

29/4/20
Lesson No - (17)
Dr. Hemphill

English (Hons.)
DI/Paper II (Palgrave's Golden Treasury)

(1)

Topic: My Last Duchess (continued...)

The Poem "My Last Duchess" is considered by critics as one of his ^{the} best dramatic monologues composed by Robert Browning. The poem first appeared in 1842 in the volume published as "Dramatic Lyrics".

Browning's interest was, most of the times, centred in moral and spiritual forces as well as conflicts of individual men and women rather than in the world of action. Nevertheless, it was not through the machinery of the regular ~~stage~~ stage play that he found his most natural outlet, ~~but~~ he chose dramatic monologue instead. As Hudson puts it "His characteristic art-form (a form which has been used by other poets, but by none so effectively), was the detached speech, or dramatic monologue, in which he takes some striking individual — generally at a critical moment — and instead of dissecting him from the outside, as the ordinary novelist would do, penetrates to the depth of his nature and through his own utterances compels him to reveal the innermost secrets of his life."

In "My Last Duchess" too, just like in the poem "A Grammarian's Funeral", Browning attempts to dramatize history. Browning is always interested in characters that have something abnormal, or at least remarkable about them. The speaker, here,

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is also one of such powerful characters. He is very short tempered, egoistic and self centred. He wants that others should obey him — he is notoriously dictatorial.

Here, in this poem, he is shown speaking to an ambassador from a neighbouring state the ~~Da-~~^{Count} of which wants his daughter to be married to him. In order to create an impression over his guest, he shows himself off as a patron and lover of art; and throughout speaks in a tone which can be described as "imperial".

The opening stanza finds Duke, the speaker, showing his picture-gallery to the envoy of the Count whose daughter he was to marry. We see him pointing towards the portrait hanging in the drawing room which he reveals to be that of the last Duchess or his last wife. The Duke is now a widower. As the poem progresses further, in succeeding stanzas, the whole thing sounds like a psychoanalytic confession of the guilt as, in course of his boastful show-off, the speaker is made to reveal how he had got the Duchess murdered on account of jealousy borne out of her simple and innocent behaviour. The Duke, while trying to impress the ambassador, unknowingly confesses that it was he who ordered the death of his previous wife for her equally kind behaviour towards all including her servants. The self-centred ego of the Duke could not bear it

that even the servants may be bestowed with the same smile which only should be to please him and none else. His dictatorial attitude wants that all the beauties of the world should be only his possession. Though he is proud of the Duchess of the portrait - of her dimpled cheeks and her life like smile, he was envious of her when she was actually alive.

As the poem progresses further, one is afraid whether the new bride-would-be is not going to meet the same fate as one sees the Duke wanting to put in the mind of the ambassador that though he (the Duke) is a lover of beauty and art, but he weighs his reputation - rather a false pride - above everything. That he can put his Duchess to death only because she had more than enough humanity which she should not have possessed. All this is put before the man only to emphasise reputation, integrity and love for regality on which bases he cunningly claims a hefty dowry. whether or not the ambassador is impressed by this Royal fanaticism is left for the imagination of the readers.

The references like "Neptune" (the Greek Sea-god) is used to emphasize the strictness of the Duke's nature and the imaginary names of the artists such as "Fra Pandolf" and "Claus of Innesbruck" is there to add to the atmosphere of rarity and awe. The Duke's cunningness of character gets

highlighted by his eloquence in his pretending to be lacking in the skill in speech.

The poem, thus, happens to be a fine representative of Browning's fascination ^{with} and mastery in selecting a bewildering variety of psychologically abnormal individuals and to make them express their own mental conflicts and doings in the form of dramatic monologues — rather dramatic lyrics. On a careful reading of the poem, the reader is sure to relish the musical charm even while appreciating the insight into the subtleties of human nature.

As far as the historical aspect of the characters of this poem are concerned, in all probability the speaker was Alfonso II, fifth Duke of Ferrara whose wife Lucrezia di Medici died, at the young age of seventeen, on being poisoned. The Duke, later, married the niece of the Count of Tyrol, who hailed from Innsbruck.

We cannot but confirm when John Bryson remarks: "The outstanding quality of this short monologue is the tenseness and the economy with which the dramatic situation is handled. It displays Browning's mastery of irony and understatement. It also demonstrates his remarkable historical imagination, his power of projecting himself into the mood and characters of a past age."

(concluded)
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