

"my last duchess" by robert browning essay sample

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My Last Duchess by Robert Browning is based upon Duke Alfonso II of Ferrara's marriage to Lucrezia de' Medici and her death at his hands. Although it has never been proven that the Duke orchestrated her death, she did die suspiciously at the young age of seventeen after only a year of being married to the Duke. At first glance the reader only sees this story but upon reading the poem in more depth and looking at what the form and language devices tell us, we can observe a much more deeper meaning. There is a second story to this poem an underlying message that the poet sends to raise awareness to a social issue that was widespread but was never addressed and in some cases thought of as normal or even worse acceptable. This poem is a metaphor in itself of the oppression of women and domestic violence in the Victorian Era. My Last Duchess was written in 1842, around this time the Industrial Revolution was booming, the British economy was thriving because of trade and Queen Victoria was ruler of Britain and all of her colonies.

It was a truly glorious era of British History in terms of power and financial prosperity. However, it was also a time of poverty and repression, although the reigning monarch was female it was very much a patriarchal society. Because men had dominance in both the business world and home life this often (but not always) lead to maltreatment and abuse of women. The poem is a dramatical monologue of a conversation between the Duke and an emissary of the Count of Tyrol (his future wife's father) the conversation is completely one-sided, we only hear the Duke's voice. This shows two things, firstly, from the outset that the Duke has complete control he is the authority. Secondly, because the author does not comment, it symbolises

that the Duke's brutal behaviour is something the reader only knows about because the Duke has deigned to talk about it, in other words no one knows what goes on behind closed doors (Isachsen, 2010)

We can gather from the Duke's easy admission of the murder of his wife, "...I gave commands; Then all smiles stopped altogether", l. 45-46, not only the fact that his arrogance knows no bounds but by use of the word "all" he feels he has exercised his power over others as well as his wife. Another way Browning gives the Duke a powerful and controlling personality and exerts his dominance is in the layout of the poem. It is not split into stanzas, its urgent, continuous pace shows that the Duke is in charge and even though the poem is conversational the stanza form shows the Duke leaves no room for the listener to interject (Teachit, 2007). Browning also uses form to demonstrate the Duke's personality within the metre and rhyme scheme. The poem is written in iambic pentameter and has a simple ABAB rhyme scheme, this shows that although the Duke may have power and control he is not very apt in using it properly so the regular beat of the poem gives his rambling some stability.

It shows this because of the way he speaks, it is not particularly elegant or articulate for a member of the aristocracy, the Duke even says of himself, "Even if you had skill in speech- (which I have not)-," l. 35-6 (Teachit, 2007). He also says that to tell his wife of his concerns over her behaviour would be to "stoop", (lines 42-43) he sees communication with his wife as beneath him and his class, so instead he gives "commands" (Plays. about, n. d). Browning uses this example to show how Victorian men are dependant on

their power over women. The Duchess' outgoing and friendly personality threatens the Duke's power, he thinks her behaviour makes it look like he has no control over his wife and thus no power. In the Victorian era a way men exerted power and control over women was to treat their wives not only as a reflection of themselves but as an object belonging to them.

Browning shows the Duke's ownership of the Duchess in the title of the poem, it is not called My Last Wife or even My Late Wife/Duchess, the title of this poem leaves no doubt that in the Duke views his wife as a commodity. He calls her Duchess not wife, this is a title he has given to her, the price he has paid to own her. Also, the use of the word "last" implies she was the latest of a line of replaceable goods (Isachsen, 2010). This is what sets the tone of the poem, it creates the cold, detached feeling that in the Victorian era would have been considered propriety and acceptable conduct. Browning also uses complex metaphors, for example, the phrase, "spot of joy", l. 14-15 and 21, is an obvious metaphor of the Duchess blushing.

However, if we take the words meanings literally as "spot" meaning blemish or imperfection this transforms the meaning of the metaphor, it now symbolises that the Duchess's emotions are seen as a stain or fault (Shmoop Editorial Team, 2008). The Duke's view of women is an extreme example of the way women were viewed by Victorian society, they were seen as emotional and irrational beings and this enforced the feeling of dominance men had over women. Perhaps Browning's intention in writing this poem as an extreme caricature of Victorian male dominance was that the men reading this poem would be confronted an uncomfortable image of

themselves and that this would lead to reform in their behaviour
(Pearsoncustom, 2010).