UNIT 10: ROBERT BROWNING: "MY LAST DUCHESS"

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10.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- discuss Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess" as an interesting psychological poem, that reveals the past of a Duke and his late Duchess
- appreciate the life and works of the Victorian poet Robert Browning
- relate the text with the literary form of Dramatic Monologue that Browning has employed in this poem
- make connections between the poem and the context of the Italian Renaissance, in which it is placed
- read into the implied possibilities that the Duke does not mention in the narrative of the poem
- appreciate the poem in its totality

10.2 INTRODUCTION

Have you read any poem by Robert Browning, the Victorian poet? This unit will introduce you to one of the prominent English poets and playwrights of the Victorian Age, who mastered and made popular the form of dramatic monologue in his literary works. This period represented the high point of the dramatic monologue in English poetry and you will be made familiar with the form in this unit, so that you can appreciate the poem better.

The 19th century also known as the Victorian period saw the prominence of poets such as Alfred Lord Tennyson, William Ernest Henley, Matthew Arnold and Gerard Manley Hopkins along with the husband-wife duo, Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, among others. The Victorian Age provided a significant development of certain forms like the sonnet, structured into fourteen lines or the dramatic monologue which influenced the later modern poets. In the history of poetry, Victorian poetry is an important period considered to be in between the Romantic period of the 17th century and the Modernist movement of the 20th century. Like the other Victorian poets, Browning was much influenced by the Romantic poets and particularly by Percy Bysche Shelley.

The prescribed poem "My Last Duchess" is a commonly anthologised poem and one of the most frequently cited examples among Browning's monologues. The form is interesting due to the dramatic revelation of the psychology of the characters and the situations they create, through the dialogic verses of the poem. Browning was the first to bring the dramatic monologue into distinct prominence with his innovative style.

The poem "My Last Duchess" is set in the late Italian Renaissance period. This was a significant period of cultural change and achievement that began in Italy around late 13th century and lasted until the 16th century. The word Renaissance (Rinascimento in Italian) means 'rebirth', implying the renewed interest in the culture of classical antiquity and love of learning during this period. The Renaissance started as a wide European phenomenon and the Renaissance ideal was fully adopted by the ruling classes, who were patrons of art and culture. The famous Medici family

was the leading example of such patrons, who held an aristocratic position in Italy for three centuries.

If you read the poem carefully, it reveals much more than just the narration of past occurrences by a Duke. In the poem he reflects his bitterness and thoughts on looking at the portrait of his dead Duchess and in the process of narrating, unconsciously reveals his own nature. Many of Browning's poems revolve around such themes of love and its madness, power and the human psyche, revenge and intrigue, which make his poetry interesting. Browning mastered the form of the Dramatic monologue which dominated his works in his writing career.

10.3 ROBERT BROWNING: THE POET

This unit will introduce you to Robert Browning's poem, "My Last Duchess" which is written in the form of a dramatic monologue that first appeared in Dramatic Lyrics (1842). Among this collection, he had included a short work "Italy and France" which in 1849, he renamed "My Last Duchess, Ferrara". When he rearranged his works in 1863, he placed it finally under *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* and did not change the title. The poem is set in the background of Italy and the Italian Renaissance and is influenced in part from historical fact.

10.3.1 His Life

Robert Browning (7 May 1812 - 12 December 1889) was born to Sarah Anna Wiedermann and Robert Browning. He had a younger sister named Sarianna, who was very gifted. His father was a well-paid clerk who worked for the bank of England and their family was well off. Even as his paternal grand father, Margaret Tittle was a wealthy slave owner in the West Indies, his own father was an Abolitionist in supporting the end of slavery. Browning's father had been sent to the West Indies to work on a sugar plantation but he soon returned to England, disgusted by the widespread slavery

that he saw. According to an anecdotal family story, his paternal grandfather was rumoured within the family to have had some Jamaican mixed ancestry but there is little evidence for the same. Browning's mother, who was a talented musician, was the daughter of a German ship-owner, who had settled with his Scottish wife at Dundee.

