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## Revealing the Layers of the Duke's Mind: Elements of Structure and Language in Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess"

Nasir Jamal Khattak

Department of English & Applied Linguistics, University of Peshawar

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### Article Info

\*Corresponding author:

(N. J. Khattak)

[khattaknasirj@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:khattaknasirj@yahoo.co.uk)

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### Abstract

This paper explores the intricate layers of the Duke's psyche in Robert Browning's dramatic monologue "My Last Duchess" through a detailed analysis of the poem's structure and language. By examining the Duke's speech patterns, use of irony, and the controlled revelation of his thoughts, we uncover the complexities of his character and his manipulative nature. The study highlights how Browning's use of enjambment, caesura, and dramatic irony not only reflects the Duke's authoritative yet insecure personality but also engages the reader in a deeper understanding of the psychological underpinnings of the narrative. Through this analysis, the paper aims to reveal how Browning's poetic techniques effectively convey the Duke's obsession with power and control, offering a compelling insight into the darker aspects of human nature.

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In Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess" the Duke of Ferrara, intent on marrying the daughter of a Count, addresses the Count's agent in order to negotiate the terms for the marriage. Contrary to what the title of the poem suggests, the subject of the poem is more the Duke, who is also the speaker of the poem, than the Duchess of whom the Duke speaks. Browning also draws upon various structural elements to reveal the often hidden layers of the Duke's mind—from his outwardly projected persona of rationality to his jealous insecurity and desire for control which ultimately lead to his cold-blooded killing of the Duchess and his immoral ways.

The poem, "My Last Duchess" is structured into rhyming couplets of iambic pentameter. Browning, however, prevents the reader from enjoying the rhymes' satisfying resonance due to the predominant enjambment of the lines; the rhymes are often lost without the aid of end-stops to bring them to the reader's attention.<sup>i</sup> Furthermore, sensing the rhyme within the couplets, the reader may be compelled to pause quite unnaturally at the end of a line in order to satisfy an expectation that the rhymes should be expressed more profoundly. This undoubtedly interrupts the natural flow of the Duke's speech, however, and the reader must control his tendency to interrupt the monologue in this way so that the conversational tone and meaning of the language is preserved.

Browning's use of enjambments prevents the formation of heroic couplets; his lines are not end-stops. The lines, although highly similar to heroic couplets, fall short of this poetic form that comprised the great heroic tragedies. Perhaps Browning is suggesting that the Duke himself only appears to be valiant while underneath he is actually nothing like a hero.<sup>ii</sup> The Duke's outward appearance of composure will later give way to his hidden anxieties; and so the contrast between what is obviously apparent with what lies beneath the surface, as suggested by the poem's hidden rhyme scheme, is a strong theme of this poem. As such, the "more outrageous his view the more illuminating for us the psychological revelation" of what sort of a person the Duke actually is (Langbaum 137).

Also, because Browning chooses to conceal rhyme with enjambment throughout most of the poem, the reader may not at once notice Browning's strict adherence to structure. The reader must be careful not to dismiss Browning's

utmost control over his verse; for it can be argued that Browning displays greater awareness and command than if he had merely let the rhymes fall where they may. The poem is at once consistently given to constraint, yet at the same time, the control that is necessary to achieve this constraint is not immediately obvious to the reader. As a result, the elements of the control over the poem's structure are kept hidden from the reader.

The poem's hidden control over its structure underscores the Duke's own dark, calculated persona. Throughout the poem, the Duke is shown to exert a complete control over his listener, the agent to the Count. He draws back a curtain that conceals the painting of his previous wife and asks the Count's attendant, "Will't please you sit and look at her?"<sup>iii</sup> Only when the speaker is nearly finished with his monologue will he later ask his listener to "please...rise" (47). The agent of the Count, without title or rank, is inferior to the Duke in regards to station; this inferiority is magnified by his seated position and the fact that he does not interrupt the Duke during the course of his monologue. The Duke definitely has the control in this meeting.

Similarly, to how the poem itself conceals the constraints of structure, as discussed earlier, the Duke cunningly attempts to disguise his own desire of power. He directs his listener to sit and to stand at will, and by doing so he attempts to avoid coming off as the overbearing, calculated man that he ultimately reveals himself to be. He does not tell his guest to do these things—asks him to. And he does not forget to say "please" either. Because the Duke makes a point of putting forth such good manners, the reader must pay close attention to the poem's language and tone in order to perceive the Duke's hidden drives and dark patterns of thoughts. Only by making such inferences will the reader realize that the Duke's benevolence is but masking a cold heart and evil nature.

