

UNIT-5

MY LAST DUCHESS

Robert Browning

Structure

- 5.0 Introduction
- 5.1 Unit Objectives
- 5.2 About the Poet
- 5.3 About the Poem
- 5.4 Summary
- 5.5 Key Terms
- 5.6 Answers to Check Your Progress
- 5.7 Explanation of Important Passages
- 5.8 Questions and Exercises

5.0 Introduction

"My Last Duchess", is one of the finest examples of the dramatic monologue. It first appeared in 1842 in Browning's *Dramatic Lyrics*. The poem is written in 28 rhymed couplets of iambic pentameter. The poem is set in 'Ferrara', the capital of a province in Italy that was well-known for its 'high' culture during the Renaissance. This setting also suggests that the poem's story is historical: a factual event occurred.

5.1 Unit Objectives

The purpose of this unit/poem is to facilitate the students in comprehending the poetic ability and profound insight of, well known Victorian poet, Robert Browning. The students need to be well versed in understanding the finer aspects of dramatic monologue of which Robert Browning was the master.

5.2 About the Poet

Robert Browning (7 May 1812 – 12 December 1889) was one of the most renowned English poet and playwright. He is known mainly for his dramatic monologues, in which the words not only convey setting and action but reveal the speaker's character. Robert Browning was considered to be an optimist. His poetry is often considered to be obscure and full of ambiguity.

Browning started writing at an early age . He published *Pauline* in 1833, *Paracelus* in 1835, *Strafford* in 1837, *Sordello* in 1840. His poems are highly ironical in nature. He is known for *Porphyria's Lover*, *My Last Duchess*, *How They Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix*, and *The Pied Piper of Hamelin*.

5.3 About the Poem

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive. I call
That piece a wonder, now; Fra Pandolf's hands

Worked busily a day, and there she stands.
Will't please you sit and look at her? I said
"Fra 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
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
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." 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.
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, at least. 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
 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 lessoned 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,
 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. 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!

The poem is set during the late Italian Renaissance. The poem is set in 'Ferrara', the capital of a province in Italy that was well-known for its 'high' culture during the Renaissance. This setting also suggests that the poem's story is historical: a factual event occurred. The speaker is the Duke and he is talking to a listener, who is an emissary and has come to negotiate Duke's marriage to the daughter of a Count. A Duke murdered his seventeen-year-old wife after three years of marriage, and married another girl.

He shows the messenger a painting of a woman, explaining that it is a portrait of his late wife; he invites his guest to sit and look at the painting. As they look at the portrait of the late Duchess, the Duke describes her happy, cheerful and flirtatious nature, which had displeased him. He says, "She had a heart – how shall I say? – too soon made glad..." He goes on to say that his complaint of her was that "'twas

not her husband's presence only" that made her happy. Eventually, "I gave commands; then all smiles stopped together." This could be interpreted as either the Duke had given commands to the Duchess to stop smiling or commands for her to be killed. He now keeps her painting hidden behind a curtain that only he is allowed to draw back, meaning that now she only smiles for him.

5.4 Summary

The speaker here is the Duke tells his listener that the painting of the Duchess is impressively accurate. The painter, Frà (or "Friar") Pandolf, worked hard to achieve a realistic effect. The Duke asks his listener politely to sit down and examine the painting.

The Duke explains to the listener why he brought up the painter, Frà Pandolf.

He says that he mentioned Pandolf on purpose, or "by design" because strangers never examine the Duchess's portrait without looking like they want to ask the Duke how the painter put so much "depth and passion" into the expression on the Duchess's face, or "countenance" They don't actually ask, because they don't dare, but the Duke thinks he can tell that they want to.

Addressing his still-unknown listener as "sir," the Duke goes into more detail about the expression on the Duchess's face in the painting.

He describes her cheek as having a "spot / Of joy" in it, perhaps a slight blush of pleasure.

It wasn't just "her husband's presence" that made her blush in this way, although the Duke seems to believe that it *should* have been the only thing that would.

The Duke doesn't like the idea that anyone else might compliment his wife or do something sweet that would make her blush.

The Duke imagines some of the ways that Frà Pandolf might have caused the Duchess to get that "spot of joy" in her face.

