Browning's optimism brought forth the realism of the nineteenth century in that it showed the elements of hope in the attitudes of the people. Browning was interested in human beings; although he never praised them unduly, nor did he accuse them of being entirely wrong. This is seen in his development of optimism in his poems that will be discussed later.

¹⁵ C. K. Chesterton, Robert Browning, 182-183.

Religion

Browning's attitude towards religion was instilled deeply in his poetic mind. His religious poetry maintained that ever-lifting feeling that man belonged to the Lord rather than to man himself. He felt that man, on earth, reaped the reward or punishment as he deserved. If his life contained "success in failure", he had completed his mission on earth.

Browning optimistically portrayed the love of God in man rather than the love of God in nature, as did the Romantic poets, Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Southey. He found that through the characteristics of a man's soul, his inner being would come to life. Therefore in Browning's poetry each minute detail which is described or each speech given by one of his monologists portrayed an uncanny description of the person heretofore unfound in English poetry. By these means God stood out in some form in all of his characters.

Browning was not necessarily a church attendant. He did not always profess his beliefs of God openly and strongly, but he let the characters of his poems tell his beliefs. Symons best described Browning's attitudes toward Christianity:

He conceives of each man as placed on the earth with a purpose of probation. Life is given him as a test of his quality; he is exposed to the chances and changes of existence, to the opposition and entanglement of circumstances, to evil, to doubt, to the influence of his fellow-men, and to the conflicting powers of his own soul, and he succeeds or fails, toward God, or as regards his real end and aim, according as he is true or false to his better nature, his conception of right. He is not to be judged by the vulgar standards of worldly success or unsuccess; not even by his actions, good or bad as they may seem to us, for action can never fully translate the thought or motive which lay at its root; success or unsuccess, the prime and final fact in life lies between his soul and God. The poet, in Browning's view of him, is God's witness, and must see and speak for God. He must therefore conceive of each individual separately and distinctively, and he must see how much each soul conceives of itself.¹⁴

Thus is conceived the elementary basis of Browning's attitude toward religion. This attitude places a clearer light upon Browning's incomprehensible habit of leaving his poems containing a murder or a suicide without an explanation of its solution. Mrs. Frances Russell said that Browning's poetry was a combination of optimism and pessimism;¹⁵ in this fact a solution might be found for Browning's attitude.

Science

Browning, as a scientist, delved much deeper into the mystery of a human's mind. He was not so much of a physicist

¹⁴ Arthur Symonds, An Introduction to the Study of Browning, 2.
¹⁵ Mrs. Frances T. Russell, One Word More on Browning, 68.

or a chemist, but he had the mind of a scientist who could look into people's minds and determine their ills, their sorrows, their happiness. Browning's science might be termed as that of a mental analyst or a psychiatrist. His study enveloped the person rather than the deed he might do - good or evil.

Browning's most famous poetry was written after 1859. It was in this year that Charles Darwin published his startling work, Origin of Species. This publication not only astonished the general public of the middle nineteenth century, but also it made the minds of the authors ponder over an increased knowledge of humanity. In Browning one might find the traits and thoughts developed from the sources brought about by Darwin's discovery. Berdoo said that Browning's optimism was in complete accord with the teachings of science during the Victorian era.

Continuing upon Browning's science as discussed by Berdoo:

...Browning's work is rather to divine the hidden things of the human soul for us and open to us the hieroglyphics of nature. Analysis with him becomes incentive; he is "the maker" because he is so great an analyst. He unwraps and dissects so skillfully that the power of synthesis has come to him from the perfection of his knowledge of the materials in which he works...Browning's theory of life is eminently in accord with the teaching of evolution and development.¹⁵

Browning could develop an individual clearly and realistically because of his scientific method of analysis. He

¹⁵ Edward Berdoo, Browning's Message to His Time, 131.

could make his reader aware of the fact that his characters, who were frequently invented from his own imagination, might walk and talk as people would do in real existence. They did the ordinary things in life which were to be expected from the habits and movements of people in his day.