Browning's father had amassed an extensive library of around six thousand books, in several languages and many of these were rare. These were the chief literary resources that helped him develop his literary interests. His father encouraged his children's interests in literature and the arts. He was very close to his mother and it was his sister, who had become his close companion in his later years.

Browning wrote a book of poetry at the age of twelve, which he later destroyed when no publisher could be found. He was a very sensitive child and showed a dislike towards school life. After attending one or two private schools, he was educated by a home tutor with the help of the literary resources in his father's library. Thus, by the age of fourteen he was fluent in French, Latin, Italian and Greek and this was the time when he became a great admirer of the Romantic poets, especially Shelley. In his admiration and influence for Shelley, he too became vegetarian and an atheist, although he did not remain so later. At the age of sixteen, he studied Greek at University College, London but left after his first year. He did not study at either Oxford University or Cambridge University which were both open to the members of the Church of England. He stayed away from these universities because of his allegiance to his mother's evangelical Protestant faith. She was a devout nonconformist, and did not follow the beliefs of the Church of England.

He composed arrangements of various songs and inherited musical abilities from his mother. He chose to stay at home,

financially dependent on his parents, until the age of 34, after which he married. Until then he had even refused to a formal career, ignoring his parents' critical protests to his serious inclination to poetry. In 1845, he married Elizabeth Barrett, who was elder to him by six years and a semi-invalid in her father's house at Wimpole Street, London. Their regular correspondence slowly developed into a romance and finally they eloped on 12 September, 1846. Initially their marriage was a secret because Elizabeth had a dominating father who disapproved marriage for any of his children and he even disinherited Elizabeth like each of his children who had married. Elizabeth Barrett was a sweet and innocent young woman who suffered her father's endless tyranny and cruelties.

The Brownings lived in Italy, residing first in Pisa for a year, and then in an apartment in Florence (now a museum to their memory). Their only son Robert Wiedermann Barrett Browning nicknamed "Penini" or "Pen" was born in 1849. During the years they lived there, his fascination led him to learn much about Italian art and culture. In his later life he also described Italy as his University. Later, he bought a home in Asolo, outside Venice. While in their Italian home the couple was very comfortable and their relationship prospered.

He returned to England only after the death of his wife in1861, and he became a part of the London literary scene, even as he kept visiting Italy frequently. Gradually, he received recognition for his works and it brought him the recognition that he had sought for nearly forty years. The Robert Browning Society was formed in 1851and his work was considered befitting the British literary canon. The last years of his life saw him travel widely and he even joined a British diplomatic mission to Russia in 1834.

According, to some reports Browning became romantically involved with Lady Ashbutton but did not remarry. In 1878, for the first time in seventeen years since his wife's death, he returned

there on several occasions. Browning breathed his last at his son's home in Venice on 12 December, 1889. He was buried in Poet's corner in Westminster Abbey, where his grave lay adjacent to that of the poet Alfred Tennyson.

10.3.2 His Works

Browning's writing career began with the publication of the anonymous poem "Pauline". His long poem "Paracelsus" based on the renowed doctor and alchemist, received the notice of Thomas Carlyle, Wordsworth and other men of letters. This gave him the reputation of being a promising poet on the London literary scene. During this time, he came to be acquainted with Charles Dickens, John Forster, Harriet Martineau, Thomas Carlyle and Charles Macready too.

He was encouraged to write the play *Strafford* performed in 1837 by Charles Macready and Helen Faust and even as it was no great success, he was encouraged to try again. He went on to write eight plays in all, which included *Pippa Passes* (1841), *A Blot on the Scutcheon* (1843) and *A Soul's Tragedy* (1846). A troubled production of *A Blot on the Scutcheon*, followed by the publication of the experimental and politically radical poem "Sordello" (1840) were both met with widespread dislike. And this caused him such a setback that his reputation would not rise again for 25 years. "Sordello" was a complex psychological poem about a 13th century troubadour or a travelling poet.