When the Duke directs attention to the painting of his last Duchess, his deliberately contrived manner of level-headedness, as suggested in the Duke's calm politeness at the start of the poem, fails to keep hidden his irrational sense of jealous fear. Because the painting is so sensitively rendered, able to capture "the faint/Half-flush that dies along [the Duchess'] throat" (18-9), the Duke assumes that anyone who looks upon the painting must be compelled to ask, "How such a glance came there[?]" (12). In order to resolve the suspicions that he imagines the beholders of the painting to have, he makes a point of claiming that the artist of the painting is "Fra Pandolf"—a religious figure—thereby resolving any uncertainties surrounding his wife's fidelity or the artist's moral character.

Even more interesting, however, is the fact that the agent of the Count never suggests to the Duke that he suspects any adulterous behavior of the woman in the painting. The agent remains silent. Even the Duke reveals that the previous beholders of the painting only "*seemed* as if they would ask" (11; emphasis added) such questions. Despite the Duke's intentions to appear rational, by revealing his unfounded anxieties concerning his wife's fidelity and her attractiveness to other men, the reader, though divided, notes how he ironically appears to the contrary.<sup>iv</sup>

The Duke's lack of reason is not only apparent in his unfounded jealousy, but is also noted in the criticism he imparts on the Duchess' character. The Duke, incredulous to the reader, faults the Duchess for her gracious and generous heart as when he asserts with disdain, "she liked whate'er she looked on, and her looks went everywhere" (23-4). The Duchess' excitement for life and appreciation of nature, as she displayed for the "white mule she rode with round the terrace" (28-9) for example, is degraded to a "spot of joy" in her complexion—as if her vitality is something that could be localized in such a manner. Worse still, by repeatedly labeling her sense of joy as "that spot" (14/21) the Duke implies that it was like a blemish or a fault—something disgraceful and to be gotten rid of. The Duke's faultfinding underscores his desire to have ultimate authority over his wife—to diminish her spontaneity and her sense of happiness. He does not come across as powerful in doing so, but only seems needlessly cruel and even obsessive in his need to dominate.

The problem that the Duke has with his last Duchess is not merely her cheery demeanor, but the fact that she did not preserve her gratitude for the Duke alone. His problem is therefore more a matter of pride, as revealed when he arrogantly argues that she "ranked my gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name with anybody's gift" (32-4), and when he later claims that "she smiled no doubt, whene'er I passed her; but who passed without much the same smile?" (43-5). The reader is led to wonder if the Duke could ever be happy with any woman, or if maybe his pride is so large it would eclipse all hope of satisfaction with any woman alive and with a free will. In fact, he seems to be more pleased with his wife as a portrait, for he "call[s] that piece a wonder, *now*" (3; emphasis added) than he ever was while she was a living being.

Underscoring the pleasure that the Duke finds in his wife's painting is the static representation it offers. No more fretting over some baffling, spontaneous "spot of joy." The Duke can now make his wife appear at will, "since none put by the curtain I have drawn...but I" (9-10), and he is further able to control who will be bestowed by the "depth and passion of its earnest glance" (8). Although the Duke may have prided himself in having had such a lovely wife, he is nonetheless more satisfied by having her neatly preserved and under his direct control as a result of his possessing her portrait.

Throughout the poem, "the Duke's desire for control is no more present than in the calculated rhetoric he employs in speaking to his guest. As the poem progresses, however, the Duke's methodical pattern of speech seems to unravel and the reader is able to discern the disquiet that underlies the Duke's calm composure". For example, up until line twenty-one the lines of the monologue are generally evenly paced, but the sentence that begins at the end of this line marks Browning's first use of dashes to articulate the Duke's speech: "she had a heart—how shall I say?—too soon made glad" (21-22). The Duke betrays a sense of hesitation and second-guesses, as he does when he later exclaims "she thanked men—god! But thanked somehow—I know not how—as if..." (31-32). By revealing such dire hesitation the Duke fails to maintain the polished image he sets out to project at the start of the poem (with his even tone and graceful manners).

The tone of the poem, and indeed the mood of the speaker, shifts with the introduction of these dashes. Compounding this effect is the fact that the rhyme of the couplets becomes more obvious as imparted in the following lines:

Sir, 'twas all one! My favor at her breast,  
The dropping of the daylight in the West,  
The bough of cherries some officious fool  
Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule  
She rode with round the terrace—all and each  
Would draw from her alike the approving speech,  
Or blush at least. (25-31)

Various elements of style come together and quicken the cadence of the verse in this passage. For one, Browning utilizes end-stops at the start of this passage which makes the rhyming of the couplet obvious. The momentum that results from this rhyme seems to carry over into the following lines and is maintained by assonance and consonance of such phrases as "orchard for her" and "officious fool" respectively. At the end of the passage, the inclusion of the internal half-rhyme on the word, "least" with the final words of the preceding couplet—"each and speech"—completes the sense of hurried impatience that is rendered in this passage.

