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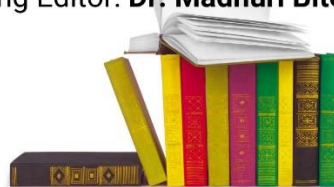
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## **Essence of the Romantic and the Victorian ages in ‘My Last Duchess’**

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### **Abstract:**

The age, in which a poet or a poetess is brought up, has great impacts on his or her sensibilities. In “My Last Duchess” the poet explored the horrific relationship of the Duke and the Duchess. The Duke narrated to an emissary the entire story of killing her. It seemed that the objective of visit of the emissary was, perhaps, to convey the proposal of marriage to the Duke. In the poem, the Duke and the Duchess became symbols to represent the Victorian and the Romantic ages respectively. It is evident that the scientific inventions and industrial revolutions changed the mindsets of the people. The general attitude of persons shifted from the tranquil state of Romanticism to reasonable and logical arguments of Victorianism. Browning captured the manner of complex human existence of this age through the poetic creation of dramatic monologue. The Duke was shattered enough to note the “spot of joy” on the Duchess’ face. The “spot” reminded him of the French Revolution and the American War of Independence. These revolutions challenged the institution of monarchy. So, the worried reactions by the Duke were natural reactions on his part. He was highly threatened with the reflections of spontaneous

emotions on Duchess' face. The Duke believed that his authority would be challenged by his wife. Her thought of liberty and freedom are a means of threat for the Duke. Consequently, he killed her to safeguard his authoritative position. It was explored that the feminist movement found a voice in reaction to such horrible crime against women. It was also observed that the form of interior monologue was the new dimension of creativity by T. S. Eliot to suit the Modern age.

**Keywords: Duke, Duchess, Romantic Age, Victorian Age, Dramatic Monologue, Interior Monologue, French Revolution, Industrial Revolution, Utilitarianism, Doubt, Conflict, Pessimism, Dehumanization, Lyrical Ballad, Blissfulness, Alienation, Individualism, Existentialism.**

The poem, 'My Last Duchess' by Robert Browning was published in *Dramatic Lyrics* in 1842. The age, in which the poem was published, was known as Victorian Age. The Victorian age, which began in the year 1830, almost coincided with the reign of Queen Victoria from 1837 to 1901. Since the preceding age was Romantic age, the thoughts and ideas of the age were often reflected in the works of the Victorian writers. It is said that the well-known writers of this age such as Tennyson, Browning, Arnold, Dickens and others were influenced by the romantic thoughts and feelings. At the same time, the writers of the Victorian age were also highly anxious about the influences of the romantic fervour because they had to display their own poetic talent. Considerably, the writers moulded their arts as per the existing contemporary ideas and thoughts. In the poem, My Last Duchess, Browning based his plot on the institution of Dukedom and his marital relations with the last Duchess as well as other Duchesses. The poem drew the critical attention of the critics and readers due to the significance of the subject-matter which

focused on the institution of marriage. However, the aim of this paper is to consider Duke as a symbol and representative of the Victorian society and the Lady Duchess as a representative and symbol of the Romantic age. Considerably, the conflicts between the Duke and Duchess were not studied only to the limitations of the marital conflicts but beyond this boundary. In other words, the conflicts between the Duke and the Duchess represented the essence of the Victorian and Romantic ages respectively.

The term "Essence" here requires elucidation to clarify the objective of this paper. It is defined how the Duke and the last Duchess inherited characteristics of the Victorian and the Romantic ages respectively. The well-known Victorian writers - Alfred Tennyson, Mathew Arnold, Bronte sisters and so on - were under the impacts of the romantic writers. This impact was caused as they were born and brought up during the glorious days of the romantic period. Robert Browning, who was born in the year 1812, was also under the spell of the romantic movements. The impacts of Percy Bysshe Shelly were often reflected in the poems of Browning due to the thematic content of Shelleyan revolt. The poem, "My Last Duchess" achieved the creative dimension due to the unique portrayal of the Duke who reflected the Victorian mindsets. He was highly threatened to note the "spot of joy" on the Duchess' smiling face.(Young p.58-60) The Duke, who believed in class as a means of human existence and class categorization as the basic foundation of society, was highly shaken to note that spot on her face. He considered that she had inherited such thoughts from the romantic ideologues. Like romantic thinkers, the Duchess believed in spontaneous existence and treated all people around her equally. The Duke was perturbed to note such behaviour on her part that he considered her an infidel and thereby took the liberty to kill her. Critics were highly astonished to note the Duke's horrible arguments for justifying the killing and also taming the last Duchess in a portrait. Was he so foolish or