He might have told her that her "mantle" (her shawl) covered her wrist too much, or he might have complimented her on the becoming way that she flushes, telling her that "paint / Must never hope to reproduce" the beautiful effect of her skin and coloring.

The Duke thinks the Duchess would have thought that comments like this, the normal flirtatious "courtesy" that noblemen would pay to noblewomen, were "cause enough") to blush.

Strangely, the Duke seems to believe that blushing in response to someone like Frà Pandolf was a decision, not an involuntary physical reaction. Notice that the Duke also seems to infuse his comments with a judgmental tone.

The Duke describes the Duchess as "too soon made glad" and "too easily impressed" . This is his main problem with her: too many things make her happy.

Another way of looking at it is that she's not serious enough. She doesn't save her "spot of joy" for him alone. She's not the discriminating snob that he wants her to be.

She likes everything she sees, and she sees everything.

The Duke elaborates further on the Duchess's tendency to see every pleasant thing as pretty much the same.

If he gives her a "favor" or mark of his esteem that she can wear, such as a corsage or piece of jewellery, she thanks him for it in the same way that she approves of a pretty sunset, a branch of cherries, or her white mule.

At first the Duke suggests that she speaks of all these things equally, but then he changes his claim and admits that sometimes she doesn't say anything and just blushes in that special way. Part of the problem is not just that she likes boughs of cherries – it's that some "officious fool" brings them to her.

The Duke claims that, although it's all well and good to thank people for doing things for you, the way the Duchess thanked people seemed to imply that she thought the little favors they did her were just as important as what the Duke himself did for her. After all, the Duke gave her his "nine-hundred-years-old name" – a connection to a longstanding aristocratic family with power and prestige. The Duke's family has been around for nearly a thousand years running things in Ferrara, and he thinks this makes him superior to the Duchess, who doesn't have the same heritage. He thinks the Duchess ought to value the social elevation of her marriage over the simple pleasures of life.

The Duke lists all the obstacles that prevented him from talking to the Duchess directly about his problems with her behavior. He claims that he doesn't have the "skill / In speech" to explain what he wants from her – but his skillful rhetoric in the rest of the poem suggests otherwise. He also suggests that she might have resisted being "lessoned", that is, taught a lesson by him, if she had "made excuse" for her behaviour instead.

But even if he were a skilled speaker, and even if she didn't argue, he says he still wouldn't talk to her about it. Because he thinks that bringing it up at all would be "stooping" to her level, and he refuses to do that.

The Duke admits to his listener that the Duchess was sweet to him – she did smile at him whenever he passed by her. But, he says, it's not like that was special. She smiles at everyone in the same way. The Duke claims that "This grew" that is, the Duchess's indiscriminate kindness and appreciation of everything got more extreme.

The Duke then "gave commands" (45) and as a result "All smiles stopped together" (46).

Our best guess is that he had her killed, but the poem is ambiguous on this point.

The Duke ends his story of the Duchess and her painting by gesturing toward the full-body portrait again, in which she stands "As if alive"

The Duke invites his listener to get up and go back downstairs to the rest of the "company."

The Duke tells the servant that he knows about the Count's wealth and generosity, or "munificence", so he expects to get any reasonable dowry he asks for. But his main "object" (53) in the negotiations is the daughter herself, not more money.

The Duke stops him and insists that they stay together as they go back to meet everyone else downstairs

Before the Duke and his listener leave the gallery, the Duke points out one more of his art objects – a bronze statue of Neptune, the god of the sea, taming a sea-horse.

The Duke mentions the name of the artist who cast this statue, Claus of Innsbruck, who made it specifically for him.

5.5 Key Terms

Duchess : wife of a duke

Fra : friar, a monk

Spot : a small mark on the cheek

Mantle : woman's loose sleeveless cloak

By design : intentionally

Pictured countenance : the face of last Duchess in the picture hanging on the wall.

