

Irony in Browning Poetry

In this essay we will try to point out the use of irony that Browning does by looking at how it works in his poems, particularly to *My Last Duchess*.

My Last Duchess, by Robert Browning is written in the form of a dramatic monologue. You are being spoken to by the Duke. Browning has captured an authentic speaking voice. The syntax is manipulated by the author in order to create a conversational tone. This is a poem telling a story, the title of this poem reveals that the speaker, a duke, is referring to his last wife. The story of this poem perhaps has a historical allusion: a reference to a similar occurrence in history. The speaker in the poem, talks about his last wife pointing to a painting of her on the wall. In a certain way, Browning is being critical of the Duke through the way he portrays him, this poem is meant to be ironic, say more than what actually is been said.

The central irony of the "*My Last Duchess*" is of course that the Duke wanted so much to bring the Duchess's beauty within his own control, that he was willing to destroy her to do it. In *My Last Duchess* we find irony, diction, and imagery that creates a haunting effect. This irony that we are focusing in, is used by Browning altogether with the dramatic monologue with the purpose of producing a sinister and domineering effect. This irony allows the reader to question himself and put in him the desire of knowing the hidden message of the poem. In the poem, a portrait of the egocentric and power loving Duke of Ferrara is painted for us.

In *My Last Duchess*, verbal irony is demonstrated when the Duke says to his guests, Even had you skill, In speech – (which I have not). The Duke is not a modest man, but him making this seemingly humble statement in the midst of all his power stricken remarks establishes situational irony. Dramatic monologue can make that an unappreciated irony, with this dramatic surrounding that totally attracts the reader's attention and so we can appreciate how the duke's monologue appears on the surface to be about his late wife, a close reading will show that the mention of his last duchess is merely a side note in his self-important speech. In *My Last Duchess*, he shows the reader how the Duke need to control and have completely power, and he causes a weariness to overcome the reader through irony, Browning shows us the controlling, jealous, and arrogant traits the duke possessed without ever mentioning them explicitly. By combining dramatic monologue, irony, precise diction, and imagery together, Browning is able to produce his desired haunting effect.

The poem begins with the speaker showing off the picture: That's my last Duchess painted on the wall, Looking as if she were alive. I call, That piece a wonder, now, the speaker is addressing his guest but, it almost feels as if the Duke is speaking to the reader. This shows the great love that the speaker felt for his duchess. Through these words, it sounds like he is almost praising her.

The very first word of the poem That's, makes the poem should sound like everyday speech, possessing the "informality of construction" we find in conversation, but the writer creates intentionally that randomness of construction to make the monologue more colloquial, more natural, and more convincing as impromptu spoken words.

In this first two lines of the poem introduce us to the main topic of the duke's speech, a painting of his late wife: "That's my last Duchess painted on the wall, Looking as if she were alive." We immediately begin to suspect that the duchess is no longer alive. But as we read this lines, we arrive to the conclusion that for the Duke, his late wife was nothing more than her external appearance. And once again, the Duke, shows off his control as he did in the beginning parts of the poem. He adds a parenthesis in his speech, "since none puts by, The curtain I have drawn for you, but I". Here he says that nobody but him has the power to display the painting. But this is obvious and did not need to be said. Since the painting is in his home and he owns it, of course he is the one who would draw the curtain to display it. He only adds this statement to highlight his

control. As the poem progresses, we find more mention of the duke's love of control and realize that it is a very important thing to him. This line also is important because it shows that the duchess was and still is, under complete control of the duke and can only be seen by others when he wishes it.

We could have a different reading of this very same part of the poem, finding again the irony that Browning is looking for: the irony in the painting. The duke keeps it hidden, it is a painting of the Duchess smiling for the painter and not for him. With this he is confessing that he could not control her then or now, he could only hide her away, or kill her. Even now she is not obeying his unspoken rules. That is why he explains to the assistant that the painter was a monk. He expresses this in order to prove that the expression on her face was from the Duke and not brought upon by the painter.