Browning was critically dismissed further by patrician or Aristocratic writers such as Charles Kingsley for his leaving the shores of England to live in Italy. It was in Florence from early 1853 that Browning worked on the poems that eventually comprised his two volume *Men and Women* (1855) and these works increased his reputation only after he returned to England. In 1868, after five years of work, he completed and published the long poem *The*

Ring and the Book in blank-verse, which was based on an extremely complex murder case in Rome of the1960s.The poem is composed of twelve books, with an introduction and conclusion by him and ten lengthy dramatic poems narrated by the various characters in the story, reflecting their responses to the events. It was long even by his own standards, being over twenty thousand lines and this has been his most ambitious project and praised as an accomplished achievement in poetry. This was published separately in four volumes from November 1868 to February 1869 and this poem was a success both critically and commercially, bringing him the recognition that he had sought for nearly forty years.

After a series of long poems published in the early 1870s, the poems "Fifine at the Fair" and "Red Cotton Night Cap" were well received. The volume *Pacchiarotto and How He Worked in Distemper* included an attack against Browning's critics and in particular the Poet Laureate Alfred Austin. In 1887, Browning produced the major work of his later years *Parleyings With Certain People of Importance in Their Day*. It presented the poet speaking in his own voice, engaging in a series of dialogues with long-forgotton figures of literary, artistic and philosophic history and this collection baffled the Victorian public.

Browning then returned to writing short, concise lyrics for his last volume *Asolondo* (1869) which was published on the day of his death. He had a rewarding writing career and he was awarded many distinctions. He was made L.L.D of Edinburgh, a life Governor of London University and had also the offer of the Lord Rectorship of Glasgow. Browning's fame today rests mainly on his dramatic monologues in which the dialogic voice conveys not only the setting and action but also reveal the speaker's character. This was the form that he was known to have significantly mastered and innovated in his works.



LET US KNOW

Read to find out what M.H. Abrams says are the following three features of the dramatic monologue as it applies to poetry:

a) A single person who is not the original poet utters the speech that makes up the whole of a poem, in a specific situation at a critical moment.

b) This speaker addresses and interacts with one or more person but the reader finds the listener's presence only from clues of the speaker.

c) The main principle controlling the poet's choice and formulation of what the speaker says is to enhance the interest of the reader. The way of revealing the situation is very important as seen in the narration of a dramatic monologue and this gives away the speaker's temperament and character.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. Mention whether True or False:

a. Robert Browning made popular the form of Dramatic monologue in his literary works. **(True/False)**

b. The poem "My Last Duchess" is set in the late English Renaissance. **(True/False)**

c. The poem "My Last Duchess" first appeared in 1842 in his collection *Dramatic Lyrics*. **(True/False)**

d. He had a home tutor and the resources of his father's extensive library. **(True/False)**

Q2. Fill in the blanks:

a. Browning's writing career began with the publication of the anonymous poem ……..

b. The book…….was based on an extremely complex

murder case in the Rome of the 1960s.

c. The book……..was published on the day of his death.

d. The……. …….. Society was formed in 1851.

Q3. Name some of the best known works of Robert Browning.

Answer:…….....

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.....

10.4 THE TEXT OF THE POEM

My Last Duschess

Ferrara

"That's my Last Duchess painted on the wall (1)
Looking as if she were alive. I call
That Piece a wonder, now: Fr Pandolf's hand
Worked busily a day, and there she stands
Will't please you sit and look at her? I said
"Fr Pandolf" by design, for never read
Strangers like you that pictured **countenance,**
The depth and passion of its **earnest** glance, (8)
But to myself they turned (since none puts by
The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)
And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,
How such a glance came there: so, not the first
Are you to turn and ask thus Sir, 'twas not
Her husband's presence only, called that spot
Of joy into the duchess' cheek: perhaps
Fr Pandolf chanced to say "Her **mantle** laps
Over my lady's wrist too much" or "Paint
Must never hope to reproduce the faint (18)
Half flush that dies along her throat" such stuff
Was **Courtesy**, she thought, and came enough



Countenance: a person's face or facial expressions.

Earnest: with sincere and serious intention.

Mantle: a woman's loose sleeveless cloak.

Courtesy: a polite and considerate behaviour.

