

My Last Duchess by Robert Browning: Analysis

Robert Browning (1812-1889)

The real character of the duke is gradually 'unmasked' in the process of his talk. He is a murderer who had killed his innocent young wife out of jealousy. He boasts about his great name and status in a mean manner. He is a Philistine (one who pretends to be a lover or expert of art). The irony lies not only in that he is not what he thinks he is, but more in that he doesn't realize how he is unwittingly telling the truth. He reveals all the truths about his devilish character when he is trying to prove himself a great man. Browning takes up a moment and makes the character speak of something that reveals so much behind what is being said. The duke here pulls the mask off his own face.

The poem is unique for its technique of dramatic revelation of character. The colloquial language, the rough rhythms like that of the ordinary language of conversation, the very ordinary situation and many such features make the poem realistic and memorable. The poem is rather compressed, elliptical (full of gaps) and difficult at first sight, and it needs a critical mind to explore the reality behind the story the Duke tells. The historical background is not essential, but adds to our understanding of the poem.

The features that make the poem a 'dramatic monologue' are: a character who speaks to someone specific (addressee) and in the manner of a dramatic speech, physical setting like that of a drama, the monologue or the speech of one character only, actions (though they are limited to sitting and standing and moving around) that are implied by the speech, and the plot or a set of developing action suggested by the monologue.

The poem opens with the reference, by the Duke of Ferrara to the portrait of his last Duchess. The Duke says that the figure in the portrait has the very look of life. This cannot be mistaken as a hint of lament. Browning's use of irony exposes the Duke to us: the Duke himself could not know the natural liveliness of the Duchess and remained a stranger to his own wife because of his obsession with himself. The aggressive individualism of the Duke and his tyranny of possession already indicated in "my" of the first line are reinforced in his pride of being the only person to draw the curtain away from the portrait. The sense of superiority of aristocratic isolation is also indicated here in the hint that others dare not ask the Duke any

questions. The Duke may be a lover of art, but is "essentially a savage, however he may appear superficially".

The possessiveness and the jealousy of the Duke as husband is revealed when he tells the listener that the smiles of the Duchess were not reserved only for her husband. How vigilant, he was under the provocation of jealousy, is proved by the example that he gives. The word "per-haps" indicates that he is not even certain about what he says and proves Emilia's statement that the jealous persons are jealous because they are jealous and not due to any other reason. He imagines that probably the monk-painter hinted at the gown excessively covering the wrist of the Duchess or that the artist remarked that his art could never recapture the delicate beauty of the Duchess and the Duchess thought that she must respond with cheerful courtesy. Herein may be read also the implicit hint by Browning that life is greater than art. The generosity and spontaneity of the humanitarian Duchess were quite unacceptable to the Duke, who here becomes the Victorian conventionalist.

From the smiles and courtesy of the Duchess the Duke now passes on to consider, or rather just tells about himself and fails to understand, the "heart" of the Duchess. This is Browning's chance to reveal through the dramatic contrast the heartlessness of the Duke. The Duke says that language fails him to communicate to others the quality of the heart of the Duchess. He then refers to the Duchess as pliant, receptive, generous and alive to the world around her by saying that happiness and the impressions of things came naturally to her. He then proceeds to refer to the sense of equanimity in the acutely sensitive Duchess. He notes with the sense of conventional Victorian shock that she, through the blush or through the words, weighed the trifles (for the Duke) like the sunset scene on the Western horizon, the cherries brought to her by some intruder (in the Duke's sole property rights over the Duchess), or the mule that she rode on equally with his 'significant' embracement—it must be noted here that the Duke embraces only the body but the Duchess embraces natural and universal humanity.

The excellence of the poem lies in the dramatic irony of the Duke's witlessness. The Duke is, in fact, neither dull nor shrewd to perfection. Browning's important point is to show the false pride and personal vanity of the Duke. The words "such a one" indicate how insignificant the Duchess is to the conventional and obstinately ego-centered Duke. The Duke, like the stale Victorian husband, thinks that by bringing the Duchess into his establishment like any other commodity, he had secured a monopoly over her into the bargain. He liked her smiles only for himself, but would

stifle her humanity if directed towards others. The Narcissus complex of the Duke and the resultant jealousy could not go hand in hand with the humanitarian values of the Duchess and the conflict raised to the climax must bring the tragedy.

The bronze statue of Neptune provides the final symbolic statement of the meaning of the poem; Neptune tames the sea-horse, just as the Duke had "tamed" his wife. It may be suggested that the Duke failed to "tame" the last Duchess unless murder be called taming. Undoubtedly the Duke sees himself in the image of Neptune and the last word "me" in the context indicates his tyranny of possession. It is not just being Machiavellian; rather the Duke emerges ultimately as the symbol of Victorian husband, who in a man-oriented society thinks of himself as master and of woman as dehumanized creature, a domesticated animal. Hence the whole social background of Browning's contemporary world lurks through the poem and it does not remain just a study of the Italian Renaissance which is traditionally associated with the poem.

The Duke is simultaneously the Renaissance Machiavellian figure and the Victorian man with his vanity; materialism, lack of spirituality, and lack of awareness of human values. The Duchess is also a symbol, that of natural humanity. The murder of the Duchess under the commands of the Duke shows the ultimate human depravity resulting from suppression of human values in the Renaissance world and the Victorian world.