

My Last Duchess Poem Analysis

Robert Browning (1812-1889)
 May of written it based on his travels.
 The poem could be about woman's rights.
 Travelled
 Dramatic Monologue
 My Last Duchess
 Not Written from Robert's Point of view
 Published in 1842
 Based in 14th and 16th century
 Industrial Period
 More Jobs
 busier
 overcrowded
 Pollution
 Early Victorian Era

Formal
 Repetition
 1 That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
 Looking as if she were alive. I call
 That piece a wonder, now: Frà Pandolf's hands
 Worked busily a day, and there she stands.
 5 Will't please you sit and look at her? I said
 'Frà Pandolf' by design, for never read
 Strangers like you that pictured countenance,
 The depth and passion of its earnest glance,
 But to myself they turned (since none puts by
 10 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
 15 Of joy into the Duchess' cheek: perhaps
 Frà Pandolf chanced to say 'Her mantle laps
 Over my lady's wrist too much,' or 'Paint
 Must never hope to reproduce the faint
 20 Half-flush that dies along her throat': such stuff
 Was courtesy, she thought, and cause 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.
 25 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

Annotations:
 Duke talking: Throughout the poem.
 Sounds polite but forceful
 Taking control (power)
 Suggests people were scared of him.
 The duke controls who looks at the painting, but he couldn't control who looked at his wife when she was alive.
 Creates the impression of a question from the visitor but we hear it through the Duke, he's in control.
 The woman's blushing
 red → Anger/pain/danger
 Jealousy
 Rhyming couplets throughout the poem.

My Last Duchess is a dramatic monologue written by Robert Browning, first published in 1842 as part of his collection "Dramatic Lyrics." This poem presents a chilling exploration of power, jealousy, and the nature of art through the voice of a Duke who speaks about his deceased wife. The poem's complex characterizations and rich imagery culminate in a narrative that reveals the darker aspects of human relationships. In this article, we will dive deep into a comprehensive analysis of "My Last Duchess," discussing its themes, structure, and the historical context that surrounds it.

Overview of "My Last Duchess"

"My Last Duchess" is set in Renaissance Italy and is framed as a conversation between the

Duke of Ferrara and an emissary seeking a new marriage for the Duke. The poem opens with the Duke showing the emissary a portrait of his late wife, who he refers to as "my last Duchess." As he speaks, it becomes evident that his affection for her was marred by possessiveness and jealousy, leading to a tragic conclusion.

Historical Context

To better understand the nuances of "My Last Duchess," it is essential to consider the historical context in which Browning wrote. The poem is inspired by real historical figures, particularly the Duke Alfonso II of Ferrara and his young wife, Lucrezia de' Medici, who died under mysterious circumstances. This backdrop of aristocratic politics, power struggles, and the role of women in society enhances the poem's themes of control and dominance.

Renaissance Values

The Renaissance period was characterized by a renewed interest in art, literature, and humanism. However, it also reflected a patriarchal society where women were often viewed as possessions rather than individuals with agency. The Duke's attitude towards his wife exemplifies these values, as he objectifies her and sees her beauty as a reflection of his own status.

Structure and Form

"My Last Duchess" is structured as a dramatic monologue, a form that allows a single character to reveal their thoughts and emotions to the audience. The poem consists of 28 rhymed couplets, which create a conversational tone while also emphasizing the Duke's authoritative voice.

Use of Enjambment

Browning employs enjambment throughout the poem, allowing thoughts to flow seamlessly from one line to the next. This technique mirrors the Duke's uncontrolled emotions and the underlying tension in his speech. For example, the line breaks often occur at moments of emotional intensity, capturing the Duke's volatility.

Character Analysis

The Duke is the central character of the poem, and his portrayal is multifaceted. Through his words, we gain insight into his personality, motivations, and the complexities of his

character.

The Duke's Arrogance

The Duke's arrogance is evident from the outset. He refers to the portrait of his last Duchess with a sense of ownership, illustrating his need to control the narrative surrounding her life and death. His disdain for her lack of exclusivity in expressing joy reveals a man who equates love with possession.