For calling up that spot of joy. She had
A heart-how shall I say? –too soon made glad,
Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere
Sir, 'twas all one! My favour 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 (28)
She rode with round the terrace-all and each
Would draw from her alike the approving speech,
Or blush, atleast. She thanked men, -good! But thanked
Somehow-I know not how- as if she ranked
My gift of a nine-hundred-tears-old name
With anybody's gift. Who'd **stoop** to blame
This sort of **trifling**? Even had you skill
In speech-(which I have not)-to make your will
Quite clear to such an one and say, "Just this
Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss, (38)
Or there exceed the mark"-and if she let
Herself be lessened so, nor plainly set
Her wits to yours, **forsooth**, and made excuse,
-E'en then would be some stooping; and I choose
Never to stoop. Oh Sir, she smiled, no doubt,
Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without
Much the same smile? This grew. I gave commands:
Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands
As if alive. Will't please you rise? We'll meet
The company below, then, I repeat, (48)
The Count your master's known **munificence**
Is ample warrant that no just pretence
Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;
Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed
At starting, is my object. Nay, we'll go



Stoop: lower one's standards in doing something morally wrong.
Trifling: unimportant or something trivial.
Forsooth: indeed.
Munificence: generosity of someone who is very generous.

Together down, Sir. Notice Neptune, though,
Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me! (56)

10.4.1 Explanation of the Poem

The poem "My Last Duchess" is interesting due to Browning's psychological treatment of the character of the Duke of Ferrara. The Duke's love for the arts, his personal and family pride, his jealousy and tyranny as the husband and his authority as a master, make him the typical Aristocrat of the Renaissance period. On the other hand, even though the Duke presents the Duchess in a different light, she shows the characteristics of being young, inexperienced and happy-natured with a love of all things. Her smile or courtesy to all, which he reads with suspicion, appears rather as an expression of a warm all-embracing soul. The psychopathic possessiveness and jealousy in the duke's mind finally goaded him to murder his charming wife.

The background of the poem is set in the Renaissance period of 16th century Italy. The poem first appeared in Browning's *Dramatic Lyrics* (1842) and later in *Dramatic Lyrics and Romances* (1863). It contains 28 rhymed couplets. The poem begins with the lines:

"Ferrara
That's my Last Duchess painted on the wall
Looking as if she were alive. I call
That Piece a wonder, now: Fr Pandolf's hands
Worked busily a day, and there she stands
Will't please you sit and look at her? I said
"Fr Pandolf" by design, for never read
Strangers like you that pictured countenance,
The depth and passion of its earnest glance,
(Lines 1-8)

The narrator is an Italian Duke and the poem is set in the

Italian city of Ferrara, which one learns from the immediate exclamation of the Duke. You may be interested to know, that a Duke rules a small independent state, holding the highest, hereditary title of power. Here in the poem, the Duke plays a host to the visiting guest, showing him the painting of his dead wife, the late Duchess. Like the paintings or portraits of the Italian Renaissance period, this painting is very life-like and appears as if the Duchess was still alive, right in front of the privileged viewer. This was painted by one Fr. Pandolf and the busy artist's work resulted in capturing her portrait, which held the Duke's gaze as he admired this work of art, calling it a work of "wonder".

Asking the Envoy to be seated, he let the visitor know, how it was his privilege to view this rarely shown painting. Perhaps, this was due to the fact that, in the eyes of the Duke this man had the ability to perceive the depths of facial expressions of people to a certain extent. Thus, you will notice that generally, monologues which are one-sided happen in the presence of a silent listener.

But to myself they turned (since none puts by
The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)
And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,
How such a glance came there: so, not the first
Are you to turn and ask thus Sir, 'twas not
Her husband's presence only, called that spot
Of joy into the Duchess' cheek: perhaps
Fr Pandolf chanced to say "Her mantle laps
(Lines 9-16)

