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My Last Duchess
By Robert Browning
Interpreting Poetry
Revision

Robert Browning's (1819-1891) poem, "My Last Duchess," is the monologue of a selfish and arrogant Duke.

The Duke is talking to a mediator for a very important person, presumably to clarify the details of an arranged marriage.

His monologue focuses on a painting: the portrait of his last Duchess. We sense that he is a very possessive man when he addresses the painting as being of "My Last Duchess." Also, the fact that he keeps the painting covered up reveals his possessive character.

The woman in the portrait is smiling, and her pose reveals—according to the Duke's remarks—an unacceptable behavior: "Paint/Must never hope to reproduce the faint/Half-flush that dies along her throat" (530).

He characterizes his last wife as being too easily "impressed"—although one may think of her as a sensitive and naïve young woman whose only fault is that she has a very jealous and excessively possessive husband.

He blames her for flirting—something that a person who carries a very honorable name should not do. To me, she appears to have been a very kind person—something that the arrogant Duke never understood—and not someone who likes to flirt. She knows how to thank people who have gone out of their way for her and her husband: “She thanked men good! but thanked somehow—I know not how—as if she ranked/My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name/With anybody’s gift” (530). He even admits his arrogance, although he is not aware of it: “I choose never to stoop” (530).

He is condemning her smile as though it were a capital crime—even when she smiles at him. Ultimately, she will pay with her life: “I gave commands;/Then all smiles stopped together” (530). The Duke’s despotic nature is revealed at last.

After telling the story of his last Duchess, he proceeds to meet his potential father-in-law. His last remarks only confirm his arrogant and cruel character. He is informing the mediator that money is not his main priority but the daughter: “his fair daughter’s self...it is my object” (531). The word, “object,” serves a double purpose: it defines the Duke’s interest in his future bride; also, it defines the Duke’s interest, his future bride, as being classified as an object. It is obvious to the reader that any chance of a real relationship with the Duke is impossible—as long as the other partner is viewed as an “object.”

The Duke is controlling every aspect of the visit with precise directions: “Will’t please sit and look at her? I said/‘Frà Pandoff’ by design, for never read/Strangers like you” (530). We don’t sense any kindness in his controlling voice, and words like “I said” and

“Strangers like you” could easily offend. Also, his remarks—such as “Will’t please you rise? We’ll meet/The company below, then. I repeat...” (530), or “Nay, we’ll go/ Together down, sir. Notice...” (531)—reveal his controlling and arrogant character.

This poem leaves the reader with a bitter taste—when imagining how lonely the most beautiful and misunderstood Duchess must have felt.

Works Cited

Browning, Robert. "My Last Duchess." *Angles of Vision: Reading, Writing, and the Study of Literature*. Eds. Arthur W. Biddle, and Toby Fulwiler. New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1992. 529-531.