

Robert Browning – my last duchess

Business



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The Thesis Statement – A Literary Criticism of “ My Last Duchess” by Robert Browning.

1. About the opening line.

2. The unveiling of the portrait. 3. The reader gets introduced to the memories of the duchess. 4. The reader gets acquainted with the duke's despicable attitude towards the duchess.

5. The Duke appreciates Fra Pandolf's work. 6. The poet's effective use of stylistics. 7.

A beautiful ending. 8. A masterpiece. My Last Duchess is a masterpiece by Robert Browning. The poem opens with the Duke unveiling the portrait of his Duchess who apparently has left for her heavenly abode. “ Looking as if she were alive”, this line tells the reader that this beautiful lady was history now.

He explains to the messenger present during the unveiling that the lovely lady depicted on this portrait was his wife, the duchess who was an extraordinary woman, he goes on to explain that she actually had a very flirtatious nature, it did not need too much of an effort to see her beautiful smile . A small compliment or a cheap gift was enough to bring the blush on her cheeks, “ Strangers like you that pictured countenance, the depth and passion of its earnest glance”. The poet manages to bring in sarcasm in the tone of the Duke to convey his dislike for the duchess, to the readers. At no point does the Duke say anything derogatory about the duchess but at the same time manages to express the hurt and humiliation he went through due to her wayward nature. The Duke says indignantly “ Oh! Sir she smiled

no doubt whenever I passed her; but who passed without, much the same smile.

“ This line exposes the exasperation of the Duke, because he feels that he was not treated specially, since the duchess bestowed the same smile on him, which she had for all others who she came across. He felt humiliated at the thought that a small gift from a man was enough to please the duchess, according to him it was very petty in comparison to the eight hundred year old legacy of his family name that he had given her. The duke was unhappy that she never laid any importance to this great lineage. The poet uses the method of stylistics while writing this poem; this technique has been used very well and very effectively. It is wonderful the way the poet makes the Duke talk about the duchess, whom he has probably got eliminated without any remorse.

The Duchess had died under mysterious circumstances but the way the Duke talks about it makes it very obvious that he had a hand in the mysterious occurrence. But the Duke is relentless and does not waste any time, he immediately gets engaged to a Count's daughter. In a way I feel there was a lot of difference between genders during that time, because a man as projected during Browning's lifetime had the privilege to marry again after “ killing” his wife. The Duke was not guilt ridden as he feels his actions were righteous. He continues lambasting the duchess and tearing her reputation into smithereens with great panache.

The best part of the poem is that the poet has never made the Duke Mouth harsh words throughout; the entire poem is like “ a sugar coated pill”. Thus

we see that Browning has managed to convey to his readers who have actually never come face to face with the duchess about her flirtatious nature, a coquette who deserved no sympathy even after death. The very casual attitude the Duke maintains throughout the poem to some extent manages to evoke sympathy for the duchess. The reader at this point feels that the allegations against the duchess are incorrect because she is not there to defend herself. The picture which we get about her is one-sided and it seems a little biased. At times however the reader nurtures a dislike for the duchess and empathizes with the Duke too because the poet projects the Duke as the wronged one.

Browning has managed to tell us a marvelous story about the feudal lords of yester years where the women were subjugated. If a woman smiled at a man, it was considered a "sin", because a wife was supposed to be visible only to her husband. Although the statement sounds very weird in our modern times, the situation was entirely different during Browning's times, but all credit goes to him to have brought this entire picture of male supremacy in front of us in such a lucid manner. There is not a single gory incident, word or utterance. It is a fantastic piece of literary work!