No one is to have power over the strings to draw the curtain, which hides the portrait of his wife except himself. This shows a sense of absolute power in the Duke, who solely enjoys the right of what he thinks to be his own property, like any art- collector. In revealing the portrait, he also begins to give himself away and the

past. The pronoun "they", here implies to the selected strangers, who often question him about the appeal of the glance of the Duchess. Taken aback by the beauty of the Duchess, the visitor who is addressed as "Sir" is not the first person to ask him, the often repeated question about the portrait. In his answer, the Duke admits that he was jealous about not being the sole cause of the radiance in her, while the painting was made. It reflects his suspicion as he utters the word "perhaps", in imagining the reason of the "spot of joy" in the cheeks of the Duchess. He says that, while she posed for the portrait, it was the artist who caused her to blush with pleasure, when he remarked that too much of her wrist was covered. In not being the sole reason of the joy reflected in her, the Duke expresses his discontent and this reflects how in the past he had wanted to control and confine her interaction with him alone. And finally as he wished, after her death she is confined within the frame of the painting, which is solely his property.

Over my lady's wrist too much or "Paint
Must never hope to reproduce the faint
Half flush that dies along her throat" such stuff
Was Courtesy, she thought, and came enough
For calling up that spot of joy. She had
A heart-how shall I say? –too soon made glad,
Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere
(Lines17-24)

According to him, no mixture of paint could ever produce that effect of a radiant glow in the painting. And this makes him read too much into the "faint half flush", that seems to have a compelling effect on his opinion. He sarcastically, assumes it to be her sense of courtesy that may have caused her, to blush in front of a mere painter. He felt that she did not have the required composure that a Duchess

should have had. To his eyes, she had a heart that was impressed easily and won over by anyone or anything. Probably she lacked the desired aristocratic ways, due to her origins and therefore anything would easily catch her whim and fancy. What irritates him is that he perceived her as lacking in good taste and sense of choice that was required in a Duchess. He comments on her uncontrollable eyes, all around the place, as if he alone had the right to gaze and not her. As the poem progresses, the obsessive possessiveness of the duke becomes more and more evident from what he says to the visitor.

Sir, 'twas all one! My favour 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, atleast. 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. Who'd stoop to blame.
(Line 25-34)

He recounts all the instances, when he found that there was no marked difference in the things that drew her approval and even made her blush with joy. Whether it was her noticing his eyes at her bosom, the delight of the last rays of a sunset, a bough of cherry blossoms given by a young officer in admiration, or her joy of riding a white mule round the terrace, there was no difference in the pleasure that these things brought her. He felt insulted to be treated the same like the other men around, to whom she thanked too easily. His pride was hurt by what he thought to be her disrespect for him and his aristocratic lineage, a nine hundred year old name and a

royal family history.

This sort of trifling? Even had you skill
In speech–(which I have not)–to make your will
Quite clear to such an one and say, "Just this
Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,
Or there exceed the mark"–and if she let
Herself be lessened so, nor plainly set
Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse,
–E'en then would be some stooping; and I choose
(Lines 35-42)

Perhaps, she was of humble origins to understand what was expected of a Duchess. And her behaviour could be the result of the simplicity and warmth of her nature, which he saw as "trifling". The Duke reasons that anyone with the "gift" of an inherited title, would not stoop to blame an ignorant woman who does not live up to her name, even if one had the skill of speech. Although the Duke says he lacks such a skill, you will find that he is only trying to be modest to the visitor because, right from the start it is he who takes command of convincing the visitor about his thoughts. To him, no respected man would like to instruct about what he does not like in his woman, what disgusts him or what are the things that exceed the limits set by him. The address "here you miss" that he utters sounds as if he had the disgrace to belittle his wife as if she were a child. If the woman opened her mouth to answer something in return, trying to explain herself or even make excuses, even that would be considered as lowering one's standards to a morally inferior woman.

Never to stoop. Oh Sir, she smiled, no doubt,
Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without
Much the same smile? This grew. I gave commands:
Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands
As if alive. Will't please you rise? We'll meet

The company below, then, I repeat,
The Count your master's known munificence
Is ample warrant that no just pretence
(Lines 43-50)

He was too egoistic to stoop to his Duchess and he treated her in cold silence, considering it below him to condemn her. His complaint was that she smiled at others, just as she smiled at him and that there was no difference in her treatment to him and other men. When he could no longer bear it, he ensured that it never happened again. You may wonder what commands he may have given. It could be possible that he ordered the Duchess to be sent to a convent, commanded to be put to death or even killed her himself. He was such a tyrannical husband that she might have died of a nervous breakdown too. "I gave commands" suggests that she was killed on his orders. Her mysterious death, finally creates the Duchess into a work of art, to be frozen as a painting on the wall forever. There is every possibility of the Duke's hand in her untold death.