cunning? Or did he argue as a diplomat in front of the emissary? It seemed from his critical arguments that he had reached a conclusive mindset to kill an individual departing from Duke's frame of mind. These arguments by a monarch were highly threatening to human existence. Such an inhuman approach on the part of the Duke was an alarming note for an individual residing in the Duke's territory. The Duke was so deviated in his psychological state of mind that he failed to control his words and actions. The nuptial knot of the Duke and the Duchess broke due to the conflicting and contrasting characteristics of the respective ages inherent in their individual beings. Browning's masterpiece of dramatic monologue upheld the phenomenal and complex means of existence in Victorian society. As a result, the characters of the Duke and Duchess attained their symbolic status to represent their respective ages rather than limited to their individual selves. Conclusively, it was assumed that the failure of the nuptial knot was a reflection of the gradual transformation of a romantic-being into a reasonable and enquiring Victorian-self.

Let us trace the general characteristics of the Romantic and the Victorian ages. The timeline of English literature periods cannot be considered sharply from a particular year. Usually, these periods were based on certain significant incidents. It is said that the year of the Romanticism began with the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789 or the publication of *The Lyrical Ballad* in 1798. Similarly, there were several dates considered for the beginning of the Victorian age such as 1830, 1832 and also 1837. It is argued that the year 1830 was the beginning of a decade and also coincided with *The Reform Act* 1832. It is often argued that the year 1837 should be considered as the beginning of this age because Queen Victoria ascended the throne in this year. The city of Paris played a central role in the Romantic movements

whereas England was the epicenter of the Victorian movement. The contrasting features of both the ages are often reflected sharply in various literary texts.

The French Revolution contributed to the freedom of thoughts and expressions in literature. Simultaneously, the manifesto of the revolution had a direct impact on monarchs and their institutions. The American War of Independence resulted in independence of United States of America and its impacts were felt in England. Both the revolutions influenced the minds of the intellectuals as well as the common people of European countries including England also. These revolutions, which demanded political freedoms, brought a change in society. Thereby the intellectuals felt and considered that the neo-classical rules in the field of literature were a means of hindrance in liberty and free thinking. The political slogan –Liberty, Equality, Fraternity– emblazoned the mind of the poets. It was stated that the rules of the neoclassical period fettered the minds of the poets and thus failed to answer the fundamental objectives of the slogan. The poet started focusing on the mysterious existence of human beings which were based on emotions and imaginations. Thus the nature of poetry was changed from the satiric spirit of the neo-classical age to outburst of imagination and emotions, which were recollected in tranquility. William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Bysshe Shelley, John Keats and Lord Byron expressed their best through poetry and not prose. It is to be noted that even women were given space in the intellectual arena. However, the emotive dimensions of English literature of the Romantic age again took a new turn during the Victorian age. It was seen that the entire focus of temperament shifted to logical and scientific arguments. The Industrial Revolution also contributed to the whole society. The zenith of scientific temperament was caused mainly due to the publication of *On the Origin of Species* by Charles Darwin in 1859. It shook the foundation of the biblical arguments and its bases and thereby the entire focus of discussion shifted towards

the principles of Darwin. The Victorian age was marked by the Industrial revolution, scientific temperament and intellectual discussion. Obviously, these perspectives were also reflected in literature and art. This new mode of thought brought a change in the particular characters as well as the general temperament of the age. The writers considered argumentative approaches to suit the subjects of their works. In the changed scenario, the reasoning mind was the English mind. Due to all these factors, the society of this age experienced a complete transformation from a rural and agricultural society into a commercial and industrial England.

The Last Duchess was an epitome and replica of the Romantic movements. Like a Wordsworthian character, she focused towards subjective thoughts, individual existence, spontaneous faith and a transcendental sense of yearning and pursuit. Naturally, she flew with the idea of romantic uncertainty rather than the Victorian certainty. She believed in exploring the accidental moment of circumstances rather than bending herself as per the will of arbitrariness. Her existence was so intense and effectively based on the inspirations derived from the principles of the Romantic age. It was of utmost importance to gauze her deep sensitive understanding of human existence. Despite being created through the rhetorical utterances of the Duke, she represented almost all the features of the Romantic age. She was so natural and spontaneous that Browning, perhaps, created her by imitating the Wordsworthian principles of "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings." (Wordsworth, p.165)

The portrayal of Duke was done in contrast to the Last Duchess. It is stated that Alfonso d'Este (1486-1534) was the model of the Duke. "The poem thus awakens our sense of historical perspective, our knowledge that it was written by a nineteenth-century poet for readers who would share his more enlightened viewpoint." (Watson, p.75) Thus, in addition to the expansive policy of the Italian prince, the Duke's personality represented also the mighty Empire of the