Jealousy and Control

As the poem progresses, the Duke's jealousy becomes more pronounced. He expresses contempt for how his Duchess treated others, suggesting that her kindness and charm were signs of disloyalty. This jealousy ultimately leads to the implication of her demise, showcasing the extremes of his controlling nature.

Thematic Elements

Several prominent themes emerge from "My Last Duchess," making it a rich text for analysis.

Art and Representation

Art plays a critical role in the poem, as the Duke shows the portrait of his wife as if it were an object of beauty to be admired. The juxtaposition of art and reality raises questions about the representation of women in art and the ways in which they are objectified.

- The Duke's desire to control how his wife is remembered
- The idea that art can immortalize beauty while distorting the truth
- The implication that real emotions are secondary to appearances

Power Dynamics

"My Last Duchess" also explores the theme of power dynamics within relationships. The Duke's authoritative voice underscores the imbalance of power he holds over his wife, illustrating the larger societal norms of the time.

Death and Mourning

The poem's exploration of death is poignant, as the Duke's commentary reveals his lack of genuine mourning for his wife. Instead, he seems more concerned with how her death affects his reputation and status. This detachment from grief highlights the Duke's narcissism and emotional void.

Symbolism in the Poem

Browning's use of symbolism enhances the poem's depth and meaning.

The Portrait

The portrait of the Duchess serves as a powerful symbol of the Duke's control. It represents not only her beauty but also the way he wishes to confine her memory. The fact that she is captured in a moment of happiness contrasts sharply with the Duke's possessive nature.

The Statue of Neptune

Towards the end of the poem, the Duke mentions a statue of Neptune taming a sea-horse, symbolizing his desire to dominate and control. It reflects his view of relationships as a power struggle and reinforces his need to assert dominance over both his wife and future partners.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess" offers a profound exploration of themes related to power, jealousy, and the nature of art. The Duke's character embodies the darker aspects of human relationships, revealing how love can devolve into control and possessiveness. Through its intricate structure, rich symbolism, and historical context, the poem serves as a timeless examination of the complexities of love and the societal norms that shape our understanding of relationships. By analyzing "My Last Duchess," readers can gain deeper insights into the human condition, the nature of art, and the consequences of unchecked power.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the main theme of 'My Last Duchess'?

The main theme of 'My Last Duchess' is the power dynamics in relationships, particularly how control and jealousy can lead to tragic outcomes.

Who is the speaker in 'My Last Duchess'?

The speaker in 'My Last Duchess' is the Duke of Ferrara, who is revealing his feelings about his deceased wife to an envoy.

How does Browning use dramatic monologue in 'My Last Duchess'?

Browning uses dramatic monologue to reveal the Duke's character and his views on art, power, and women, allowing readers to see his narcissism and cruelty.

What role does art play in the poem?

Art plays a significant role in the poem as the Duke uses the portrait of his last duchess to control her memory, reflecting his desire to possess and silence her.

What does the Duke's attitude toward his last duchess reveal about his character?

The Duke's attitude reveals his arrogance, possessiveness, and lack of empathy, indicating he values power and status over genuine human connection.

How does the poem reflect Victorian attitudes towards women?

The poem reflects Victorian attitudes towards women as it portrays them as objects of male desire and control, highlighting issues of patriarchy and objectification.

What literary devices are prominent in 'My Last Duchess'?

Prominent literary devices in 'My Last Duchess' include enjambment, irony, and vivid imagery, which enhance the dramatic tension and depth of the Duke's character.

What is the significance of the Duke's final remarks about the statue of Neptune?

The Duke's final remarks about the statue of Neptune signify his obsession with power and control, as he compares his desire for dominance over women to that of the god over the sea.

How does the setting of the poem contribute to its

meaning?

The setting of the poem, a grand Renaissance palace, underscores themes of wealth and power, reinforcing the Duke's status and his cold detachment from human emotion.

What can be inferred about the Duke's previous marriage from the poem?

It can be inferred that the Duke's previous marriage was marked by jealousy and control, leading to his wife's demise, which he discusses with a chilling nonchalance.

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