Ending his narration, the Duke asks the visitor to rise to meet the company downstairs. The word "company" may imply a party held in reception and honour of the visitor. By line 49, you will find that the visitor who has been received so ceremoniously is the Envoy of a Count and the Duke wishes to marry the Count's daughter, with a generous dowry. Perhaps, the Count sent his Envoy to bring him report of the Duke of Ferrara.

Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;
Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed
At starting, is my object. Nay, we'll go
Together down, Sir. Notice Neptune, though,
Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!
(Lines 51-56)

The Duke is of the opinion that the generosity of the Count is assuring enough, that no justified quote for dowry would be rejected. Even though he says that it is his fair daughter who is his interest, he seems keener on the dowry. The fact that he addresses her as his "object" again reflects on how he sees woman as a possession, over whom he considers to have the sole rights.

The rank of the Envoy is established as he says, "Nay, we'll go together down". At the end of the poem the Duke draws the Envoy's attention to a rare work of art by the sculptor Claus of Innsbruck, which is the bronze statue of Neptune taming a sea horse. This is nothing but self-flattery in order to impress the Envoy who is to report back to his Count. This symbolically shows his tyrannical and immature side which wishes to tame and control anyone or anything that is his. The word "my" points to his sense of possessiveness for which he can go to any lengths to establish as his alone. The Duchess was not murdered because of immorality or infidelity but because of her unthinking nature as a wife and a Duchess and the lack of gratitude for her position. The title of the poem itself hints that it is centered on the Duchess even as she is no more which also reflects a certain guilt and self-justification in accounting the things of the past. The reader gets an insight into the psychology of the Duke and the possible chain of events.

You will be interested to know that many critics think that the poem has connections with real life incidents. The fifth Duke of Ferrara Alfonso ll d'Este (1533-1598) had abandoned his wife for two years before she died at the age of 17 on April 21, 1561. At the age of 25 he had married the 14-year-old daughter of Cosimo I de' Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany. Her name was Lucrezia di Cosimo de'Medici. She was not well educated and the Medici's were "nouveau riche" (newly rich in status) in comparison to the distinguished Este family. She was married to the Duke with a sizeable dowry. There

was a strong suspicion of poisoning, and after her death, he sought the hand of Barbara, the eighth daughter of the Roman Emperor Ferdinand I. The Count was in charge of the arrangement of the marriage and he sent Nikolaus Madruz, a native of Innsbruck to bring report from the Duke of Ferrara.

The poem "My Last Duchess"… a well researched poem and is partly based on historical fact…first appeared in *Dramatic Lyrics* in 1842 …later in *Dramatic Lyrics and Romances* in 1863…in the form of a Dramatic Monologue... contains 28 rhymed couplets…set in Italy in the Renaissance of the 16th century… about the Duke's reflection on portrait…character of the Duke and his past revealed in narration of the Duke.



LET US KNOW

Owing to the increasing interest in the Classical cultures of ancient Greece and Rome, portraits–both painted and sculpted– were valued as works of art in Renaissance society. The period saw the genius of Leonardo Da Vinci, Michelangelo and Raphael.

Robert Browning admired the Pre-Raphaellites who drew from myth and folklore for their artwork. Dante Gabriel Rossetti was regarded as the chief poet among them. The Renaissance brought with it a revival in pagan art, and many pagan gods were depicted in the same Classical models used in Greek and Roman times. Neptune (as you will also find mentioned in the poem) was the Roman God of water and the sea and a counterpart of the Greek God Poseidon. Neptune was the brother of Jupiter and Pluto. Each of them presided over the three realms of Heaven, Earth and the Nether regions. Like Poseidon, Neptune was worshipped as the Patron God of Horses by the Romans. As Neptune was God of the waters, he was often depicted as riding sea-horses.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q4. Choose the correct answer:

a. The poem is a dramatic monologue in which the speaker is the Duke and the silent listener is

1. The Count
2. His friend
3. An Envoy
4. His newly wed wife

Answer: ……

b. The Duke felt that to instruct his wife it would result in his "stooping" as he was proud of his

1. Own Relation
2. Life of luxury
3. Nine- Hundred- year old, inherited title.

Answer:.....

