



About Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

Contact Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

Editorial Board: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>



ISSN 2278-9529  
Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal  
[www.galaxyimrj.com](http://www.galaxyimrj.com)

## Oppression, Jealousy and Murder in Robert Browning's *My Last Duchess*

**Sapna Sharma**

Assistant Professor

Deptt of English

K R Mangalam University

Gurgaon.122103 (Haryana)

### **Abstract:**

This research paper examines Browning's poetry who philosphised the idea that most ardent and soaring aspirations of human heart and hardest realities of life go hand in hand. Failures and sorrows are necessary for the progress of soul as they urge us towards higher ideals. And nothing is worse than a self-satisfied state of soul which is clearly visible in many of his poems. 'My Last Duchess' is a character study of a unique and complex Duke of Ferrara. Browning deals with his case history presenting a moment of crisis in his life. The poet has also presented a deeply perverse but highly fascinating character. And the very reality of his personality is made known as well as visible.

**Keywords: philosophy, character study, perverse**

### **Introduction**

One of the phenomenal figures in literature in Victorian Age, Browning has perhaps occasioned more discussion than any other poet of the period. Neglected at first on account of his alleged obscurity and complex style, he was later admired as the greatest moral and spiritual force in English Poetry. It is said that poetry of Browning was less read and enjoyed than admired. He was supposed to be the voice of Romanticism in its most realistic aspect. There is a combine of religion with science and passion with puritanism. Most ardent and soaring aspirations of human heart and hardest realities of life go hand in hand in most of his poems. Failures and sorrows are necessary for the progress of soul as they urge us towards higher ideals. And nothing is worse than a self-satisfied state of soul. Life is to be judged not by the amount of worldly success but by the quality of our most intense moments. By and large, these moments are concerned with love, courage and devotion to some ideal above and below us. Robust optimism, vigorous zest in life, a keen relish of actual realities of life with all their roughness and crudity, warm and color almost every poem of Browning.

No doubt, philosophy is not the forte of Browning in spite of his beliefs .It is a curious product from the heated Cauldron of his brain into which had been thrown shreds and patches from Victorian Sentimentalism. Actually poetry of Browning lives and would live "if precious be the soul of man to man. " He had a rare vitality of soul –a will that refused to bow to the worst darkness and doubt. As Landor, a lesser known Victorian poet has remarked:

“Since Chaucer was alive and hail  
No man hath walked along our roads with step  
So active, so enquiring eye or tongue

So varied in discourse.” (To Robert Browning lines. 7-10)

This is Browning’s chief title to our attention. He could throw himself into the inner minds of his characters, think and feel with them and advocate their claims. It was his privilege to have discovered that there is a soul of goodness in evil things also. The dramatic monologue was therefore in pre-ordained form for him. It is through it that he sweeps the full current of his human sympathy and sense of reality. Many of his so called philosophical poems are valuable only on account of these elements present in them.

‘My Last Duchess’ is a fine dramatic monologue by Browning, a great love poet of English Literature. Most of his monologues depict the individual striving with himself in the solitude of his own conscience. These are instruments which reflect life just as his poetic vision conceives it to be. In fact dramatic monologue is a technique, which he thought could, more than any other form of poetry, ‘all express him’. To go through these monologues is to see through the personalities they are written about.

“My Last Duchess” is a character study of a unique and complex Duke of Ferrara. The poet has stripped him off his hypocritical attire. And the very reality of his personality is made known as well as visible. His conversation with messenger of the Count whose daughter he is going to marry exposes the layers of his character so by highlighting some of his viewpoints. The poet has also presented a deeply perverse but highly fascinating character.

The narrator of the poem is a Renaissance Duke. He has killed his first wife and now is very keen to marry the daughter of the Count. The Count’s emissary is the auditor of the poem. In other words, the Duke plays the story teller whereas the emissary plays the silent listener. The whole effort of the Duke is to impress the emissary. He poses and paints himself as a great connoisseur of some of the branches of art. There are paintings and culture as indicated by the portrait of his last duchess on the wall. It is done by the most celebrated painter Fra Pandolf. A wonderful bronze statue of the sea god Neptune taming a sea horse made by a famous sculpture. Of course both the painter and the sculpture are imaginary. The poet describes how the Duke flaunts his love of painting.

While glorifying his love for art, he also justifies his killing of the last duchess. What resulted in her death was her ever cheerful nature and courteous manners. What Duke could not digest was that smile of duchess was meant for all. It also expresses the jealous and possessive nature of the duke. As he himself puts it, it was the sun shining smile that compelled the duke to get her killed. The following oft quoted lines amply manifest the murderous motivation of the Duke:

“Oh, Sir, she smiled, no doubt  
Whenever I passed her, who passed without  
Much the same smile? This grew, I gave commands  
Then all smiles stopped together. (My Last Duchess, 43-46)

In fact, the Duke got jealous of her fated smile. He considered it a slur on the fair name of his nine hundred years old traditional family.

Browning has very successfully revived the history of Este family through its most wicked and most fascinating representative. Although the story lies behind the canvas, it is sufficiently hinted at. There is an undercurrent of irony running through the whole fiber of the poem. We are invited not only to look at but look through the picture of the duchess. We

confront to contrast pictures of duchess and the Duke. Under the persona of serenity and grace, the Duke, in fact, is a paragon of arrogance and cruelty whereas the duchess is a picture of tenderness, beauty and remarkable innocence. ( To some extent , the innocence and tenderness of duchess reminds us of Desdemona in ‘ Othello’ so much so both meet the same end because of their innocence).the duke is a very ambiguous character having his own stiff and strange concept of dignity and vanity . In fact he is a dilettante claiming and posing to be connoisseur. The poem also reveals his greedy nature. After showing the emissary the portrait, he in a very cunning and indirect manner, puts the matter of dowry also.

The poem is fair example of the superb handling of the poet of this dramatic monologue. It is through indirection rather than elaboration that he has described the terrifying and touching scene of the sudden disappearance of Duchess. While in other dramatic monologues, there is a speaker and the listener, here there are three persons: Duke, the listener and of course the last duchess. But it is the protagonist of the poem who does duty for all the three. The concluding lines of the poem are drenched in very deep implications:

“Sir, notice Neptune, tho’  
Taming a sea horse, thought a rarity”(My Last Duchess, 54-56)

Brevity indeed is the forte of the description in this great dramatic monologue. It is something rare that a profound life drama has been conceived and expressed in just less than sixty lines. The theme meant for a novel has been capsuled into a poem. How he has given the picture of two characters that stand polls apart and they can exist in any cultivated, capitalist society at any modern time. The unfeeling, thick-skinned and stone hearted nature of the duke stands in sharp contrast with the tender, innocent and generous nature of unfortunate duchess. She was indeed, to quote an expression of Keats” unravished bride of innocent beauty”. How could it be prized by cruel person like duke burning with sexual jealousy? Although the title of the poem is ‘My last Duchess’, yet the poem seems to be more about Duke and less about her.

### Works Cited:

1. Lander Walter Savage. *To the Browning*. www.poetryfoundation.org.2007, Web.May16 2015
2. Mukherjee, Suroopa. *Victorian Poets: Tennyson, Browning& Rosetti*.Delhi Worldwide Publications: 2014. Print.