

The psychology of the duke in "my last duchess"



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"My Last Duchess", one of the most beautiful poems in English literature by Robert Browning; a poem in the dramatic monologue form, unlike others, that conveys its message by implementing pure and genuine technicality through the character within it. The poem takes place at the art gallery in the residence of the Duke of Ferrara, where the Duke, after his previous wife's death or disappearance, is preparing to remarry and is talking to the messenger of the Count of Tyrol who has come with the proposal of the Count's niece's hand. My response and comment is specifically based on the character of the Duke, for I believe the poem, or rather the Duke in the poem himself has been entirely successful in putting forward a comprehensive view of the several attributes of his personality while also being unable to convince the readers to support his claim. Throughout the poem, the Duke employs both tact and conciliation as he conveys his message, or more appropriately, his demand to the messenger without actually revealing his actual attitude in person. At the very beginning, the Duke comments on a painting containing a portrait of his Last Duchess.

"I call That a piece a wonder," (Line 2 – 3) He feels very proud by referring the painting as a piece which connotes his consideration of his wife as a mere object. He then goes on to discuss the charming expression that his wife wore in the painting. "for never read Strangers like you that pictured countenance... How such a glance came there; so, not the first Are you to turn and ask thus" (Line 6 – 13) Such an amazing expression that seemed to urge everyone who looked at it, ask him how did that expression come to her face, since he was the only one to control the curtains covering the painting; in other words, this is another way of explaining that only he alone has, or

has had the desire for, possession and control over the Duchess. Then suddenly his tone takes a sudden change, showing discontent towards his wife's smiling as he went on saying that it was not his presence that brought the smile on the face of his wife; perhaps the painter said something typical, which she thought as courtesy and deserving a smile. Starting from here till around the end, the Duke mentions various acts of his wife that aroused several negative feelings within him.

The Duke is a very jealous kind of person because he could not tolerate his wife being so nice and friendly with everyone just as she would be with him. He was totally envious of the Duchess smiling at the sunset, at the mule she rode on, when thanking the servant who brought her cherries as well as everyone else who passed her by, the same way that she smiled when the Duke gave her an expensive gift or necklace. In addition, he was also an arrogant person because he disliked his wife valuing his "gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name", the legacy of his high-class family name, with the ordinary gifts of everyone else. Moreover he has a domineering personality, because he would like his wife to be more conservative with others and do whatever he wants her to do. "Who'd stoop to blame This sort of trifling? Even had you skill In speech—which I have not... E'en then would be some stooping; and I choose Never to stoop. (Line 35 – 43) The Duke is also a person full of dignity and always concerned about his image in front of other people; because although being so envious and having the desire of dominance over the Duchess, he does not want to lower himself by telling her to realize her mistakes (from the Duke's perspective) and do as he wished.

Furthermore, if he had the ability to do so, which he does not, and if she would listen to him by going accordingly, even then he thought it would be an act of lowering himself and he could not afford to that, because he was the Duke! To be specific, here the Duke says that he lacks the skill of speaking in a powerful manner to his wife, but if compared to context, the Duke all the time had been talking in a dominant tone till he arrives at this point and through to the end the power of his tone prevails. The Duke ends the talk about his last Duchess with the lines, " This grew, I gave commands / Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands / As if alive. " (Line 45 – 47). Notice here, how the Duke's tone takes a chilly makeover as he says that he could no longer bear to see the Duchess being so nice with everyone and as a result he had her disappearance arranged.

Relating to the real happening, which many critics believe this poem to be based on, the Duchess actually died 3 years after her wedding with the Duke which called for his second wedding¹. However, as it is not mentioned explicitly that whether the Duchess had been assassinated, it is assumed that she had been banished or made to disappear. However, in an interview, Browning said, " I meant that the commands were that she should be put to death . . .

Or he might have had her shut up in a convent. 2" At the end, the Duke indirectly hints at his true reasons for narrating the story of his last Duchess to the messenger. One reason behind this could be that he wants his next wife to be informed about how to behave accordingly and not like his last Duchess did; otherwise the consequences might be similar. Also, he wanted the messenger to inform his master (Count of Tyrol) about his demand for

dowry. Then he also says " Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed / At starting is my object.

" (Line 52 – 53). Here he tries to bring up his dignity back to the former level in front of the messenger after mentioning the dowry; he says that in spite of the dowry, his primary interest lies on the woman herself. Notice here as well that the Duke only mentions his interest to be in the bodily aspects (self) of the woman, which reinforces his mentality about the woman being an object. Finally the Duke puts down his powerful tone and attempts to reconstruct his friendly image with the messenger through showing some courtesy by allowing the messenger to walk with him downstairs together.

However, on the way he points out a sculpture of Neptune taming an exotic animal, the sea horse; yet again indicating his yearn to tame and have possession and governance over women. Lastly, the Duke in most of the poems entire content, tries to persuade the reader to match their understanding with that his about his last Duchess, which is full of negative qualities; but on the contrary it turns out that the reader comes up with totally different evidences for the Duchess, proving her to be a very nice person and having an innocent character. Overall, this poem is in all aspect a perfect combination of skillful presentation, efficient use of hard to achieve literary forms such as the rhyming iambic pentameter couplets and important literary elements, mostly irony. It is one of the few poems in English Literature which expect its reader to be a dynamic thinker along with being more perceptive than usual. ? References: 1. The Norton Anthology of English Literature, W.

W. Norton; 8th edition (October 1, 2005). 2. Harmon, William, and C. Hugh Holman.

A Handbook to Literature. 8th edn. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1999.