## Robert Browning's "*My Last Duchess*": A Critical Appraisal

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## Abstract

The paper aims to critically analyse Browning's poem, "My Last Duchess" as a dramatic monologue as well as a poem about exploitation and abuse. The paper will use the critical insights of two major Browning scholars, Armstrong and Langbaum in order to achieve its purpose. The text will be thoroughly analysed using a major critical tool of close reading. The major characters and their motives will be critically analysed keeping in mind the Renaissance context of Browning's poetry.

**Keywords:** critical appraisal, exploitation, abuse, renaissance etc

"My Last Duchess" is a product of Browning's exhaustive study of the culture and the morality of the Italian Renaissance. The speaker of the poem resembles a historical figure namely Alfonso II, the fifth Duke of Ferrara. He was a very callous and capricious man. He had three wives and was accused of killing one of them. Browning uses this historical material in order to create a distancing effect, because he is essentially holding a mirror to his own times and criticizing Victorian morality and prudery. This poem is one of his best dramatic monologues. M H Abrams defines 'dramatic monologue' as "a type of a lyric poem that was perfected by Robert Browning. As represented in Browning's "My Last Duchess" and many other poems, the dramatic monologue has the following features: (1) A single person, who is patently not the poet, utters the speech that makes up the whole of the poem, in a specific situation at a critical moment. (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 a single speaker. (3) The main aim of a dramatic monologue is to reveal to the reader, the speaker's temperament and character." (Abrams and Harpham 96)

"My Last Duchess" is actually a speech delivered by a single speaker, the Duke. It is a very specific situation and a critical moment for him, because he is negotiating with an emissary for a second wife. We know about the presence of the envoy through the hints dropped by the Duke. This poem is an outstanding portrayal of a jealous husband who kills

his wife in cold blood. It is a keen analysis of the psyche of a selfish man. He reveals his inner character while commenting on his dead wife's portrait. He is an arrogant aristocrat and rules his household like a tyrant. He is extremely misogynist and sexist. The Duke seems to be suffering from severe neurosis and paranoia. He is a sadistic psychopath. It is expected that he will be extremely careful while speaking to an envoy who has come on behalf of his master (the Count), to negotiate the details about his (the Duke's) new wedding, with the young daughter of the Count. Instead of exercising caution, he surprises the reader by revelling in his abnormal state of mind. While showing the portrait of his last duchess to the envoy, he objectifies his late wife and refers to her simply as an art piece. He tells him that the portrait was made by a monk.

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,

Looking as if she were alive. I call

That piece a wonder, now; Fra Pandolf's hands

Worked busily a day, and there she stands.

Will't please you sit and look at her? (My Last Duchess)

A reference to a 'monk' shows that the Duke did not want his wife to be close to any person with worldly temptations. He did not want her to behave like a normal person. He has been a very possessive and a jealous husband. The Duke is thrown off balance by the smiling portrait of his dead wife. There is an element of necrophilia in his character, because he wants to possess and control his wife even after her death. In the words of Isobel Armstrong, "The mad Duke cannot love without possessing and destroying the identity of his wife, and he literally kills her and lives with her dead substitute—a work of art."(Armstrong)  Isobel Armstrong further observes that the duke has found his wife's "living existence unbearable because she is independent of him. The duke thinks that the picture of his wife is easier to control than her reality because it has turned her into an object. He does not reckon, of course, for the living continuance of his own hatreds."(Armstrong)  While describing the portrait of his last wife, the Duke criticizes her independent way of life and quite unconsciously reveals that she was a very genial person and possessed a kind heart. According to Robert Langbaum, "The duchess's goodness shines through the duke's utterance: he makes no attempt to conceal it, so preoccupied is he with his own standard of judgment and so oblivious of the world's."(Langbaum) Because of her inherent goodness, the duchess would smile at others and shower kindness on one and all. The Duke did not trust her and thought that she was a flirt. He accuses her of disrespecting him and his 'nine hundred years old name.'

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Sir, 'twas all one! My favour at her breast,

The dropping of the daylight in the West,

The bough of cherries some officious fool

Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule

She rode with round the terrace—all and each

Would draw from her alike the approving speech,

Or blush, at least. She thanked men—good! but thanked
Somehow—I know not how—as if she ranked
My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name
With anybody's gift. Who'd stoop to blame
This sort of trifling? Even had you skill
In speech—which I have not—to make your will
Quite clear to such an one, and say, "Just this
Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,
Or there exceed the mark"—and if she let
Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set
Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse—
E'en then would be some stooping; and I choose
Never to stoop...   (My Last duchess)

The Duke tells the emissary that he could not tolerate his last wife's good spirits and jovial nature. He expected her to be obedient to him but it seems that she refused to be 'owned', and as a result, he had her murdered.

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. There she stands
As if alive.  (My last Duchess)

The duke narrates this horrific tale with extreme coldness. After finishing this chilling tale, he suggests to the envoy that they should join the rest of the party present in the house. While descending the stairs, he very casually warns the envoy that his future wife is expected to be very obedient and servile. He tells him that he hopes to get a huge dowry from the 'generous' Count. He refers to his potential bride as his object.  He, very proudly, shows the emissary a bronze sculpture of Neptune, the sea god. The reference to Neptune 'taming a sea horse' is symbolic of Duke's behavior towards both his late wife and the emissary. It is also a stern warning to his prospective bride.

Will't please you rise? We'll meet
The company below, then. I repeat,
The Count your master's known munificence
Is ample warrant that no just pretense
Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;
Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed
At starting, is my object. Nay, we'll go
Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though,

Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!
                    (Browning)

The Duke thinks that he has an absolute authority to be in command of his wives. He thinks that he owns people like any other commodity that he can buy using his wealth and riches. He is an ace manipulator and tries his best to use people as means to achieve his selfish ends.

Robert Langbaum believes that a perfect dramatic monologue like "My Last Duchess" makes a reader suspend his/her moral judgment and even, at times, sympathize with the speaker. The poem has to be true to its form. In a dramatic monologue, the speaker has to reveal his/her character and the reader has to necessarily participate in the story being told. "It is important that the duke tells the story of his kind and generous last duchess to, of all people, the envoy from his prospective duchess. It is important that he tells his story while showing off to the envoy the artistic merits of a portrait of the last duchess."(Langbaum 525) He further writes that "we suspend moral judgment because we prefer to participate in the duke's power and freedom, in his hard core of character fiercely loyal to itself… this willingness of the reader to understand the duke, even to sympathize with him as a necessary condition of reading the poem, is the key to the poem's form." (Langbaum 529) However, we cannot suspend the moral judgment for long, especially in the case of the cruel and callous Duke. We do ultimately judge him and pronounce a sentence. "The duke's egregious villainy makes especially apparent the split between moral judgment and our actual feeling for him. The poem carries to the limit an effect peculiarly the genius of the dramatic monologue—I mean the effect created by the tension between sympathy and moral judgment." (Langbaum 532)

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