

My Last Duchess by Robert Browning: Critical Appreciation

SUMMARY

Browning's "My Last Duchess" is a famous dramatic monologue. The drama that this poem represents is set in 'Ferrara', the capital of a province in Italy that was famous for its 'high' culture during the Renaissance. This setting also hints at the fact that the poem's story is historical.

A duke had murdered his seventeen-year-old wife after three years of marriage, and married another girl. The main character and speaker of the poem is Duke Alfonso II of Ferrara. The other person listening to him is the marriage agent sent by the Count of another place called Tyrol.

The duke is talking about the painting on the wall while preparing to go down to meet the Tyrol, the father of the proposed girl, and other people who have come to finalize the new marriage proposal. The poem looks like a piece of small-talk, but it is meant to reveal a story of oppression, jealousy, pride, corruption, murder and the greed for dowry. The theme of this poem is the wide gap between the so-called high culture and 'low' personal behaviour of the upper class during the Renaissance Italy. The purpose of the poet is to expose the real character of the duke and satirize the culture that he represents.

Critical Appreciation

The monologue is designed in such a way that it reveals the true character of the duke who is having a small-talk with a visitor. As the duke is preparing to go downstairs, probably putting on his clothes, he sees that the messenger is looking at the paintings on the wall. He begins to talk about the painting of his previous wife (the duchess). He says that it was a painting by the famous Italian painter brother Pandolf. The way he repeats the name and uses 'fra' or 'brother' before the artist's name suggests that the duke is trying to impress the visitor with his intimacy with artists.

Similarly, we see that he is trying to give the impression of being an art-lover (aesthete) when he describes the painting with the words of an art-critic – “the depth and passion in the earnest glance..... reproduce the faint half-flush that fades along the throat...”. Then he boasts about his art of speaking by indirectly saying that he doesn’t have the skill of saying small things in the proper manner. But that is another example of his egotism. He claims that he is such a powerful man that no one has dared to ask him about the red spot on the cheek of the duchess. But we see that he is such a mean, evil-minded, jealous and cynical man who thinks that if his wife looks at or smiles at visitors and any other males, it is because of her sexual excitement with them. He guesses that the painter’s small-talk had caused “the spot of joy” to appear on her cheek!

Then he boasts about his ‘nine hundred years old name, and complains that the duchess did not give special regards to that. With normal people, that doesn’t count in a marital relationship, because everyone’s husband is a husband first of all and it is not necessary to address him by his status-name. He says that she used to bring the red spot of joy on her cheek and he gave a “favorable” look on her breast. The duke is a shameless tyrant who cannot think of anything positive; most probably because he is evil minded himself. He says that “her looks went everywhere”, that she would thank and appreciate anything or anyone, that she was too easily impressed, and that she used to smile at anyone who passed by her.

At the climax of the dramatic poem, the Duke reveals that he had killed his previous wife. There are also some dramatic actions in the poem, in the beginning, the duke tells the other man to sit down and look at the picture. Towards the end of the poem, he tells him to stand up: “Will it please you rise?” We also guess other things that the characters must be doing. As the duke is saying all the nasty things about his own wife, the other man seems to try to leave the place! But the duke tells him to wait: ‘Nay, we’ll go down together, sir’. The next moment, we find that he is making the man wait just to give another piece of boasting! He points to a statue and tells his guest that it is his own statue in the form of god Neptune training the sea horse. This also symbolizes this demand for a wife like a ‘trained’ horse. The poem ends with the duke still talking about himself as a great man and a lover of art.

Reference:

Shrestha, Roma. "My Last Duchess by Robert Browning: Summary."
BachelorandMaster, 16 Feb. 2013,
bachelorandmaster.com/britishandamericanpoetry/my-last-duchess.html.