Laps : overlaps

Half flush : half suffused with passion and pride

Plainly : clearly

Officious : bureaucratic, interfering

Munificence : kindness in bestowing gifts, extremely liberal and generous of spirit

Trifling : foolish

Just pretence : reasonable expectation

Stoop : lower one's standards or morals

Avowed : that has been asserted, stated publicly

Neptune : Roman God of Sea

Claus of Innsbruck : a fictional sculptor or artist

5.6 Answers to Check Your Progress

1. Who was Fra Pandolf and what did he do ?

Ans: He was a monk who painted for Duke a portrait of his last Duchess.

2. What does the poet say about the woman's heart?

Ans: According to the poet the woman had a heart that was made glad too soon.

3. Whose smiles s' stopped together'?

Ans: The Last Duchess.

4. What does the poet say about count's daughter?

Ans: He says that it is not dowry but Count's beautiful daughter the real object of his desire.

5.7 Explanation of Important Passages:

Passage 1

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
 Looking as if she were alive. I call
 That piece a wonder, now; Fra Pandolf's hands
 Worked busily a day, and there she stands.
 Will't please you sit and look at her?

Reference to the Context: These lines have been taken from Robert Browning's famous poem "My Last Duchess". This poem is a remarkable dramatic monologue. Here the speaker is the Duke of Ferrara. He is talking to an envoy of a Count whose daughter the Duke plans to marry.

Explanation: In these lines the Duke points to a portrait painted on the wall. He tells the messenger that it is the portrait of his last Duchess. Here, the Duchess appears to be alive. The Duke calls this painting a wonderful piece of art. He states that it was Fra Pandolf, a monk, who painted it. He worked busily for this the whole day and completed it. The speaker asks the messenger to sit down and look at the portrait.

Passage 2

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.

Reference to the Context: These lines have been taken from Robert Browning's famous poem "My Last Duchess". This poem is a remarkable dramatic monologue. Here the speaker is the Duke of Ferrara. He is talking to an envoy of a Count whose daughter the Duke plans to marry.

Explanation:

In these lines the speaker says that the Duchess had a heart that was too soon made glad. She had a heart that was too easily impressed. She liked whatever she looked on and her looks went everywhere.

Passage 3

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
 This sort of trifling?

Reference to the Context: These lines have been taken from Robert Browning's famous poem "My Last Duchess". This poem is a remarkable dramatic monologue. Here the speaker is the Duke of Ferrara. He is talking to an envoy of a Count whose daughter the Duke plans to marry.

Explanation:

In these lines the speaker says that the Duchess thanked men who bought gifts for her. The Duke gave her the gift of his nine hundred year old family name. He was upset that she ranked his gift equal to anybody's gift. The Duke arrogantly states that he would never stoop to blame a trifling in his Duchess.

Passage 4

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.

Reference to the Context: These lines have been taken from Robert Browning's famous poem "My Last Duchess". This poem is a remarkable dramatic monologue. Here the speaker is the Duke of Ferrara. He is talking to an envoy of a Count whose daughter the Duke plans to marry.

Explanation:

In these lines the speaker says that the Duchess used to smile whenever he passed her. Infact, there was nobody who passed her without getting the same smile. As this grew, the Duke gave commands and then all the smiles stopped together. The Duchess was murdered at the behest of the Duke. The Duke pointing to her portrait says that she looks as if alive.

Passage 5

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 pretense
 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!

5.8 Questions and Exercises

1. What does the Duke call the painting?

Ans: A wonder.

2. Who was easily impressed?

Ans: The last Duchess.

3. How did the Duchess thank men?

Ans: The Duchess thanked men with a smile.

4 Whose ‘smiles stopped together’?”?

Ans: The last Duchess’s .

5. Whose Statue did the Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for the Duke?

Ans: The statue of Neptune taming the sea.

6. Who is the speaker in the poem?

Ans: The Duke of Ferrara.

7. Who is the listener in the poem?

Ans: The Count’s envoy.

8. What proposal did the envoy bring for the Duke?

Ans: The envoy brought a marriage proposal of count’s daughter with the Duke.

9. Where did the Duke take the envoy to?

Ans: The Duke took the envoy downstairs to meet the visitors .

10. Who painted the portrait of the Last Duchess?

Ans: Fra Pandolf.

Answer the following questions in 20-30 words each.

1. Why did the Duke want to remarry?

Ans: The Duke was a prestigious and a rich man. After the death/murder of his last Duchess he was left alone. So, he wanted to remarry.