The shift in tone, as outlined above, abruptly ends with the terseness of the following lines:

This grew; I gave commands;  
Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands  
As if alive. Will't please you rise? (45-7)

Here, the Duke composes himself, and the sense of urgency in the preceding passage is undetected. These lines also mirror those near the start of the monologue: "and there she stands...Will't please you sit and look at her?" (4-5). The Duke's state of mind seems to have come full-circle—from composed to undone and back again. The contrived sense of composure at both the beginning and end of the poem is understood more clearly in light of the contrast it receives when the Duke, ironically unaware, loses control of his poised persona in the middle of his monologue.

At the end of the poem, the Duke reveals to the reader that he will soon have another Duchess by marrying the Count's daughter. The theme of circularity, present in the mirroring of lines from the opening and closing of the poem as shown above, is also present in the story that is conveyed by the Duke's monologue. For example, when the Duke asserts that "his fair daughter's self, as I avowed at starting, is my object," the reader eerily suspects the same fate will come to this young woman once she becomes the next Duchess. Langbaum rightly says:

It at this point that we learn to whom he has been talking; and he goes on to talk about dowry, even allowing himself to murmur the hypocritical assurance that the new bride's self and not the dowry is of course his object. (132)

In this sense, the terms "next" and "last" suggest the continuity of this cycle. The Duke's use of the word "object" also carries various connotations; it could mean that the Duke will strive to gain the woman's hand in marriage or it could also suggest that the woman will soon become his literal "object." Perhaps she, too, will become a portrait like the last Duchess. With this thought in mind, the Duke "manages to add a new shock to the shocks" that readers have "already endured" (Langbaum A 146).

From beginning to end the structural elements of language and style underscore major themes within Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess." The deliberate rhyme scheme of the poem is often subtle, and it alludes to how the Duke's outward appearance does not always reflect the inner workings of his mind; both the rhyme scheme and the Duke seem to create elements of disguise. At the poem's end, the structure of the language suggests circularity, hauntingly leading the reader to believe that the Duke's future wife will share the fate of the last Duchess.

### Conclusion

In "My Last Duchess," Robert Browning masterfully uses structure and language to reveal the intricate layers of the Duke's mind. Through the dramatic monologue form, Browning provides a window into the Duke's psyche, exposing his manipulative and authoritarian tendencies. The strategic use of enjambment, caesura, and dramatic irony not only underscores the Duke's need for control but also invites the reader to engage critically with his character. This analysis has shown that Browning's poetic techniques effectively illustrate the Duke's obsession with power and dominance, while also reflecting broader themes of human nature and psychological complexity. Ultimately, "My Last Duchess" stands as a testament to Browning's skill in character portrayal, leaving readers with a profound understanding of the darker facets of the human condition.

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### Notes

<sup>i</sup> Edith C. Batho and Bonamy Dobree say that one of the greatest characteristics of the Victorian Poetry and which increases the readability of the Victorian poetry is "the great freedom in form and prosody" (23). See their "Poetry," *The Victorians and After: 1830-1914* (London: The Cresset Press, 1962), pp. 23-57. They further say that Browning's readers read him for "the flowing, swelling, bursting, outrageous rhythms" (30).

<sup>ii</sup> This statement is in line with Lascelles Abercrombie's assertion that Browning uses his art in such a way that the essence of his characters is revealed. Abercrombie says, "[Browning] is attributing thought to certain characters he has imagined, and making them delineate themselves by the manner of their thinking" says in, "Robert Browning," *The Great Victorians: I*, eds. H. J. Massingham and Hugh Massingham (Middlesex: Penguin Books Limited, 1938). Also see Edwin Muir, "Robert Browning," *Robert Browning*, ed. Phillip Drew (London: Methuen & Co Ltd., 1965), pp.66-71. Muir says that Browning's "metrical forms...have a tentative and casual music in which the thought seems to be experimentally finding its proper expression" (70).

<sup>iii</sup> Robert Browning, "My Last Duchess," *The Poems and Plays of Robert Browning* (New York: The Modern Library, 1934), pp. 94-5. All subsequent references are to this edition, and are parenthetically incorporated into the text of this paper by line number.

<sup>iv</sup> Cornelia D. J. Pearsail, "The Dramatic Monologue," *Victorian Poetry*, ed. Joseph Bristow (Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 67-88. Pearsail says, "reader is divided, understanding and even identifying with the speaker's position, and yet drawn to render moral judgment about what the speaker appears to reveal" (71).

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