Victorian age. Due to the dramatic expansion and her dominance during the reign of Queen Victoria, it was said that “the sun never set on the British Empire.” It was often debated how the Empress Victoria, who was a woman, could represent the male-Duke. It was argued that even women often carried patriarchal mindsets. “The achievement of the poem, then, is not simply that Browning has created a superb character, but that the Duke himself, through a mask, is playing a character.”(Garret, p.117) Unlike the last Duchess, the Duke, however, was incapable of exploring uncertainties, mysteries as defined as Negative Capability by Keats and found his suitable existence by social conventions and norms set by the society. The Duke believed in artful manipulation of human beings just to affirm his selfhood. It was seen often that the personal beliefs were imposed as a governing principles to be followed by the people. These artificial rules were the parameters of the societal norms which were imposed forcefully by Duke. The arrogance and pride of the Duke were due to those conventions of the Victorian and the patriarchal world. Consequently, he believed in and also forced others to follow those artificial norms of the societies. Thus, the Duke failed to understand and comprehend the spectacular thoughts of the Last Duchess. The Duke was shattered highly with the Duchess' belief in the theory of Imagination as enunciated by Coleridge. The theory of Coleridge focused on the organic evolution of the human self. Since the Duke failed to comprehend and explore the last Duchess, the Duke considered her a Shelleyan character bearing a rebellious nature.

A Utilitarian perspective was reflected in the character of the Duke as he emerged in his existence by suppressing the spontaneity of the last Duchess. Utilitarianism, a Benthamite principle, was wrongly applied by some people and institutions of the Victorian age. Dickens, perhaps, tried to examine the wrong use of Benthamite principle in his



novel, *Hard Times* (1854). In order to elucidate the impacts, the novel explored how the principle was wrongly applied by a teacher called Gradgrind in the model institution. Instead of allowing the students to enjoy their childhood and spontaneous growth, Gradgrind crafted a mode of education that was based on arithmetic principles of facts only. Evidently, Louisa Gradgrind, the daughter of Thomas Gradgrind, suppressed her emotions and imagination following the principles of the utilitarian model of education. She was forced by her father to marry a businessman, Mr. Bounderby. It was a loveless marriage that failed to cater her emotional demands. The students of this institution did not have the liberty to enjoy their fanciful and emotional states of thoughts and dreams. Instead, they were subjected to strict rules and restricted norms. The objective of Gradgrind was that the students must not be carried away by their emotional states of being. On the contrary, a mechanization learning mode was focused so that they become rational creatures only. An excerpt from Dickens' novel, *Hard Times*, is elucidated here to apply the Touchstone Method of Matthew Arnold to understand the "real estimate" of poem, "My Last Duchess." The Duchess, like Louisa, also underwent tremendous mode of suppression so that she should not inculcate her intuitive being and imagination self. The Duke's expectations were shattered when he found that she was exchanging compassionate greetings with the people around her. Evidently, her spontaneous reflections became the cause of his crisis and he vehemently pointed those facts with a lot of emphasis before the emissary. It is observed that a note of Utilitarian nature extended even further on the part of Duke and found a manifestation through his lurching diabolical speech. As evident from the boastful glorification of his past reputation and mightiness, the Duke presented the entire narration before the emissary with an objective to get a tremendous amount of dowry as a gift. Also, he intended to convey in clear terms to the emissary that his would-be wife should know about the incident of killing so

that she should not dare to follow the footsteps of the last Duchess, failing which, she would meet the same fate of the last Duchess. Conclusively, one can say that the Duke was far away from a sense of generosity, kindness, frolicsome depth of Duchess' womanhood. As a result, he hovered for a particular and stereotype behavior as expected from a woman by a man. It was reflected that the Duke carried the Utilitarian frame of mind as he not only killed but even tried to exploit the killing of the last Duchess.

The doubt of the Victorian age and the blissfulness of the Romantic age were reflected in the characters of the Duke and the last Duchess, respectively. He was highly worried to note the "spot of joy" on her face. Since "spots" of natural settings were the locations where Romantic poets used to meet for their creative purposes, the Duke was worried to note such reflections on the Duchess' face. The inequality existing between a man and a woman during the Victorian age found a reflection in deliberate victimization of the Duchess by the Duke. The crime committed by the Duke was a reflection of dehumanization generated due to Industrial Revolution. He was so mad in pursuit of material prosperity that he considered the collection of statues and pieces of art as a means of prosperity. Browning presented a harsh and realistic picture of the age through this poem. In other words, the poet wanted to impart moral education to the readers.