Not only could he develop their characters to a great extent, but he could place them in real life situations which one might face at any time. Browning knew that the supreme feeling in humanity was love counteracted by hate. He realized that a person's position on earth was temporary, and, while here, his deeds were influenced by his mind. However, he wanted to clarify and emphasize the statement that God is the Supreme Ruler, and that He is the final judge of an individual's deeds.

BROWNING'S ATTITUDES APPLIED TO HIS
POEMS DEALING WITH MURDER AND SUICIDE

In The Inn Album the young man has suffered two great losses--one his material wealth and the other his sweetheart. Both losses were created intentionally by the elderly man. In applying optimism to this poem, Browning showed that the death of the heroine would leave a less bitter memory than her living. Meanwhile her former suitor choked his rival in the hope that the wrong done to the young lady would be righted. However, with both parties searching for a hidden light, and

both hindering each other, the basic murder and suicide occurred. This happened when the woman committed suicide because of her mental suffering, and the young man committed murder.

Browning believed that by a man's deeds were wrought his punishment. So, in The Inn Album, if the young man had been more persevering in his goal for love and less gullible in believing the old man, the murder and suicide would never have occurred. But he relented his love, and he believed the old man. Thus what punishment he might receive as a result of the murder, he would well have deserved. This outcome satisfied Browning's religious belief, in that each man received here on earth the punishment he deserved.

Browning's science was not so clearly seen in The Inn Album. But here the science of a true psychologist has developed the weakened minds of three individuals--the older man, warped and crude, a scoundrel, a thief; the younger man, gullible and pathetic; and the young lady, incapable of standing on her own feet. In this poem Browning displayed a technique of interdependency which is rare in any writer or poet.

The characters in The Red Cotton Night-Cap Country underwent similar scientific analysis. Again three people's destinies were interwoven in the deeds of one weak man, Monsieur Miranda. Miranda was fighting the deed of adultery against the devotion he owed to his mother. Her death was the result of his inability to make up his mind. His relative outlook toward

optimism lay in the attempts of suicide. Peace came after death, and death would give Miranda the peace he sought. Browning again satisfied the human desires in regard to the universe.

His religion was transformed into the thought of Miranda's mother and relatives. To them Miranda violated all principles of the Catholic Church by living with a woman whose husband was still alive. This fact cup deeply in the impressionable mind of Miranda; however, he could never break completely away from sin. Browning kept this idea by correlating it with the idea of human weaknesses. The death of Miranda in this poem indicated that weakness.

Scientifically, Browning believed in the dissecting and analyzing of his various characters in these poems into their mental behavior. This process, in itself, portrayed the change in the trend of thought in the middle nineteenth century. The Red Cotton Night-Cap Country showed this element in Browning's poetry.

.....the originals of faith,
 The causes, were they caught and catalogued,
 Would to distract, too desperately foil
 Inquirer. How may analyst reduce
 Quantities to exact, their opposites,
 Value to zero, then bring zero back
 To value of supreme preponderance?
 How substitute thing meant for thing expressed?¹⁷

Count Gismond displayed thoroughly Browning's optimism. Here the wrong of slander is righted by Gismond's slaying of

¹⁷ Berdoe, op. cit., 111-113.

Gauthier. All hope was lost when Gauthier flung his faulty words at the Queen of May. Gismond did as his honor behooved him to do--slayed his opponent while the crowd cheered in the arena. This tale is simply one of optimism and courage. Gismond was no more than a hero, as Gauthier was the villain.

Optimism, in Porphyria's Lover, lay in that her lover, after committing the murder, felt no remorse in his deed. The murder was done in a fit of passion and came as a result of frustration and confusion. To kill Porphyria seemed to be the only solution to their romance. Disillusioned, he knew that there could never be earthly happiness for them. Death was the outlet for all of his desires; hope was found in death. Here Browning placed the love of hereafter before the love of earth. His religion was thus displayed.

Browning was a realist in showing that the only outcome of this complicated situation lay in murder. His realism always brought forth truth rather than fancy in all of his poetry.