2. What was the envoy curipous about?

Ans: The Duke showed the envoy a painting on the Wall. him. The painting had a blushful glance on her face. The envoy was curious to know the reason of that blush.

3. What does the Duke say about the temperament of the Duchess?

Ans: According to the Duke, the Duchess was pleased by everything. She smiled at every person. She expressed her gratitude to everyone who gave her gifts.

4. How did the Duke react to the 'unkind' behaviour of the Duchess?

Ans: The Duke was an arrogant man. He could not tolerate the simple nature of the Duchess. Finally he ordered his men to get her killed. Then all smiles stopped together.

5. What is the Duke's explanation for his cruel treatment of the Duchess?

Ans: The Duke believed that the Duchess had a heart that was too soon made glad. She was easily impressed by everyone. This annoyed the Duke.

6. What do you think happened to the Duchess?

Ans: The Duchess was finally murdered at the commands of the Duke, because the Duke was suspicious of her simplicity and could not tolerate her behaviour.

Answer the following questions in about 200 words each.

1. Evaluate the poem as a dramatic monologue.

Ans: *Dramatic monologue* refers to a particular type of poetry. These poems are *dramatic* in the sense that they have a theatrical quality; that is, the poem is meant to be read to an audience. To say that the poem is a *monologue* means that these are the words of one solitary speaker with no dialogue coming from any other characters.

'My last Duchess is a fine example of dramatic monologue. Here, Duke of Ferrara, is the speaker and an envoy of the Count is a silent listener. In this poem, the speaker tells us about his own character and also the character of his Last Duchess.

The poem begins abruptly, "That's my last Duchess painted on the wall." Through this line, the Duke reveals his egotistical and possessive nature. Throughout the poem, we have numerous examples of Duke's pride and haughtiness. Towards the end, the reader is aware of his cruel nature as well. When he gives orders to kill the Duchess: "I gave commands. Then all smiles stopped together.'

Moreover, Duke's diplomatic attitude also comes to the fore when he refers to Count's known munificence'. His greedy nature is evident when he demands dowry. Hypocritically he announces that it is Count's daughter and not the dowry he craves.

2. The tyranny, pride and greed of the Duke have been shown in sharp contrast to the good nature of the Duchess. Explain.

Ans: In this remarkable dramatic monologue, the Duke not only reveals his own character but that of his last Duchess's as well. "That's my last Duchess painted on the wall." Through this line, the Duke reveals his egotistical and possessive nature. Through out the poem, we have numerous examples of Duke's pride and haughtiness. Towards the end, the reader is aware of his cruel nature as well. When he gives orders to kill the Duchess: "I gave commands. Then all smiles stopped together.'

Moreover, Duke's diplomatic attitude also comes to the fore when he refers to Count's known munificence'. His greedy nature is evident when he demands dowry. Hypocritically he announces that it is Count's daughter and not the dowry he craves.

Thus, through Duke's speech his egoistic, cruel and tyrannical nature is exemplified. However, his nature is in sharp contrast to the sweet simple and the guileless innocence of his Last Duchess.

3. Comment on the use of irony in the poem. Illustrate your answer with examples from the text.

Ans: Irony is a figure of speech in which words are used in such a way that their intended meaning is different from the actual meaning of the words. It may also be a situation that may end up in quite a different way than what is generally anticipated. In simple words, it is a difference between the appearance and the reality.

In this poem there are numerous examples of irony employed by the poet. Throughout the poem the Duke heaps praises on his last Duchess. He talks about his beautiful face, simple nature. He talks about her pure heart and believes that she had a heart that was too soon made glad. It was a heart that was easily impressed. The Duke talks about her pleasant smile stating that she smiled at whatever or whosoever she looked at. "all and each/ Would draw from her alike the approving speech/Or blush, at least".

But the irony is evident when the Duke says:

" This grew; I gave commands;
Then all smiles stopped together.'

Another example of irony is evident in his demand for dowry though pretending to marry the Count's daughter due to her beauty. To quote:

"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.

Thus, Robert Browning has remarkably used this genre of irony to heighten the poetic effect.