In light of the topic of this paper, it is required to exhibit the various forms of creativity designed by the writers of the age to capture the existing frame of mind during the Victorian age. Thus, the various literary devices such as irony, sarcasm, melodrama, Juvenalian and Horatian satires were used by the writers to express their thoughts. Charles Dickens, who was popular and dominant voice of the Victorian age, became famous by creative inventions of various caricatures to point out the oddities and absurdities existing during his time. William Makepeace Thackeray used social satire to make his point against human vanity. On the same note,

Browning also created the form of Dramatic monologue to present the rhetorical utterances of the Duke.

The technique of Dramatic monologue encapsulated the scene of the social complexities of the Victorian age. The intense cut-throat competition and the existing tensions among the various schools of thought were prevailing in the age. Each school of thought was in the fashions of imposing its ideas and principles with an intention to eliminate the other school. Evidently, one school of thought completely clashed with the other one and tried its best to compete in the art of subjugation. The desire to assert one's authority just like the Duke through the monologue only and unwilling to listen further showed the unique mindset of the age itself. Thus, the creative poetic form by Browning reflected a unique mode which also critically examined the existing rhetorics of the age. Philip Hobsbaum perceived that:

Indeed the critics saw the Victorian age essentially as one of lyric. In a sense, it was: much of the weight of fiction was taken over by the prose novel, but this makes the verse monologue all the more important. Insofar as poetry was capable of bearing serious reference to the outside world, the monologue proved to be the clue to the period. Underground as it sometimes was, submerged as critical opinion since that time has allowed it to be, the monologue nevertheless was the lifeline of English verse when poetry was in danger of losing its foothold in civilization as a relevant art-form.

Yet the period was to favour the erection of character in lieu of personal utterance, if only because it at once doubted moral issues and yet was concerned to exhibit a good front to the world...In Browning and his more gifted successors, a great deal of psychic energy was released, much of which had lain in abeyance since the time of Shakespeare because there was no dramatic fiction capable of giving it shape. And it is this interesting in the

creation of character, particularly at a psychological extreme, that typifies the school of Browning.(Hobsbaum, p.239)

The silent state of the emissary, who was on the mission to negotiate the wedding of the Duke, was an essential element of the poetic form of dramatic monologue. This state of the emissary also symbolized the reticence and repression imposed on women during the Victorian age. It was a matter of standard practice that women were allowed to exist only in their state of silence. This arbitrariness on the part of patriarchy was the reason that culminated in gender inequality. In other words, the protest by women might land them in the portrait gallery of the Duke. The emissary was shown to represent the lady and her father- King on whose behalf he was there to negotiate the wedding. However, he was also as a representative of all those women of the Victorian society whose situations were just like the last Duchess. In spite of the dominance of the reasoning mind, the women during Victorian age were highly marginalized in life as well as art. The reason behind this is that society was highly patriarchal in mindset and women were not allowed to live their independent life. The basic premises and doctrines were highly biased for women. Women were treated subordinate to their husbands in a family and so in a society also by various means of marginalization.

The use of allusion in the poem also reinforced the silent state of women's existence with special focus on the span of time. The women were not suppressed and subjugated during the Victorian age only but it was continuing since Renaissance period. The literary device was brilliantly employed by Browning to point out how women were facing a life of humiliation in almost all the ages from the Italian Renaissance to the Victorian age. The Duke became synonymous with the exploitative mindsets that voiced to subjugate women. The poet through the technique of allusion seemed to make an observation regarding cynical mindsets that were

responsible for the demeaning means of existence for women even during the Victorian age despite various reawakening and reformation movements since Renaissance.

Browning employed the literary device of irony, perhaps, to portray the Duke as a caricature rather than a monarch. The words and situations were interplayed in such a way that the verbal irony and the dramatic irony were reflected through his words and actions. The verbal and rhetorical utterances of self-glorification by the Duke portrayed him just contrary to his speeches. Naturally, the critics considered him a disillusioned personality. Critics were of the opinion that a further examination of his statements might reveal that he was impotent as a husband. The verbal and the dramatic ironies in the poem reflected his hollowness.

The paper concludes with the facts that the suppressive state of silence of emissary found a ray of hope in the intellectual ammunition in J. S. Mill's *The Subjection of Women*, published in 1861. It was also seen that the conflicts of the society was shifted and manifested in the individual being of the Modern age. It can be elucidated that the conflicts of a character in the Modern age was reflected in the poem, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." The poem was written in 1911, when T. S. Eliot was enrolled in the Oxford University and it was published in the year 1915. The poem was written in the form of Interior monologue. The dramatic scene of the Victorian society was shifted into an individual self of the Modern society. Consequently, the poem focuses on alienation, isolation, timidity self-consciousness. Prufrock may be considered the modern Duke who was constantly searching a means to address his own self. The Duke, perhaps, faced existential crisis and he started questioning his own existence in the post-Modern world. The objective of the paper - the reflections of an age on the personality of an individual self – is, thus, examined.

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