False optimism is shown on the part of the monologist in A Forgiveness. Browning never assumed that the situations between the husband and his wife would ever change. Although his wife was optimistic until her death, she never realized the hatred that her husband had for her until a few moments before her murder. Tragedy lay in this poem in that neither of the two had ever tried to understand each other to a great extent. Hatred developed upon the part of the man until he had to satisfy this hate by committing murder. He found no other

choice, although his wife had relented her part in the tragedy. Browning, true to form, portrayed the two distinct opposites of religious feeling--the man, from good to evil, and the woman, from evil to good.

The science of psychology is developed in A Forgiveness. By attempting an illicit love affair, the wife thought that her husband would pay more attention to her than to his work; however, her plan failed. The husband distrusted his wife; and his emotions grew into hate and vengeance. As in My Last Duchess, where the Duke spoke of his past wife in revealing both of their true characters, A Forgiveness revealed the two characters, husband and wife, in the husband's monologue.

Artemis Prologizes would hardly be said to be placed among the poems which typified Browning's attitudes. The story in this poem was from Greek mythology, and not of Browning's own invention. It simply related the tale of the Greek god, Hippolutes, in which there is accounted in poetic form from the story of the murder, of Hippolutes by Theseus. At least, if not one of Browning's murders, Browning thought enough of the murder story to use it in a poem.

In a Gondola portrayed the optimism of two lovers, intensely in love, who went against conventional moral standards to satisfy their own desires. Browning believed that people should strive for their desires, even though these desires might be morally or spiritually wrong. This young couple knowingly faced danger and disaster. They led themselves into

the tragedy that followed. Perhaps, according to Browning, the lover was justified in being killed by one of The Three. Browning's optimism showed that the love of the two for each other was stronger than the dangers which they might face; it was a uniting force throughout the poem.

My Last Duchess, one of Browning's better known poems, showed Browning at his best as a character analyst. Here the Duke of Ferrara expressed his intense hatred of his wife's optimism. The poem showed how deceit, jealousy, and hatred could overcome goodness by death. However, the memory of the Duchess still remained in the Duke's mind. This poem is scientific in that it displayed so intensely the contrasting personalities of the two main characters; the duke, cruel, egotistical, and cold-hearted; the duchess, a loving, innocent, gentle wife. In this poem as in all of his other poems, Browning's analytical mind developed plots and hidden characteristics to an extreme superiority. He could uncannily read the minds of the characters in the words they spoke. Thus the Duke is shown to be very despicable. He had his mind filled with misdeeds and scorn for his wife. This is not a poem of optimism. It could be called a poem of contrast--the conceit of the Duke versus the humility of his wife. False optimism lay in the hope that the Duke would merit another wife from a neighboring province.

Jealousy was the predominant theme in this poem. Here Browning did not try to prove his religious beliefs, nor did

he attempt to further the new science of the middle nineteenth century. He only analyzed the two contrasting personalities with his usual cunning. He did not wish to right the wrong committed.

In The Laboratory, as in My Last Duchess, Browning analysed a jealous woman with a desire to kill. There is no optimism. The poem lacks all the requirements which would make the situation sound hopeful. The woman was completely without reason, and her hatred for her husband's or perhaps her lover's women friends was exceedingly great. She did not worry about her future on this earth or for that matter anywhere else. She wanted only to kill, and to kill with hatred. The poem carried a powerful hatred, which Browning described to perfection. The chemist's laboratory is pictured realistically, and in this way science comes to the aid of Browning. Browning had a reporter's knowledge of places and facts; so his picture of the chemist's shop and its equipment was clearly seen--the point of view of the scientist.

In Halbert and Hob, God seemed to be the reckoning factor. The son received no punishment for the death of his father. The father died as the result of his son's blows received in the fight the night before. The son became an idiot. It could be seen that Browning's faith in God's judgment was exceedingly great. Scientifically, this poem would be said to be based upon superstition rather than on fact. He did not try to explain the phenomena which took place in terms of the

nineteenth century. It was a tale of simple people, and Browning let it remain as such.

