

## PSYCHOANALYSIS OF DUKE OF FERRARA FROM ‘MY LAST DUCHESS’

**\*Sharmin Sumayah and Musrat Sultana Mumu**

Lecturer, Department of English, City University, Bangladesh

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**ABSTRACT:** *Robert Browning encapsulates the cosmos of a character within the microcosm of a moment. The dramatic monologue ‘My Last Duchess’ by the poet is a presentation of an egoistic, narcissistic and self centered duke. Throughout the poem there is a clear image of a psyche, overprotective, jealous and possessive personality who has executed his wife for his own narrow mentality. Browning has also portrayed the duke as someone extremely powerful who can change everything with a single command.*

**KEYWORDS:** psychoanalysis, Duke of Ferrara, Last Duchess’

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### INTRODUCTION

The Victorian age was an era of sudden changes in technology which brought doubts and disbeliefs in human being about the presence of God and supernatural powers. It was such a time when people started to discover themselves detached from the power of nature. The invention of medicine, machineries and most importantly the theory of evolution of Darwin created doubt about the existence of human being. Thus poets and writers like Robert Browning, Alfred Tennyson, Matthew Arnold and also others presented the internal trauma of people of that time. Duke of Ferrara in ‘My Last Duchess’ was also a character created by Browning with attitude, ego, pride and forged power show showed himself as a loving and caring husband in the disguise of a possessive and envious man. The poem can be interpreted in many ways among which the Psychoanalytical criticism is the most prominent one.

‘My Last Duchess’ is one of the most beautiful poems that portray the implementation of pure and genuine technicality through the character in it. The poem is the voice of Duke of Ferrara who is entertaining the envoy, as thought to be, from his would be father-in-law by showing his palace and the art gallery in the residence. While displaying his power and property to the envoy the Duke shows him his previous wife’s photo which starts revealing the cruelty and possessiveness of the duke.

Initially, the duke’s surroundings, tone, diction of words and choices impelled the reader to assume the duke as a very sophisticated, well mannered and controlled person. However as the narration progresses there are revelations of his nature and cruelty. Unintentionally the duke exposes his own vices while citing the follies of his erstwhile spouse. The duke’s monologue indicates not only the visage he wishes to display to the world but underlying the literal words, the speech reflects his underlying moral fiber — a proud aristocrat who would not “stoop” (Browning 34) to rectify his wife’s flaws (according to him as he reads them), but who would rather finished

her innocent life for his faulted sense of noblesse oblige. The character of the Duke comes across powerfully as a typical member of the aristocracy of the Italian Renaissance.

The duke in this monologue seems to be a mentally disturbed person, as we do not have any such evidence that there was actually an envoy who was listening to him, even he keeps talking to him continuously without having any responses from the listener. Also when the duke displays the portrait of his last duchess to the envoy, his image as an art connoisseur is revealed. The last two lines reiterate this art – loving sensitivity evidenced in his rare art collections of paintings and priceless sculptures. Even the portrait of the dead Duchess is a collector's item, a priceless art exhibit for him. The duke is steeped in the pride of his prehistoric ancestry and an overbearing personality – he controls the envoys' reactions, commands him to sit and examine the portrait of the deceased duchess. By which the readers get some ideas about the existence of a silent listener.

The duke is also recognized as a disturbing person who commands and practices his power on everyone around him. Nobody has the nerve to question the Duke and his arbitrary actions of self-will. As we see through this line to the envoy-

“ Will't please you sit and look at her?”

He commands the listener to sit and see the duchess photo quietly. Moreover, the duke announces to the listener:

“ I gave commands;  
Then all smiles stopped together.”

These lines prove that the duke ill practices his power over his wife. Her gracious and friendly behavior with everyone showed as faults to him. He lists her grievous sins. Her naiveté was her crime, her innocence and simplicity of life, her smiles and delight in living, her polite acknowledgement and reception of the people around her were her offenses. She was guilty of being a fresh young girl who felt happy at the beauty of the sunset, the simple gift of cherries proffered by some subordinate, the white mule she rode. The duchess' friendly nature annoyed the duke, so he commanded to stop the smile of the lady by killing her.

The duke has overprotective, jealous and possessive personality. In the very first line of the poem he announces:

“That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,”

Here, the duke declared with such a possessive tone 'My Last Duchess' that proves he thought his wife as his possession neither as a life partner nor as a wife.

The duke says-

Sir, 'twas not  
Her husband's presence only, called that spot

Of joy into the Duchess' cheek;

There was a spot of joy on the cheek of the duchess when Fra Pandlof was making her portrait, but as duke was not present there, so it made him wonder what made the duchess so pleased and joyous. He also gave the answer in his next lines, as he said-

“ Perhaps  
Fra Pandolf chanced to say, “Her mantle laps  
Over my lady’s wrist too much,” or “Paint  
Must never hope to reproduce the faint  
Half-flush that dies along her throat.”

