

My last duchess



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

of of your My Last Duchess Robert Browning has touched upon the darker aspects of human nature in his poem ' My Last Duchess'. It is about a dominating individual who exercises his control and authority over his duchess and everything. It forces the reader to understand the complex nature of man that is blinded by jealousy and makes him so cruel that he can put an end to the life of a woman who disobeys him and doesn't act according to her social status.

The duke or the speaker of the poem is self obsessed. He refers to the painting as his personal belonging and he doesn't praise the picture of the duchess rather its artistry. The duke is commanding the silent auditor to sit down and to have a look at her painting. The duke is also very possessive about the painting and that is why he has hidden it behind a curtain so that no one can look at her except for himself. This way he wants to control who sees it and how it is seen.

Although the protagonist speaks in a polite way and treats the count's legate with respect, the addresses to his guest (" Will't please [...]" 1. 5; " We'll meet [...]" 1. 47; " Nay, We'll go [...]" 1. 53) sound rather like orders. The duke is even certain to look inside his guest's mind... (Mannle 2)

He assumes that anyone that looks at that painting wonders: " How such a glance came there;" (Browning 12).

The duke is a jealous husband and he doesn't approve the fact that his lady could have derived pleasure from any other thing or company of any other person but him. He doesn't think very highly of her; according to him she was too easily pleased and was attentive to everyone: " She liked whateer / She looked on, and her looks went everywhere". (23-24)

The duke seems to characterize his last duchess by virtue of her painting. He

believes that his social status should have been enough for her to be proud of and she didn't have to be courteous with everybody. The duke is proud of his nine hundred years old family name and status and wonders how anything else other than this can become a source of pleasure for her. He thought it was beneath her social status to be friendly to the commoners. Most of all, he is displeased with her smiles that she bestowed on everyone. The smile of the last duchess is of significant importance as it is mentioned for a couple of times. Her smile is secret- the duke doesn't exactly know the reason behind her smiles. However, he is keen to learn about it. He knows for sure that the smile he received was not special- it was a typical gesture of the last duchess to smile all the time for everyone.

Her smile also becomes a cause of jealousy of her husband- and her death. Death and smile are ironically juxtaposed in this poem so as to bring out the sharp contrast between the two themes of life and death. The poem unfolds and winds up in a symmetrical manner. The duke starts talking about the painting with the phrase: "... as if she were/ alive" (1-2); and likewise ends by saying: " There she stands/As if alive."(33-34) He mentions the artist that painted her picture and the one that sculpted the statue of Neptune and the sea horse. This is his way of informing the readers and the silent person that he is the person who commands others to serve him.

The duke perhaps has to reassure himself that she is dead- yet her presence is too strong that he keeps referring to her as if she were alive. He admits that he had her killed to put an end to all her smiles and doesn't regret his cruel act. He instantly changes the subject to a count's daughter he is marrying not for dowry but for her beauty.

... it reflects as well on other modes of representation, including the pictorial

and the political... the Duke of Ferrara is 'presented' to us (represented, that is, as if he were immediately present to us), describing a painting of his late wife ('my last duchess') to the agent of a certain count whose daughter is engaged to be married to the duke. (Lentricchia and McLaughlin 17)

Just before leaving the scene, he points to another statue cast in bronze and admires it.

A comparison between the painting of the duchess and the statue of a sea horse being tamed by Neptune brings forth the notion of power exercised by the duke over his duchess and Neptune on the sea horse, respectively.

Thus the poem is about power, ruthlessness, wealth, social status and death; and it also highlights the imbalance of power and importance of social status and wealth in marriage.

Work Cited

Lentricchia, Frank and Thomas McLaughlin. *Critical Terms for Literary Study*. USA: University of Chicago Press, 1995. Print.

Manle, Reginna. *Gender Expectations and Power Constellations in Robert Brownings "My Last Duchess"*. Germany: GRIN Verlag, 2006. Print.