

Character analysis of the duke in "my last duchess"

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Robert Browning encapsulates the cosmos of a character within the microcosm of a moment. His dramatic monologues center on a persona, whose dark shades subtly come to light through the commonplace utterances of the speaker.

In his famous poem " My Last Duchess" Browning reveals the psyche of a man, indomitable and arrogant, speaking about his deceased wife before the silent audience of the envoy of the family he wishes to marry into.

Unintentionally the duke exposes his own vices while citing the follies of his erstwhile spouse. The duke's monologue indicates not only the visage he wishes to display to the world but underlying the literal words, the speech mirrors his underlying moral fiber — a proud aristocrat who would not " stoop" (Browning 34) to rectify his wife's flaws(as he reads them), but who would rather crush her innocent life for his faulted sense of noblesse oblige. The character of the Duke comes across powerfully as a typical member of the aristocracy of the Italian Renaissance. Browning was inspired to mould the character of the Duke on the historical personality of Alfonso II, fifth Duke of Ferrara of the Italian Renaissance whose first wife Lucrezia di Cosimo de' Medici died on suspicious grounds. Thereafter, the Duke sought the hand in marriage of Barbara, the niece of the Count of Tyrol.

The silent listener, the envoy to whom the duke recounts his narration of his last duchess was possibly the chief of his entourage, Nikolaus Mardruz.

[1]The sketch of the speaker is fleshed out into fuller dimensions through the word- painting of the poet. As the duke displays the portrait of his last duchess to the envoy, his image as an art connoisseur is revealed. The last two lines reiterate this art - loving sensitivity evidenced in his rare art

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collections of paintings and priceless sculptures. Even the portrait of the dead Duchess is a collector's item, a priceless art exhibit for him. The duke is steeped in the pride of his ancient lineage - the " nine-hundred-year-old name" (Browning 33) and an overbearing personality - he controls the envoys' reactions, commands him to sit and examine the portrait of the deceased duchess.

Nobody has the nerve to question the Duke and his arbitrary actions of self-will. The Duke's aberrant psychology is glimpsed at by the details of his suspicious mind and enforced possession of all he likes - he employs only a member of the monastic order, Fra Pandolf for the portrait assignment of the Duchess within the deadline of a day. The Duke is an exceptionally articulate speaker, yet he puts on the mask of false modesty - " Even had you skill / In speech-(which I have not)" (Browning 35-36). His eloquent account of his wife's faults paradoxically reveals the crudity of his own flaws. The " depth and passion" (Browning 8) of her glance seemed a travesty of courtesy expected of a noble woman. His wife's delight, ardor and zest of life, the enjoyment of the little pleasures of living violated the code of conduct deemed proper in his eyes.

The " pictured countenance" (Browning 7) of the Duchess personifies her beauty and innocence. The speaker's sensuous perception of her beauty is reflected in the words he utters to show contempt at her easily-invoked happiness but which ironically mirror his own fascination with her physical charm: " the faint / Half-flush that dies along her throat" (Browning 18-19). He lists her grievous sins - she indiscriminately partook the small delights of life; yes, she looked everywhere but with the interest and eagerness of an

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innocent girl in love with life; she failed to give due value to the honor of the title she had been conferred upon as his wife. Her naiveté was her crime, her innocence and simplicity of life, her smiles and delight in living, her polite acknowledgement and reception of the people around her were her offenses. She was guilty of being a fresh young girl who felt happy at the beauty of the sunset, the simple gift of cherries proffered by some subordinate, the white mule she rode.

Thus the verdict of punishment against her crime – the sentence of death. An untimely crushing of her innocent life, as her master/husband pronounced, “Then all smiles stopped together” (Browning 46). The heinous felony of killing her is oversimplified and stated as a commonplace bland fact. It exposes his utter lack of remorse, even incomprehension of the grave wrong he’s committed. It is a typical Browningsque movement to unveil the character of the speaker through his argumentative analysis of another character (here, the last Duchess), an epiphanic flash of the inner self under the civilized veneer of the public persona.

The psychological aberration of the Duke is examined – he wished to claim possession of his wife’s life, to capture her soul as his material property. He encrypted her within the frame of art eternally, curtained, in the grip of his authority. Living — he failed to control the essence of her free radiant soul; dead — he had absolute authority over her life-like likeness. “There she stands / As if alive” (2). “I call/ That piece a wonder, now” (2-3). Now she belonged to him, in his dysfunctional rationalizing, as yet another of his prized artifacts.

Robert Browning maps the mind of the protagonist, leading the readers along the labyrinthine complexities of his psychology; yet, there are blurred areas which readers have chosen to interpret according to their individualistic appreciation. In "My Last Duchess", the significant statement "Then all smiles stopped together" (46) is taken as a confession of his murder; however, as Glenn Everett points out, we and the listeners in these dramatic monologues can only speculate, for within the text neither they nor we can find conclusive proofs. This indeterminacy, which his first readers found so distressing, accords with Browning's own "uncertainty" about what happens in his poems: most famously his comment to Hiram Corson that the Duke might have had his Duchess put to death — "or he might have had her shut up in a convent" (Corson viii). Since the envoy cannot know conclusively, neither can we.[2] Throughout the litany of misdemeanor of his late wife, the speaker ingeniously crafts his listener's understanding to the real objective of his narration – the conduct he expects of his future bride-to-be and the serious consequences of transgressing his will.

He deliberately calls the envoy's attention to the bronze sculpture of the Roman sea-god Neptune subduing a creature of his water-kingdom. "Notice Neptune, though, / Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity, / Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me". His future wife is expected to be docile, subservient to his authority, else there would be need to "tame" her as well, just as the last Duchess was subdued permanently. The Duke's mercenary nature is underlined in his expectation of the Count's known munificence. His avarice coupled with his authority, art-loving sensitivity contrasted with cruel disregard of human life, sense of pride vis-à-vis obsessive possession makes

him one of the foremost personalities of Browning's poetic creative imagination.