

# Robert Browning's My Last Duchess as a Dramatic Monologue

Meenakshi

Assistant Professor ( English)

BPSIHL, BPSMV, Khanpur Kalan , Sonipat

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## Abstract

Robert Browning was a great English poet and playwright whose mastery of the dramatic monologue made him one of the leading Victorian poets. He had contributed a lot to the English literature by his poems and plays. One of his poems "My Last Duchess" is a great masterpiece. It is the perfect example of the use of dramatic monologue. In this poem, the duke is the single speaker who reflects his character and temperament while speaking to a passive listener an emissary who had come with a marriage proposal for the duke.

**Key Words:** Robert Browning, My Last Duchess, Duke, Duchess, Emissary, Dramatic Monologue.

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Dramatic monologue is a type of poetry written in the form of a speech of an individual character is also known as a persona poem. Sometimes people consider dramatic monologue and soliloquy as the one because in both of them there is a single speaker. But there are some differences between the two which needs to be understood before analysing a poem by Robert Browning as a Dramatic monologue.

In soliloquy, the speaker addresses the audience to express his emotions, feelings and anxieties while in the monologue the words are supposed to be addressed to a silent listener. On a deeper level, the dramatic monologue reflects the psychological reaction of the silent listener. He helps to draw out from the speaker thoughts and emotions he would not care to set forth with fullness or logical elaboration, but for the presence of one of whom he can disburden himself of his emotions or justify his actions and beliefs. (Dr. S.Sen 80)

Dramatic monologue is a type of lyric poem that was perfected by Robert Browning. Browning writes some of his works in this form like "My Last Duchess", "The Bishop Orders His Tomb" and "Andrea del Sarto".

My last duchess is a poem written in dramatic monologue. It first appeared in 1842 in Browning's Dramatic Lyrics. In this poem, the Duke of Ferrara is speaking to an emissary who has come with a marriage proposal for the Duke. He shows him the artworks of his house. As he points towards a painting, he tells him that it is the portrait of his last Duchess. A famous painter Fra Pandolf makes this painting. When anybody notices this painting, they look at the Duke because he is the only one who can put aside the curtain from the painting. They notice the smile on her face and want to know about it but they do not dare to ask it to the Duke. He himself explains that when the painter was painting the picture he may have noticed that her sleeves are hanging too much on

her wrist or the painting can never produce even half of her beauty. He says that this type of flattery is enough for the Duchess to smile. She had a heart which feels glad even at a small appreciation. She can easily be impressed by anybody by giving a bough of cherries and such other gifts.

These actions and gestures of the Duchess make the Duke feel jealous of her. According to him, for the Duchess, there is no difference between the Duke's gift of giving her his surname after marriage and others' gifts. He understands that if he ever had tried to tell her that these kinds of actions irritate him and she is crossing her limits, she might have corrected herself. But he did nothing like this. He thinks that it will affect his status and will make him inferior.

"Whenever I crossed her she smiled but she smiled at everyone who passed by her"

These lines show that he does not like her behaviour with others. It disgusts him.

Then he gave some command or order and she stopped smiling. Here he does not make it clear what he did with her. and now one can see her smile only in the painting and that also only if the Duke wants. He again addresses the emissary and said that the other members are waiting below. They start walking. Then the Duke interrupts by saying that they will go together. On their way downstairs, he shows him the bronze statue of Neptune who is taming a sea horse made by Claus of Innsbruck.

This is a long poem of 56 lines. In the whole poem, the only speaker is the Duke. He speaks about his art gallery, his late wife, his wife's habits and his own temperament. So, this is the first characteristic of a dramatic monologue. As M.H.Abrams says that the first characteristic of a dramatic monologue is, "A single person, who is patently not the poet, utters the speech that makes

up the whole of the poem, in a specific situation at a critical moment." (Abrams and Harpham 80) Here, Browning put his views neither on the Duchess nor the Duke. The Duke gives a clear reflection of both the characters at a critical moment when an emissary came with a marriage proposal for him.

The second characteristic of a dramatic monologue is that it has a passive listener. His reactions will be shown through the speaker's words. Here, in this poem, the emissary is the listener. The poem does not have a single line spoken by him. He only listens. We have certain instances when he seems to speak something like

"How such a glance come there; so, not the first

Are you to turn and ask thus."

In these lines, it is suggested that after looking at the painting, the emissary might have asked something about the Duchess. In another instance,

"...Nay, we'll go

Together down, Sir."

The emissary walks ahead of the Duke on which he asks the emissary to go together. He may have the fear that the emissary will say something to the company members.

M.H.Abrams throws some light on this characteristic by saying, "This person addresses and interacts with one or more other people, but we know of the auditor's presence and what they say and do only from clues in the discourse of the single speaker." (Abrams and Harpham 80)

The Duke clearly speaks about the Duchess' habits and character in a satirical way. He also demonstrates his character and temperament throughout the poem. He is a dominating person he dominates his wife and the emissary in the poem.

“Will’t please you sit and look at her? I said.”

“Will’t please you rise?”

These lines show that the Duke wants his visitors to behave according to his wishes. When he wants them to sit, they should sit and when he wants them to walk, they should walk.

In another line when he says

“... Notice Neptune, though,

Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,”

It clearly shows his own temperament that he also wants to tame the human beings like the horse being tamed by Neptune.

Another characteristic of him which is revealed through the lines is that he is possessive for his wife. She was beautiful and everybody used to praise for her. He did not like it. She thanks and smiles when somebody gifts her small things. He again feels angry. He wants her to act according to his wishes. He wants to have a hold on her as if she is not a human being but a piece of property. This is his possessiveness which makes the Duchess silent.

“Somehow- I know not how- as if she ranked

My gift of a nine-hundred-years old name

With anybody’s gift. Who’d stop to blame

This sort of trifling?”

These lines clearly demonstrate that he is very proud of his surname and thinks that he gives a favour by marrying her.

“I choose never to stoop.”

These lines show that he is arrogant. If he explains his dislikes to his wife, he thinks that it will make him inferior.

M.H.Abrams also makes a point here about this by saying, “The main principle controlling the poet’s choice and formulation of what the lyric speaker says is to reveal to the reader, in a way that enhances its interest, the speaker’s temperament and character.” (Abrams and Harpham 80)

So, the three principle features of a dramatic monologue are a single speaker, a passive listener and the speaker revealing his character and temperament through his speech. “My Last Duchess” has all these features. In this way, the present poem by Robert Browning is a perfect example of a dramatic monologue.

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