

Exploring love and its
corruption: my last
duchess, andrea del
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In both *My Last Duchess* and *Andrea del Sarto*, Robert Browning explores the notions of love and its capacity to corrupt an individual's character and potential through his signature diegetic form; the dramatic monologue. While the form of these two poems is based around an implied audience, the primary agent and core subject matter is the narrator, rather than the subjects they speak on. The form itself requires that the reader complete the dramatic scene from within, through the use of inference and imagination, using the clues provided by Browning's narrators in regard to their obsessions and preoccupations. In a differing manner, *Two in the Campagna* varies in metrical poetic structure, and consists mainly of iambs, but as this consistency disintegrates, a parallel symbolism is created, as the ideas and love of the narrator, as well as the language required to express them, are each identified as unobtainable.

Variant perceptions and attitudes regarding the nature of loyalty and jealousy within relational dynamics are explored in both *My Last Duchess* and *Andrea Del Sarto*. The overwhelming jealousy and possessive nature of the narrator (the Duke) in *My Last Duchess* is adumbrated within the title of the poem, with the possessive pronoun "my" used by Browning to reveal the Duke's disposition, and his regard for the Duchess as being an object within his control. In contrast to this, the eponymous narrator in *Andrea Del Sarto*, whilst being aware that his wife is in an adulterous relationship with the "Cousin", opts to revert to the comfort of his relationship, rather than oppose dominance and control within the marital dynamic. The pleading tone of "Must you go?" is used by Browning in order to highlight the desperation of the narrator in maintaining the status quo, but his ultimate

inability to enforce the boundaries he desires upon his partner, evidenced by the use of a question, rather than a commanding imperative form. While the disloyalty of the partner in Andrea Del Sarto is objectively present, the Duke in *My Last Duchess* notes the same trait within the Duchess, but with a distinct absence of empirical proof. The adverb “perhaps” presupposes the imaginative nature of the evidence for the Duchess’ unfaithfulness, therefore corrupting the credibility of the Duke’s suggestions that the “spot of joy [on] the Duchess’ cheek” was brought about by other men. When confronted with the adultery he perceives, the Duke acts violently, ordering the execution of the Duchess, asserting his ultimate control over the Duchess, literally objectifying and constraining her to the bounds of a painting. Conversely, the narrator of *Andrea Del Sarto*, despite his hesitations, uses his only imperative of the poem “Go, my Love” in a manner not asserting control within his relationship, but instead allowing her to continue behaving in the same manner as previously. This command is used by Browning to highlight that the control exercised by the narrator is entirely facile, and that within his own relational dynamic, the power remains with his partner.

Much like in *Andrea Del Sarto*, the narrator of *Two in the Campagna* struggles to exhibit control over both love and his ideas, highlighting their transient nature. In order to experience a spatio-temporal paradigm in which love can be tamed and controlled, the narrator invites his listener to imagine the open fields of the “Champaign”, being the Campagna that surrounds Rome. Symbolically, this land is used by Browning to represent a liminal zone in which social convention no longer applies and permissiveness is possible. The structure of the poem subverts this liminality, however, as even when

the narrator speaks of the Campagna, the stanzas remain five lines long, with the first four in tetrameter and the final in trimeter. Browning therefore reflects that even while in the realm of alterity and separation from social norms, the restrictions of the human experience and mortality continue to apply. These notions are reflected in the existential frustration evident at the conclusion of the poem, in which reference is made to the “ old trick”, a colloquial expression used by Browning to comment upon the illusory nature of reality experienced by the narrator, due to the deceptive connotations of “ trick”. In a differing manner, the narrator of Andrea Del Sarto, despite his temporal considerations, instead accepts the nature of his human experience, commenting, “ Since there my past life lies, why alter it?” The use of the question as a rhetorical device by Browning illuminates the narrator’s struggle to overcome the restrictions of time itself, and to instead opt to resign himself to the position of inactive agent in the temporal paradigm.

In opposition to the narrators of Andrea Del Sarto and Two in the Campagna, who each display an awareness of the temporal limitations provided throughout life itself, the Duke in My Last Duchess achieves his ultimate goal only in the realm death, separated from such limitations. Unable to quell the perceived disloyalty of his partner and to confirm her as his prized possession, the Duke’s simile that the painting depicts the Duchess “ looking as if she were alive” is used by Browning to demonstrate that his late partner has observing those around her in the same manner as during life. However, her ekphrastic entrapment renders her under the control of the Duke, a control he was not able to attain during the Duchess’ life. The narrator of

Andrea Del Sarto observes similar potential to achieve his aspirations in death, commenting “ In heaven, perhaps, new chances, one more chance”, with the “ chances” being dissonant with the narrator’s previous assertion that he “ regret[s] little” and “ would change still less”. The narrator’s fantastical consideration of the afterlife is included by Browning to reveal Andrea Del Sarto’s acknowledgement of his failure to achieve his potential artistic greatness in life, but his desire to achieve them in death. The narrator in Two in the Campagna holds a distinctly separate perspective upon the afterlife, stating “ heaven looks from its towers!” Emphasized by the exclamation mark, the possessive pronoun “ it” embodies heaven itself as a singular force, and the symbolism of the “ towers” is used by Browning to suggest that the afterlife serves as a judgement for the narrator and his lover, due to the physical dominance inherent within the height of towers.