

# The Laboratory

By Robert Browning

1845

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What does the title suggest?

The Laboratory

It sounds clinical and does not reveal the gruesome nature of what is about to be created there.

First person speaker – makes the poem more menacing: the act is happening as we hear about it.

Now that I, tying thy glass mask tightly,  
May gaze thro' these faint smokes curling whitely,  
As thou pliest thy trade in this devils-  
smithy –  
Which is the poison to poison her, prithee?

The poem is full of questions, which draw us further into the crime. This one is shocking in its matter-of-fact statement of what is taking place.

Emphasises the wicked nature of what is taking place. The enjambement draws attention to the word.

Look at the different emotions referred to here. The speaker makes the whole situation sound like a game.

He is with her, and they know that I know  
Where they are, what they do: they believe  
my tears flow  
While they laugh, laugh at me, at my need  
to the drear  
Empty church, to pray God for them!  
- I am here.

Short statement makes the speaker seem determined and set on her vengeful deed.

This is ambiguous – is the church empty of people or empty of guilt or morals or something else?

The speaker assumes the couple are laughing at her and, on first reading, we might believe this too, but it is possible that this is not the case at all and she merely imagines it.

The list of four verbs adds precise and horrific detail to what is happening – the very act of creating the poison seems violent.

Grind away, moisten and mash up thy  
paste,  
Pound at thy powder, - I am not in haste!  
Better sit thus, and observe these strange  
things,  
Than go where men wait and dance at  
the King's.

The speaker makes herself sound popular; do you believe her?

The act is pre-meditated which again makes the crime seem more horrific – the speaker has thought about this before acting and is now prepared to wait patiently.

Again, a question; the speaker seems interested in the composition of the poison which hints at her enjoyment of what is happening.

That in the mortar – you call it a gum?  
Ah, the brave tree whence such gold-boozings  
come!  
And yonder soft phial, the exquisite blue,  
Sure to taste sweetly, is that poison too?

The speaker makes the poison sound like a precious jewel with her references to 'gold-boozings', 'soft phial' and 'exquisite blue'. Again, she is interested in the detail of what is happening which makes her seem even more controlled.

Another reference to the elements of the poison as 'treasures' – something valuable and precious.

Had I but all of them, thee and thy treasures,  
What a wild crowd of invisible measures!  
To carry pure death in an earring, a casket,  
A signet, a fan-mount, a silver basket!

'Wild crowd' sounds chaotic, frantic and alive which is juxtaposed to 'pure death' on the next line: still, silent and secretive in this case.

The list of places to hide the poison hint that the speaker has already thought about this – she is prepared and controlled.

'mere' and 'just' show how little effort is needed to kill someone with the poison once it's prepared. The use of the exclamation mark suggest the speaker's excitement.

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!

Singling out various parts of the anatomy reveals how detached the speaker is: she sees her potential victim as a sum of body parts.

There is a hint here that the speaker is a serial killer or a fantasist about being jilted – she mentions two women's names as if she has not yet selected her victim.

Suddenly the speaker seems to be in a hurry as she sees the apothecary is nearing the end of his task.

Quick – is it finished? The colour's too grim!

Why not soft like the phial's, enticing and dim?

Let it brighten her drink, let her turn it and stir,

And try it and taste, ere she fix and prefer!

The speaker is disappointed in the look of the poison: she wants it to look appealing so that her victim enjoys looking at her drink and takes a while to taste it and savour the flavour. This makes the speaker seem particularly cruel and vindictive.

The speaker is disappointed at the small amount of poison created; she does not believe there is enough poison to kill her victim.

What a drop! She's not little, no minion like me!

That's why she ensnared him: this never will free

The soul from those masculine eyes, - say, 'no'!

To that pulse's magnificent come-and-go.

She implies the woman is strong and caught, 'ensnared', the man like prey. The irony is that this woman, the speaker, may not look strong but she is iron-willed.

The speaker's feeling of exclusion is made overt by the use of the word 'whispered' – she feels left out and alone.

For only last night, as they whispered, I  
brought

My own eyes to bear on her so, that I  
thought

Could I keep them one half minute fixed,  
she would fall

Shrivelled; she fell not yet, this does it all!

'Shrivelled' shows how completely the speaker wants the woman destroyed – and she wants her to look horrible as well as wanting her dead.

The speaker has tried to destroy the other woman by staring at her – looking is an important element of this poem: the speaker looks at the apothecary and we look on at the scene. We are helpless to stop what happens in the poem.

Again the speaker seems to revel in the idea of the victim's suffering.

Not that I bid you spare her the pain  
Let death be felt and the proof remain:  
Brand, burn up, bite into its grade –  
He is sure to remember her dying face!

Again we have three violent verbs which emphasises the pain the speaker wants to inflict.

The speaker wants the man to remember the look on the victim's face – again a reference to the appearance of the woman.

Now the task is finished the speaker seems impatient as if she is excited about what she is about to do.

Is it done? Take my mask off! Nay, be not morose;  
It kills her, and this prevents seeing it close:  
The delicate droplet, my whole fortune's fee!  
If it hurts her, beside, can it ever hurt me?

Now the speaker seems to delight in the fact that the fatal poison is such a small amount possibly because of the irony that so little means so much to her.

As long as the woman is hurt by the poison the speaker does not believe she can be hurt in any way or perhaps any harm to herself will be worth it?

Here the speaker seems particularly excited – offering the apothecary a large fee for his work. It is as if nothing matters to her now – she does not need any jewellery.

Now, take all my jewels, gorge gold to your fill,

You may kiss me, old man, on my mouth if you will!

But brush this dust off me, lest horror it brings

Ere I know it – next moment I dance at the King's!

She even invites the apothecary, 'old man', to kiss her which seems a repulsive idea particularly as payment for such an horrific deed.

We have the contrast again of dancing and happiness with the act of murder that is about to take place.

The poem is a dramatic monologue – that is, one person narrating a story or series of events to us.

The rhythm and rhyme scheme don't seem to fit what is being narrated: they give a sing-song, jaunty feel to the poem.

This could be to reflect the speaker's state of mind: she seems to revel in what she is doing, or it could be Robert Browning making the ridiculousness of what he depicts more obvious: he could be mocking gothic horror and its overly dramatic suspense.