Cristina and Monaldeschi was based on historical data. It was the ruler's privilege to kill whom she desired, but, in killing Monaldeschi, Cristina found that she was to live the rest of her life mid secrets, gossip, and misgivings of the crime she committed. Browning was said to have been pessimistic in his attitude toward life as well as optimistic. This poem, as well as The Laboratory and My Last Duchess, showed Browning's gloomier side of life. These poems typified the honor, the hate, and all the ill which man might have.

Because Cristina and Monaldeschi was based upon fact, it was difficult to find any of Browning's points of view. He made known that the priest did not approve of the deceit which lay in the murder of Monaldeschi. As a psychologist, Browning analyzed Cristina's mind, and then found the hidden concern which rested upon her soul for the murder of Monaldeschi.

The Confessional is a deeply moving poem in which Browning portrayed the young girl as completely innocent of the suffering which was to come. The tragedy of the murder and the sorrow that she felt after her lover's death was much greater than the physical suffering that she received from behind the prison walls. The priest typified the corruption in the Catholic Church at that time. Browning hated any type of shallowness in an individual, whether it was deceit, a man's character, or false optimism. The deceit of the priest made the young

girl's torture worse. Although Browning made no attempt to punish the true criminal, he showed the effect of crime upon the innocent. The crime did not affect the criminal, hardened by years of false living, but the young girl suffered innumerable torture.

In Cenciaja, through Browning's explanation in the poem, he set the scene for Shelley's The Cenci. Browning showed how Paulo de Croce's flight affected the trial of Beatrice in The Cenci. The Pope, on discovery that de Croce had killed his mother and had made his escape, refused to let Beatrice go free. However, de Croce was captured and hanged in justification for the murder he committed.

As in The Red Cotton Night-Cap Country and The Ring and the Book, the details of Cenciaja were based upon historical facts. Therefore, Browning's important service was to present these facts concisely in Cenciaja. These facts were honestly presented and without prejudice. This poem showed the characteristics of the later nineteenth century in Browning's use of historical data.

Ivan Ivanovitch, the last of the poems dealing with suicide and murder, is one of the more famous poems by Browning. In the opinion of those who have read this poem, Ivan was justified in killing the Lousha, who so cold-heartedly let her children be eaten by the wolves. She was without reason for her deed. Browning felt that death was the only means to rid the world of a woman who placed herself above her children. In his poem,

Browning let Ivan Ivanovitch be the judge of the crime. Thus Ivan chopped off the lady's head with an axe.

Optimistically, Browning, in the words of Ivan when he heard that the priest had pardoned him for the murder of Louscha, said:

They told him he was free
As air to walk abroad. "How otherwise?" asked he.

In other words, the task which lay before Ivan was one which any man could do whose love for his children was greater than love for himself. In regard to Browning's religious faith in this poem, Mrs. Sutherland Orr said:

...But the pope declares that the art of Ivan Ivanovitch has been one of the higher justice which is above law. He himself is an aged man--so aged he says, that he has passed through the clouds of human convention, and stands in the firm basis of eternal truth.¹⁸

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this thesis has been to study Browning's poems containing murders or suicides in order to discover the reasons that he should choose such morbid themes for so many of his better poems. These reasons are here stated: (1) Browning was a realist; (2) he was a psychologist--he could get into people's minds and look from their minds into the world; (3) Browning liked nothing better than to unravel a mystery,

¹⁸ Mrs. Sutherland Orr, A Handbook to the Works of Robert Browning, 312.

and as the mystery became solved, a better understanding of the human beings involved was brought forth; (4) he was the reporter, the factual story teller and dealt not only with the murderer, the hypocrite, and the deceiver, but also with the good, the kind, and the honest.

By combining the reasons for Browning's choice of so many and varied themes for murder and suicide, one will conclude that he was essentially a man of a determined conviction and of a varied personality. His analytical power was so great that he could portray saint or sinner, prince or commoner, rich or poor, sane or insane, noble or ignoble, priest or scientist.

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