By saying so, he interprets the moment, when the painting was made, that Fra Pandolf became a quite flirty to the duchess as he quoted to her that the shawl on her lap was covering her hand too much which made his wife a little diffident, or the artist might have admired the beauty of the duchess by praising her beautiful effect of her skin and coloring. The Duke’s aberrant psychology is glimpsed at by the details of his suspicious mind and enforced possession of all he likes – he employs only a member of the monastic order, Fra Pandolf for the portrait assignment of the Duchess within the deadline of a day. This interpretation indicates that the duke is really a jealous person and a maniac who likes to interpret the event through his own imaginations.

Moreover, the duke is really an arrogant person regarding his wealth, name and fame. As he narrated,

“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.”

With these lines he indicates that, the duchess thanked everybody for whatever favor one did to her just like she thanked the duke for giving her position and rank as a duchess. His tone grows harsh as he recollects how both human and nature could impress her, which insulted him since she did not give special favor to the "gift" of his "nine-hundred-years-old" family name and lineage. To him, it was humiliating that the duchess weighed everything in the same manner. The rank that the duke had given her by marrying could never be compared to other ordinary gifts or favor. He could never feel the respect and love of the duchess towards him.

These lines also rationalize that he was also an arrogant and proud individual who was only concerned about his wealth, fame and his title. He does not consider about his wife has the same equal right after marriage on whatever he has. Basically he is not doing any favor to her then why should the duchess feel thankful to him. As a wife she is honestly playing the role and doing her duties towards him. She is a loving and caring wife which the duke does not understand and blame her about her loyalty. To him marrying the lady and giving her the title of a duchess was a great favor to her which could never be compared to anything.

Duke of Ferrara has a critical personality because to him solving the inane matters with the wife does not suit him. The duke says to the envoy,

*“Who’d stoop to blame  
This sort of trifling?”*

These lines identify his arrogance that he did not want to have a discussion with the duchess on the silly matters, but on the contrary, he had reared all these events in his mind which turned him into a heartless person who could kill his wife without a second thought. It proves that, the duke is such a person who bore events in mind and turned himself as an avenger. In fact, consciously he takes such matters as unimportant but unconsciously he lacks of taking such matters as small as it is. He is very concerned about his social position even to his wife. To him having a discussion on trifling matter is like stooping low, which does not suit him.

The duke behaved like a colonizer. The relationship between him and his wife can be interpreted as a colonizer and a colonized. As the colonizers think themselves as supreme and most powerful, likely the duke had the same attitude towards everyone. He considered himself as the most powerful one who can change everything with a single command. Whereas, the duchess is like colonized whose desires and happiness are controlled by her husband.

The duke compares himself with the Neptune. He says-

*“Notice Neptune, though,  
Taming a sea horse, thought a rarity,  
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!”*

‘The Statue of Neptune’ in the psychological projection of the duke, and the ‘Taming sea-horse’ is the depiction of the duchess. As the Neptune in the statue tames the sea-horse, likely the duke has also all the power over the duchess. It also mirrored that the duke has the attitude to dominate delicate, beautiful, feminine and natural things. He loves to control and colonize the people around him and his wife is of no exception but faces the same dominant nature. The Duke places his wife in the same category where he places his other inhabitants. Being a Duke he thinks he has all the power like the God and no one dare to speak against him or take any decision without his order. He is the law only who can rule and override others. If anyone goes against him he has the right to hang that person to death. By indicating himself as Neptune he called himself the ‘God’, who has the power to control the nature, as a lady to the Duke was like nature.

Duke of Ferrara was a selfish person, as we see he executed his wife, but was preparing to remarry the Count’s daughter. The duke was actually a very shrewd person. He only loves himself and never cares about his wife’s emotions. By showing the envoy, the painting and explaining the events he was actually giving the envoy hints about his past married life and his attitude towards his surroundings, so the envoy could warn the lady to be careful about her behavior and attitude towards others after the marriage.

From the very beginning of the poem 'My Last Duchess' we get the glance of an arrogant, superficial and over possessive duke through whom the poet has portrayed the intricate psychological state of human being. The poem, through the words of the Duke, gives us a very vivid description of the disposition of the Duke and the nature of the Duchess. Though, the duke presented the duchess in a different manner although by the description of the events we also analyze the nature of the duchess and the duke as well. Through the monologue Browning has exposed the Duke's narrow-mindedness which has presented her dead wife in a derogatory manner in front of an unknown person.

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