



Exploring the Construction of Self: An Ironic Gaze Towards Robert Browning's *My Last Duchess*

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Abstract— *Dramatic monologue can be considered as a lyrical- dramatic narrative hybrid and the flagship genre of Victorian poetry. It is the most significant poetic innovation of the Victorian era that helped to increase the dignity of Victorian poetry and especially the poems of Robert Browning to a very sophisticated level in the genre of literature. The lengthy speech delivered by the speaker expresses his/her private thoughts intentionally or not. It leads to the uncovering of the intentions and emotions deep within the self of a person. A dramatic monologue reveals the speaker's temperament and character. The peculiar characteristics of the psychological state of the speaker may be revealed to the silent listener. The construction of the self is done on the basis of the close reading of the lines of the poem. This paper deals with the idea on how a dramatic monologue throws light upon the self within a person.*

Keywords— *Dramatic Monologue, Victorian poetry, Robert Browning, Self, Narcissistic, self- reflexive, Ironic gaze.*

“Dramatic monologue is a poem written in the form of a speech of an individual character, it compresses into a single vivid scene a narrative sense of the speaker’s history and psychological insight into his character.” (*Dramatic monologue*) The poetic form of dramatic monologue was launched during the Victorian era in a more sophisticated form by Robert Browning. It is an unnatural conversation in which the speaker reveals the thoughts and feelings deep within him and the listener remains as a silent interlocutor and feels mesmerised and subjugated by the speech of the speaker.

The poetic persona validates the inner gaze of the Duke through the focus on sensory elements of the poem and also rendered a realistic portrayal of the life of someone in a royal status. The Duke represents men of the Victorian times, who desires to present their women according to certain taboo like beauty, governess of the family and so on. Browning employs his gaze on the construction of the self of the Victorian self ironically through the Duke in the poem.

My Last Duchess is often considered as an outstanding dramatic monologue which was first appeared in 1842 in 28 rhyming couplets of iambic pentameter in the Victorian era. It was the tale of a man, the Duke of Ferrara,

who knows that his wife is not suitable to fulfil his needs and respect which led to her murder. The poet employs a conversational style and explores the Duke’s cool, ironic look at life and love. The poem appears realistic and the readers may sense what the character feels and appropriate emotions would be evoked towards the speaker within their subconscious mind. The lines of the poem are self-reflexive of the speaker’s own identity.

The Duke renders an attempt to justify his act of killing the wife in front of the emissary, in order to have another marriage. He used a case-making, argumentative tone and betrayed his own state of mind by making false arguments about his wife’s death. The Duke was arguing with his own second self by making justifications about the murder that he committed. The poem is about a repressive aristocrat who has done with the literal and figurative murder of spontaneity.

The Duke makes a show- off to envoy and he wanted him to notice the palace which resembles his aristocratic life. The speaker kept on talking about the artist behind the wonderful painting, the speaker gives a hint about a brother who links the artist (Fra Pandolf) to innocent monkhood and this distanced the Duchess from any thought of sexual liaison with him.

“That’s my last Duchess painted on the wall, Looking as if she were alive (*My Last Duchess* lines 1, 2)”, signifies that the usage of ‘my last Duchess’ portrays that his sense of owning the wife in the picture and considered her just as a mere belonging of the Duke. According to him, a woman(wife) is a mere property in a marriage than a real human being. Thus, he affirms the notion that He(men) always remain dominant upon Her(women). The reference to a ‘fresco’, a painting done on the wall shows that the painting cannot be sold so that it would remain on the wall of the Duke’s house forever showing his controlling nature.

As the Duke describes his dead wife, he sounds self-obsessed, controlling, powerful, commanding, dominant and frustrated in his tone. “Will’t please you sit and look at her” (*My Last Duchess* line 5), personifies him to be a dominant, commanding villain and aesthete. The crafty Duke wants to overwhelm the envoy with his meandering overpowering intimidation. Browning’s character behaves like an authoritarian and expected absolute obedience from the Duchess. Irritated by his wife’s freedom of spirit, he says that she was ““too soon made glad”, “too easily impressed”, “her looks went everywhere” (*My Last Duchess*, lines 24, 25, 26).” He was embarrassed by her nature of smiling at other men in the same way as she smiled at him. The Duke’s speech reflects that he was a dubious husband. He wants to bring the Duchess under his control even after her death as he did not allow “none puts by the curtain I have drawn for you but I (*My Last Duchess* line 9, 10).”

The hyphens used in between the lines of the poem shows that the pauses in the speaker’s speech indicating that he was a bit nervous. “A spot of joy (*My Last Duchess* line 23).” was the expression used by the speaker to depict the happiness that gleams up on her face when men gifted her compliments. The same phrase is used by the poetic persona in order to fill the open space of the listener’s mind with the idea that the Duchess was a woman who blushes up only when she sees other men around her. The Duke was very much obsessed, angry, jealous of the Duchess, since she accepted the compliments with a smiling face. He was frustrated with the act of thanking made by the Duchess towards the men around her and as far he is concerned she was frivolous, superficial, unable to discern between the important and the trivial. The speaker is obsessed with his own self. He was not happy with his wife and portrays the Duchess as a flirtatious lady. This might be because he was so arrogant that he was not able to acknowledge and accept the innocence of the Duchess that makes her to smile at and embarrassed at the compliments given by these people to her.

The Duke’s late wife was enjoying life and not respecting his rank title. But on the other hand his only pride

rested in his wealthy family name. He viewed everything he possessed and everyone with whom he interacted as an opportunity to expand his power base.

The speaker says that he “And I choose never to stoop (*My Last Duchess*, lines 48, 49, 50) and thus the reader could trace out the voice of the speaker representing the whole patriarchal society and also the poetic persona reaffirms his power, when he commands his obedient men to kill his wife. The speaker was a character who only make orders to people around him. At the end of the poem, the Duke orders the listener to rise up to leave the place, the rhetorical questions represented the commanding nature of him.

The Duke shares his wish for another lady as his second wife and addresses her as “my object (*My Last Duchess* line 53).” The image of the Greek God Neptune taming a horse which was placed in the Duke’s palace proves him to be a lover of authoritarianism and also represents his eagerness to tame another woman after the marriage with her. It also foreshadows the kind of relationship he would like to have with a woman as well as with the other people around him. The speaker liked to tame everyone around him and wanted to have a loveless sexual relationship with his wife.

Robert Browning’s dramatic monologue *My Last Duchess* gives the readers a deep characterisation of the speaker. The Duke in the poem is symbolic of a devious, arrogant, materialistic, authoritarian aristocrat but profoundly vain soul, a malevolent twisted murderer, a possessive, self-obsessed, dubious, selfish and overpowering man. The poem *My Last Duchess* highlights that the speaker did not feel guilty of the offence he has committed towards his wife and did not realised himself as a murderer. It was an ironic gaze into the speaker’s narcissistic inner self as he lacks the feel of being guilty. The Duke’s narration of his own life to a court emissary could be considered as his own gaze into his subconscious and it remains as an irony just because it might be an act of pacifying his own mind with worthless explanations. The last lines of the poem signified his inner self without any trace of guilt and his unchangeable attitude towards people around him. It was revealed that he would follow the same attitude towards a second wife like the first wife but still he was ready for take up another chance. He is a sadistic psychopath who finds happiness in holding his upper hand upon people around him especially women. The Duke has an invulnerable self-image, no matter of his cruel deeds. Thus, the poem extolls the construction of the self of the speaker The Duke of Ferrara and the irony within the gaze into his own self.

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