

Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess"

This poem is a dramatic monologue, which is a type of lyric poem that was perfected by Robert Browning. In its fullest form, as represented in Browning's 'My Last Duchess,' the dramatic monologue has the following features:

(1) A single person, who is patently not the poet, utters the entire poem in a specific situation at a critical moment: the Duke is negotiating with an emissary for a second wife. At the start of the monologue the Duke draws back the curtains on a private, especially-prized portrait of his first wife, 'my last Duchess', and invites the envoy to sit down to look at it. The place is the grand staircase in the ducal palace at Ferrara, in Italy. The time is the Italian Renaissance, as Browning establishes by references to art and the dowry which the Duke is negotiating with the Count of Tyrol, as well as by the Duke's "thousand-year-old name."

(2) This person addresses and interacts with one or more other people; but we know of the auditors' presence and what they say and do only from clues in the discourse of the single speaker. The envoy of the Count is a silent and passive listener. He never speaks a word in the poem but his presence and interaction with the Duke's speech is revealed through the Duke indirectly. Other things like the place and time of the action of the poem and other people present at the Duke's palace are also revealed in the Duke's speech indirectly.

(3) The main principle controlling the poet's choice and organization of what the lyric speaker says is to reveal to the reader, in a way that enhances its interest, the speaker's temperament and character. The monologue of the Duke is designed to psychologically internalized his egoistic and abnormal personality. The speaker is the arrogant, art-collecting Duke of Ferrara. The Duke reveals himself to be an emotionally cold, calculating, materialistic, haughty, aristocratic connoisseur of art. The Duke eliminated his last duchess because he felt she undervalued him and treated him much as she treated other men. This man is not only ruthless but also consumed by possessiveness and jealousy. Murdering his last Duchess is a psychological assertion of his maleness. This fact is reflected in the Duke's closing reference to the statue of Neptune, taming a

seahorse, which is an emblem of the Duke's relationship with his last duchess. He is symbolically the all-powerful Neptune and she is the Seahorse. The act of taming represents the submissive relationship between them.