



Tikrit University

College of Education for Humanities

English Department

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Prof. Dr. Lamiaa Ahmed Rasheed

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Robert Browning's 'My Last Duchess'

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Introduction

Robert Browning is one of the most significant poets of the Victorian age. He is especially famous for perfecting the dramatic monologue, a poetic form in which a single speaker reveals his personality and inner thoughts while addressing a silent listener. Through this technique, Browning explores psychological complexity, moral ambiguity, and the hidden motivations of individuals.

The Victorian period, during the reign of Queen Victoria, was characterized by social change, scientific advancement, and a growing interest in psychology and human behavior. Browning's poetry reflects these concerns by focusing on the inner minds of individuals rather than merely describing external events. One of Browning's most famous poems, *My Last Duchess* (1842), is an excellent example of the dramatic monologue. In this poem, Browning presents the voice of a powerful nobleman who casually reveals his jealousy, pride, and cruelty while discussing a portrait of his deceased wife. Through subtle language and irony, the poem exposes the darker aspects of power, control, and human psychology.

Robert Browning as a Victorian Poet

Robert Browning was born in 1812 in London and became one of the leading literary figures of the nineteenth century. Unlike many Victorian poets such as Alfred, Lord Tennyson, who often focused on lyrical beauty and philosophical reflection, Browning was more interested in the psychological study of human character. His poetry frequently explores themes such as ambition, jealousy, morality, and the complexity of human motives. Browning believed that poetry could reveal the hidden aspects of the human mind. For this reason, many of his

poems present dramatic situations in which characters reveal themselves unintentionally through their speech. Another characteristic of Browning's poetry is his interest in historical and Renaissance settings. He often placed his characters in historical contexts in order to explore universal human emotions and moral questions.

Background of the Poem My Last Duchess

The poem *My Last Duchess* is inspired by a historical figure, Alfonso II, Duke of Ferrara, an Italian nobleman from the Renaissance period. In the poem, the Duke is speaking to an envoy who has come to arrange a new marriage between the Duke and the daughter of another noble family. While showing the envoy around his palace, the Duke stops in front of a portrait of his former wife—the “last duchess.” The painting is described as if it were a valuable art object. As the Duke talks about the portrait, he gradually reveals that he was dissatisfied with his wife's behavior and eventually arranged for her death.

The dramatic power of the poem lies in the fact that the Duke never openly admits the crime. Instead, the reader understands the truth through the implications of his words.

The Dramatic Monologue Technique

My Last Duchess is one of the finest examples of the dramatic monologue in English literature. In this form, a single speaker addresses a silent listener while unintentionally revealing his character. At the beginning of the poem, the Duke proudly introduces the portrait of his former wife:

“That’s my last Duchess painted on the wall,

Looking as if she were alive.”

These lines immediately establish the central image of the poem. The Duchess is no longer alive, but the Duke controls how she is remembered through the portrait. The painting symbolizes both beauty and possession.

The Duke continues to describe how he alone decides who may view the painting:

“Since none puts by

The curtain I have drawn for you, but I.”

This detail reveals the Duke’s controlling personality. Even after her death, the Duchess remains under his authority, hidden behind a curtain that only he may open.

Characterization of the Duke

One of the most important aspects of the poem is the psychological portrait of the Duke. Through his speech, Browning reveals a character who is proud, arrogant, and obsessed with control. The Duke complains that the Duchess was too easily pleased and showed kindness to everyone:

“She had

A heart—how shall I say?—too soon made glad.”

The Duke interprets her friendliness and appreciation for life as a sign of disrespect toward him. He believes that his noble status should have made him more important than everything else she enjoyed. This attitude reveals the Duke’s

extreme pride and possessiveness. He expects complete admiration and obedience from his wife.

The Implication of the Duchess's Death

As the Duke continues speaking, he reveals the most shocking element of the poem. Instead of discussing the problem directly with his wife, he took drastic action:

“I gave commands;

Then all smiles stopped together.”

These lines strongly suggest that the Duke ordered the death of the Duchess. However, he mentions this action in a calm and almost casual tone. This contrast between the seriousness of the crime and the calmness of his speech creates a powerful sense of irony. Browning uses this technique to show how power can corrupt moral judgment. The Duke does not feel guilt; instead, he treats the situation as if it were a reasonable solution to a personal inconvenience.\

Themes of Power and Possession

One of the central themes of *My Last Duchess* is the abuse of power. The Duke sees people and objects as possessions that exist to enhance his status. The Duchess is treated like one of the works of art in his palace.

This idea becomes clear when the Duke moves from discussing the portrait of the Duchess to pointing out another artwork—a statue of the sea god Neptune taming a sea horse. The statue symbolizes domination and control, reflecting the Duke's own personality. Through these details, Browning criticizes the arrogance

of aristocratic power and the treatment of women as property in patriarchal societies.

Language and Style

Browning's language in the poem is sophisticated yet natural. The poem is written in rhymed iambic pentameter, which gives it a conversational rhythm that resembles ordinary speech. The Duke's voice sounds polite and cultured, but beneath the surface lies cruelty and selfishness. Browning's skill lies in allowing the reader to detect the truth behind the Duke's words.

Irony plays a major role in the poem. While the Duke attempts to present himself as reasonable and dignified, his speech actually reveals his moral corruption and insecurity.