

A Study of Robert Browning's Monologues with special reference to "My Last Duchess"**Dr. S. Franklin Daniel**Associate Professor of English
P.G. & Research Department of English
Madras Christian College (A),
Tambaram, Chennai- 600 059

Robert Browning's craftsmanship in handling the dramatic monologue speaks of his versatility. He was considered the premier Victorian poet and adds to the richness and variety of English Literature. Browning's ideas about the princely courts of Renaissance artistically combines with high culture, political adroitness and emotional ruthlessness. His poetic brilliance finds expression in this beautiful optimism and sadly his works have been appreciated posthumously and thus his fame grew.

It is imperative at this juncture to define dramatic monologue, in many ways an innovative genre. According to M.H. Abrams, dramatic monologue is a poetic form, which is actually, "a lengthy speech by a single person" (Abrams 80) addressing a silent listener, intended to convey his inner thoughts and emotions. The dramatic monologue suited Browning's style and interest's best; the speaker brings to life his own character, the characters around him or her, and the audience. The reader is thus encouraged to identify with the speaker and put aside his or her prejudice.

The Last Duchess revolves around the apparent affectations of women who form the essence of the poem, arguably there is a highly tense situation between a man and a woman in each of Browning's poems. Apart from that, we may have common features like the paintings, the silent listener, the monologues, the voice of their conscience and memory, treatment of womenfolk, chauvinism, etc. The success of the Last Duchess is due to the harmonious blend of character, action and audience. It contains just fifty-six lines, and it enthralls us and is capable of swaying us away from an obvious public realm into the inner world of its own peculiar drama.

The dramatic monologue is arguably the greatest contribution of Victorian poetry and is the most significant poetic innovation of the age and gained widespread use after the 1830s by an overwhelming number of poets. The technique is very evident in the Greek drama, but still the origin of the form has been much debated in the last several decades as a vast number of critics claim it to be the prerogative of the Victorians. One may confuse between a dramatic monologue with a soliloquy, but actually these two forms are very different. The difference between the two is the way in which the speaker reveals himself, and the fact that the speaker directs his attention outward. The soliloquist only talks about himself, and has to take an objective position to see himself from a general perspective. He needs to describe himself like how an outsider would, because he is trying to understand himself rationally; he tries to relate his thoughts and feelings to general truths. Thus we get a self-analysis and internal debate in the soliloquy. This does not happen in the dramatic monologue; the narrator starts off with a fixed point of view and strategy; he will not try to be objective, but he will try to impress his audience by what he does and says. According to the critic Drappier the perfect monologue has seven characteristics:

There is a speaker, an audience, an occasion, interplay between speaker and audience, revelation of character, dramatic action, and the action is taking place in the present. (Drappier 13)

The dramatic monologue is a highly theatrical form occupying a very untheatrical space. It is built upon the essential elements of live theatre: the pacing, turns, and rhythms of actor-spoken speech, yet it

exists as a lyric, a private work in a volume of poems to be privately consumed. It is as though the largeness of theatrical time and space finds itself shrunk, made dense and elliptical, in the framework of a fifty—or-hundred line poem. In essence it means that a dramatic monologue is a play that has shrunk to one speech by one character. From that single speech we can infer a wider dramatic situation, but the speech is all we have of the larger reality.

In “My Last Duchess”, the monologue is a part of a discussion the Duke had with an envoy of a certain Count about the prospect of marrying the Count’s daughter. The Duke, egocentric, vengeful, and possessive, has had his first duchess quietly murdered because she failed to focus her whole existence on him. He is now negotiating for a second marriage with the Count’s daughter. Browning is thought to have based the poem’s speaker on Alfonso II (1533-97); the speaker is the Duke, and the meaning of the whole is dependent upon the right conception of his character. As readers we deduce a jealous or deranged psychopath, eaten out with insecurity, showing that the, “savage indifference that cohabits with an occasional magnanimity.” At the exact point we hear him speak, he has taken the count’s envoy or messenger up to the first floor of his palace in order to look at some of his art treasure trove. The Duke maintains his cordial tone, but gradually we sense his underlying, deadly annoyance.