Q5. Discuss briefly Robert Browning's poem "My Last Duchess". (60 words)

10.5 PROSE STYLE

Browning is often remembered for his dexterous use of the dramatic monologue in his verses. In his writings, he often provided psychological insight of his characters. It took a long time for him to be recognised as a great poet because the subjects that he explored did not attract much interest in the readers of his time. Often, they could not relate to his treatment of themes that were complex and **obscure**. His verses were mostly written on subjects of love, power, **intrigue, psychology**, class and society.

Browning is remembered for some of his short poems such as "Rabbi Ben Ezra", "How They Brought the Good News to Aix", "Evelyn Hope", "The Pied Piper of Hamelin", "A Grammarian's funeral", "A Death in the Desert" among others. The poem "My Last Duchess" is one of his most cited poems. The form soliloquy is a speech in a play, where a character speaks his



Obscure: difficult to understand.

Intrigue: plot something harmful against another.

Psychology: the mental characteristics or attitude of a person; science of the mind.

Jury: a group of Judges who have to give a verdict upon the hearing of a case.

thoughts aloud to himself and it is different from the form of dramatic monologue and the two must not be confused with. Unlike a soliloquy, the meaning in Browning's dramatic monologue is not what the speaker directly reveals but in what he unintentionally gives away about himself. In the poem this process of justification of past actions happens in front of a silent listener. It is almost like a special defence, in which the reader is like a member of a **jury** who hears a case.

Browning chose some of the most lowly and even psychopathic characters in order to build a sympathetic case for such a character (as the duke) as well as to cause unwillingness in the reader. To declare such a character innocent when there is the possibility of him being a psychopath or mentally unsound makes his verses challenging and interesting. One such sensational monologue is "Porphyria's Lover" in which a waiting lover, who sees no future together with his love Porphyria, strangles her to death by winding her golden braid around the neck. The poem "My Last Duchess" is also one such example in which the Duke is eloquent in expressing himself despite his madness of mind. Browning's complex psychological poem "Sordello" about a 13th century travelling poet reflected the late 19th century Victorian Society. In other monologues, such as "Fra Lippo Lippi", Browning takes an immoral character and challenges the reader to discover the good qualities.

A lyrical element is often present in the monologues and it may either be narrative or analytical in form. Browning had employed the dramatic monologue in a variety of forms, like in the form of letters or written records like *The Ring And The Book* or as an analytical discourse of a problem like the poem "Rabbi Ben Ezra". It could be presented as 'Patriotic' lyrics represented as spoken by imaginary persons like "Boot and Saddle" or Browning himself discussing some general problem addressing a person who lived and died before his time, as seen in his *Parleyings With Certain People of Importance in Their Day.* Several of his poems consisted expressions of love with a strong lyrical element

like the poems "Two in Campagna" or "The Lost Mistress" among others. And the element of madness in love to the point of crime was narrated by a participant narrator in some of the poems such as, "Fra Lippo Lippi", "Porphyria's Lover", "Andrea Del Sarto" or the prescribed poem "My Last Duchess". In his work *The Ring and the Book*, he wrote an epic-length poem, in twelve blank verse monologues, in which he justified the ways of God to humanity, spoken by the principles in a murder trial. These monologues greatly influenced many later poets like T.S Eliot and Ezra Pound.

