

My Last Duchess by Robert Browning

Introducing poetry as a dramatic genre has opened new perspectives in literature. Robert Browning is of the founders of a dramatic monologue that gives a new form and content to a piece of writing. "My Last Duchess" is an illustrative example of how a dramatic monologue works to achieve the author's aesthetic goals. This point of view allows Browning make his poem a psychological insight into the speaker's world. The presence of the imaginary audience at which the monologue is targeted also involves the reader into the emotional experience of the poem and contributes to its realistic perception.

Before speaking about Browning's poem it is necessary to clarify the concept of a dramatic monologue. Thus, the researchers define as "a play that had shrunk to one speech by one character. From that one speech we can infer a wider dramatic situation, but the speech is all we have of the larger reality" (Hawlin 61). The speaker of "My Last Duchess" portrayed according to his historical prototype Duke of Ferrara has a conversation with his guest who attends his house to agree on his new marriage. The focus of the discussion is a portrait of the Duke's late wife which causes his confessions about her fate to unfold.

From the very beginning of the poem, the Duke's admiration and proud of the picture is exposed. However, it is also clear that he enjoys his possession of the gorgeous piece of art in the same way that he wanted to possess his late wife who used to be a beautiful young girl. Thus, the main dramatic effect of the poem is the speaker's failure to turn the Dutchess into an object that would belong to him totally. He explains his concerns in this way: "Sir, 'twas not/Her husband's presence only, called that spot/Of joy into the Dutchess' cheek" (Browning, lines 13-15). Hence, the girl's joy and interest in other people is named as the main reason for further tragedy to happen.

It is remarkable though, that while having some hints and implication, the Duke does not tell directly what exactly happened to his wife. Although the reader can guess that he has either killed or ordered to kill the Dutchess, there is a space for speculation. All that can be deduced from the monologue is that the Duke's jealousy was getting more and more intense until he finally could not put up with it. "This grew; /I gave commands;/Then all smiles stopped together" (Browning, lines 47-49). The monologue suggests that the speaker does not have reproach for his actions because he believes them to be fair punishment. Otherwise, he would not be so open with his guest who came to arrange his marriage with another woman.

However, it is implied that the Dutchess did not really did any wrong actions to her husband. She was "too easily made happy, too spontaneous, lacking in aristocratic hauteur or sang-froid. She took pleasure in many aspects of her life at court, and (as the Duke insists) failed completely to focus on him sufficiently"(Hawlin 67). Hence, the true reason of the tragedy is the Duke's egocentric vision of marriage that does not allow the wife to have her own space and interests. The reader can guess that his second wife will probably have the same fate unless she obeys to her husband completely. Obeying thus means losing her own personality in favor of her husband.

As is clear from the above said, the theme of possession and objectification of women is a key one in the poem. It is supported by some significant details and the author's choice of language. For instance, when speaking about his next marriage to the Count's daughter, the Duke assures his guest: "The Count your master's known munificence/Is ample warrant that no just pretense/Of mine

for dowry will be disallowed; Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed/At starting, is my object" (lines 52-56). So, the word "object" is quite illustrative and demonstrates how woman is transferred from one man (father) to another one (her future husband).

To sum up, Browning's poem unveils the motifs for murder committed out of jealousy. It also raises the theme of possession and objectification of women in Renaissance society. Using dramatic monologue, the poet creates a realistic psychological portrait of the main hero who is a representative of his society, origin and background.

Works Cited

Browning, Robert. "My Last Duchess" .*Poetry Foundation*.Web. 13 Nov. 2010.

Hawlin, Stefan. *The Complete Critical Guide to Robert Browning*. London: Routledge, 2002.