In the poem, the apparent flexibility, warmth, and sophistication of the Duke’s voice draw us emphatically into his world. We participate imaginatively in the egotism, and largesse of a proud Renaissance Duke. However, the irony of the monologue continually undermines this perspective, and awakens our critical sensibilities. While the Duke tells us of his reasonableness, we see his irrationality; while he implies his generosity to his first wife, we see his blind desire to control another human being within the confines of his own will. The Duke is convinced of his innate superiority and worth.

The person spoken of, the Duchess, and her character form the real theme of the poem, and the character of the Duke is made to look blacker by contrast. She liked whatever she looked on, and her looks went everywhere, and he was offended that she recognized “anybody’s gift” on a plane with his gift of a “nine-hundred-year old name” (34,35). As far as he is concerned, his first wife was too easily made happy, too spontaneous, lacking in aristocratic conceit. She took pleasure in many aspects of her life at court, and (as the Duke insists) failed completely to focus on him sufficiently. She was one of those lovely women whose kindness and responsiveness are as natural as the sunlight. She loved to watch the sunset from the terrace; she loved to pet the white mule; she was delighted when someone brought her a gift of cherries. In short, reminds of what Lady Diana underwent as the Princess of Wales at a much later dispensation! Then the last duchess was puzzled and bewildered, when she found that all her expressions of delight in life received a cold, disapproving glance of scorn from her husband; her lively talk at dinner, her return from the ride, flushed and eager, met invariably this icy stare of hatred. She smiled too much to please him. When she failed in this, he did not condescend to reason with her, or explain how her behavior annoyed him. This grew, and he simply had her executed, and so moved on to the possibility of a second marriage. After he has euphemistically told the envoy how he ‘gave commands’, i.e. gave orders for her murder. He gestures at the portrait in order to remark that, ‘There she stands| As if alive’ (46- 48). The story of the duchess, and our developing sense of her appealing personality in contrast to that of the proud duke, is carried out entirely through the discussion of the portrait: “Oh sir, she smiled, no doubt, | Whenever I passed her; but who passed without| Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands; (45 – 47).

The situation seems ludicrous to the reader, because smiling at people does not seem a good enough reason to be killed. The duke is mad, cold-blooded and brutal. At the end there is a striking image of Neptune, the Roman god of the sea, taming a sea-horse, which is a symbol for the woman who had

been objectified and controlled. Neptune of course stands for the Duke. This image serves as a warning for the next Duchess. The Duke clearly implies that only him, or perhaps his gifts only should make his wife happy, and he sees her behavior as indiscriminating, almost – in her lack of focus on himself – teetering on the brink of sexual infidelity. As readers, we decode the irony. The ironic structure gives us various insights into the Duke's real character possibly to show the domineering and tyrannical spirit of the character. The Duke projects an image of himself as grand, sophisticated, flexible of attitude and manner, a connoisseur, a complete man. The remarkable success of this poem is due to the blend of the elements of character, action and audience.

Therefore, in conclusion, the dramatic monologue used as a form by Browning is unique in the history of English literature. It is constructed by the use of contrasts and conflicts, between the transient and the permanent, love and selfishness, renunciation and commitment, the physical and the spiritual. *My Last Duchess* is considered to be the perfect dramatic monologue. It comprises all seven characteristics that were listed in Drappier's observation: the speaker is the notorious duke; the audience consists of one man, the envoy of the father of the possible next duchess; there is an occasion; there is a certain interaction between the speaker and the audience, although it is extremely one-sided. The main character reveals himself and his personality by his peculiar recital. There is dramatic action and finally the action is taking place in the present.

WORKS CITED

- Abrams M.H., and Geoffrey Galt Harpham. *A Handbook of Literary Terms*. Delhi: Cengage Learning India Pvt Ltd., 2009 . Print.
- Abrams, M.H. and S. Greenblatt, eds. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* New York: Norton & Company, 2001. Print.
- Drappier, D., Robert Browning – *The dramatic monologue. A status quaestionis, 1945 – 1965* , Louvain: Catholic University, 1972. Print.
- Wood, Sarah. *Robert Browning: A Literary Life*, New York: Palgrave Publications, 2001. Print.