But the truth is that the painting of the Duchess will live on long after her death. Long after the Duke has been forgotten as well. In the end, he cannot control time or his own mortality. Men will continue to look at and admire the Duchess, who will in turn, continue to smile down at them for eternity.

In *My Last Duchess*, Browning touches death's topic, which was a 'taboo' subject in *My Last Duchess*. Death was not common topic in everyday conversations. The climax of the poem occurs in these lines where he describes what happened when his wife's affection continued to be non-exclusive, the duchess' smiles to the other men aroused an anger in the duke so powerful that he gave commands to have her killed. His jealousy stemmed from his perceived lack of control that he had over his wife. The duke is so possessive of his duchess that he can not stand her even smiling at anyone but him. He accuses her of being flirtatious and unfaithful when all she did was smile and be pleasant to men other than himself and he arrives to oblige her to stop smiling other man. He had killed his wife because he could not possess her completely and now that she is dead and exists only in the painting, he thinks he can have absolute control over her. More over, he speaks about marrying another young girl, hoping that she will be more submissive, and she will show her smile to no one but him. When the duke refers to his killing of his wife he does not say it in so many words, and he changes the subject almost immediately as if what has happened is really nothing to him.

In a way the Duke's speech on the murder of his wife, is not to illustrate so, but his character, the way the Duke is and behaves. Browning uses irony to illustrate the duke's manipulative and callous character towards the end of the poem as he refers to the girl he wants to marry as my object.

As you read the poem, you may notice that the "dramatic irony" of a narrator believing he is showing off his attractive qualities, when he is really revealing to his listener that he is vain and evil, is paralleled by the irony of using an epic form of poetry for a sordid monologue. In this dramatic irony, the duke is not aware of how much he is revealing about himself, he seems unaware of the effect of his words. Browning's duke can not see himself as he is, but the reader can. His words betray his consuming jealousy and his complete lack of remorse for letting it make him a killer, yet he still believes that both the jealousy and the murder are justified.

This surface meaning of this poem is that to marry the girl is the duke's object, aim, or goal. The deeper meaning refers to the girl as an object, a possession in which the duke will be glad to purchase. The duchess represents an individual who is killed by the duke as he believes that he should own her as his possession. This value of women as objects was common in the time this was written, and Browning is trying to demonstrate this idea and make people think about the individual and how they are viewed in society's eyes. Browning makes the Duke's actions so drastic as a means of exposing the metaphorical death of the fallen woman. Adultery by woman was of course condemned severely, maybe Browning's aim was to show how unjust was that condemnation.

At the end of the poem, a sense comes out that the Duchess was just an object to him. While showing his guest the picture, and telling his story, the Duke just moves on to another artefact, as if the Duchess was not important to him anymore. This is an irony to the beginning of the poem, where the Duke is praising the portrait. Women were not viewed as people at the time the story of the poem takes place, but as property.

Perhaps those last lines allude to this knowledge, and how the Duke was just another English royal of the time. And it is also important to look how it ends : Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me, with the word "me", perhaps this is an echo of the "my" that we had in the first line. The poet is reinforcing the most important thing in the poem: the Duke and his egocentrism.

Robert Browning has a tendency to show passion in his poetry, and as well, to take pleasure in a poet in writing and developing the words of the characters. The story that present us here, is a mere excuse to make a self-portrait. Even in statements that on the surface appear to be modest, the duke furthers his arrogance. We find irony in this kind of statements that overwhelms any modesty that might have existed.

The overarching irony in Browning's "My Last Duchess" is that it really is not about the duchess, but instead about the controlling, jealous, and arrogant nature of the duke. In his monologue describing a painting of his former wife, the duke introduces us to his dark and sinister qualities. By giving us the Duke of Ferrara as an example, Robert Browning subtly condemns the nobility for their poor character.