Today Robert Browning is considered the most influential poet of the second two-thirds of the 19th century. In his own time he was more admired than read. Hugh Walker's influential survey of Victorian Literature was called *The Age of Tennyson* (1897) and it influenced the opinions of the literary historians. During his time true appreciation lay with poets such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Algernon Charles Swinburne who himself argued against the common charge that Browning's poetry was too obscure. According to Swinburne, Browning's characteristic work was the purest and highest forms of the lyric or dramatic art. With time when everything Victorian was denigrated, Browning's verse continued to live on among the poets. A prominent historian and critic John Forster evaluated Browning's early development by emphasizing that he had only partially realised his potential.

In 1880s Samuel Clemens, better known as Mark Twain, was intensely passionate with the subtle style in Browning's verses. Browning was greatly admired by the Modern writers. William Butler Yeats in the final part of his last volume traced his own descent from William Blake and P.B. Shelley to Robert Browning. Ezra Pound had famously acknowledged Browning as his poetic father. T. S Eliot found Browning's monologues a model to be employed in his verses. While Robert Lowell found Browning's verses as fluid as prose, he was one of the favourite poets of Robert Frost. Richard Howard was so influenced by his verses that he wrote monologues

directly in imitation of Browning. Oscar Wilde analysed the narrative and the psychological aspects of Browning's poetry.

There have been books devoted to Browning's early relationship with critics such as Gertrude Reese Hudson's book Browning's Literary Life (1992) or Boyd Litzinger's Times Revenges (1964) on his reputation. There is also Betty Flower's *Browning* and The Modern Tradition (1976). Noted Critic Patricia O'Neill has also evaluated the poet as an index of the cultural temper of the time. His poetry is particularly remembered and popular for the rich vein of psychological speculation.



10.6 LET US SUM UP

You have just finished reading the poem "My Last Duchess" by Robert Browning, who with his unmistakable style, has given the reader an insight into the manipulative mind of a typical Renaissance Duke. The Duke's controlled, possessive, egoistic and tyrannical persona lies in contrast to the spontaneous, loving and happy-natured Duchess. You have gained a psychological insight into the narrator of the poem and the role of events.

You have also learned about the life and works of Robert Browning and about the different ways in which he employs the Dramatic Monologue. Though he is an English poet of the Victorian age, he chose the setting of Italy and the Italian Renaissance for the poem. Browning portrays the widespread Victorian concept of human relationships and social conventions. His work reflects two of his primary interests– the Italian Renaissance and visual arts. You will find "My Last Duchess" interesting after having read through the unit and interpreting the possibilities of the poem on your own.



10.7 FURTHER READING

1) Bloom, Harold (2001) *Bloom's Major Poets: Robert Browning.* New York: Infobase Publishing.

2) Browning, Robert (1898) *Dramatic Romances*. New York: Crowell and Company.

3) Fletcher, Huntington. (1908) *Modern Language Notes* "Robert Browning's Dramatic Monologue" The Johns Hopkins University http://www.jstor.org/stable/2916938

4) Friedland, S. Louis (1936) *Studies in Philology* "Ferrara and My Last Duchess" The University of North Carolina Press http://www.jstor.org/stable/417234

5) Neill, Patricia O' (1995) *Robert Browning and 20th Century.* Columbia: Indiana University Press.

10.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1 a. True b. False c. True d. True

Ans to Q No 2 a. "Pauline" b. *The Ring and the Book*. c. *Asolondo.* d. Robert Browning Society

Ans to Q No 3. *Strafford, Pippa Passes, A Blot on the Scutcheon, A Soul's Tragedy, Men And Women, The Ring and the Book, Dramatic Lyrics, Dramatic Lyrics and Romances, Pachiarotto, How He Worked in Distemper, Parleyings With Certain People of Importance in Their Day.*

Ans to Q No 4. a. An Envoy b. Nine-hundred-year old, inherited title.

Ans to Q No 5. To refer to 10.4.1 subsection of the unit.

10.9 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1. Discuss the content of the poem "My Last Duchess" by Robert Browning.

Q2. How has Browning employed the literary form of Dramatic Monologue in the poem?

Q3. Describe Browning's use of the Dramatic Monologue in his various works? Give examples.

Q4. What did Browning portray through the Italian Renaissance as a background of this poem?

Q5. Write a character analysis of the Duke from your reading of the poem and contrast it with that of the dead Duchess.

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