

## THE DOMINANCE OF THE VICTORIAN MAN OVER WOMAN IN ROBERT BROWNING'S "MY LAST DUCHESS"

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### ABSTRACT

This study tackled the Victorian men's superiority over the Victorian women in Robert Browning's poem, "My Last Duchess" (1842). Robert Browning is a Victorian poet who tried to revive the stifling Victorian atmosphere, via the forum of poetry, through which Victorian women lived miserably and unhappily. This study aimed at proving that women were passively presented as slaves, if compared with men, and at the same time symbolized the colonized nations. This poem, as being one of Browning's volume Men and Women (1855), showed the cruelty of Victorian men against Victorian women via Browning's use of dramatic monologue that indirectly criticized the treatment of women as slaves and inferior.

**KEYWORDS:** Browning, Victorian Poetry, Dramatic Monologue, Materialism

### INTRODUCTION

Robert Browning (1813-89) is a Victorian poet who was born in Camber well, a London suburb, and belonged to a middle-class family. His father was a bank clerk. And his mother was a kindly, religious woman whom he loved and respected as she imprinted in him the devotion to religion, music, flowers and animals (Kearns, 1984, 420).

Browning attended a boarding school near Camber well. Then, he was a student at London University for a short time as he preferred to pursue his education at home, availing from his father's six-thousand-book library. He mastered the classics, painting, music, boxing, foreign languages and horsemanship (Burgess, 1987, 180).

Browning once dreamt to be a dramatist, writing plays like *Stratford* (1835) and *Colembe's Birthday* (1844; acted in 1853). These plays were not successful. And yet, Browning's failure in writing drama inspired him, by availing from the poetic dialogues written for characters, to coin a brilliant poetic technique that is the dramatic monologue (Donnell, 1991, 904).

Robert Browning secretly married Elizabeth Barrett in 1846 only after one year of their meeting in Barrett's home. The couple had eloped to Florence, Italy where they lived happily till Elizabeth's death in 1861. Browning went back London where he died in 1899. Browning wrote works as *Paracelsus* (1835), *Sordello* (1840), *Men and Women* (1855) and *The Ring and The Book* (1862) (Carter, 1995, 126).

### THE IMAGE OF WOMEN IN BROWNING'S "MY LAST DUCHESS"

This poem, published in 1842, exemplifies Browning's use of the dramatic monologue that is "A poem in which an imaginative speaker addresses a silent audience, usually takes place at a critical moment in the speaker's life and offers an indirect and unconscious revelation of his or her temperament and character" (Coyle, 1984, 26). Browning employs

such a technique to discuss the women status in the early troublesome Victorian Age (1830-47) which is marked by lack of love, ugly materialism and patriarchal autocracy are to be shed light on.

The persona of this poem is a duke of Ferrara, a city in northern Italy (Kennedy: 1995, 595), who addresses an envoy whose master's daughter's marriage to the duke is to be arranged. The poem begins with the duke's portraying of his dead wife's painting hanged on the wall of his gallery before the envoy. As if the duke tries to prove his kindness towards his passing wife to the listener in having a portrait of her. "That's my last Duchess painted on the wall / Looking as if she were alive" (Browning, 2000, lines 1-2).

However, the duke, then, turns to complain to the envoy about his last wife with whom he was discontented. The dead wife is kind to what is surrounding her. She favors all people, servants and her husband so evenly that makes the duke irritated. The husband thinks that she must treat him distinctively as he is noble and deserves her joy only and essentially for him. And that can be vivid in "My Last Duchess", as Browning says:

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 what'er  
 She looked on, and her looks went ever where  
 Sir,'t was all one! My favour at her breast (lines, 20-5)

Moreover, Browning, in another extract of the poem, shows us that the wife seems not to be noble because she doesn't know the traditions of the royal nobility to which her husband belongs. Her simplicity, savagery in the duke's perspective, leads to her ignorance of the duke's nobility that dates back to hundreds of years:

Somehow-I know not how-as if she ranked  
 My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name  
 With anybody's gift (lines, 32-4)

Accordingly, the wife can't grasp the egoism [thinking too highly of oneself] (Hornby, 1995, 371) of her husband, instead she continues her innocence and courtesy to the ones surrounding her. And the more kind to others she is, the more furious the husband becomes. Hence, the duke unconsciously reveals to the envoy the former's murderous deed while complaining about the dead wife. He gives orders to his gallants to kill her, and her death is assured by:

Oh sir, she smiled, no doubt  
 When're 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 (lines, 43-7)

The poem ends with the duke's insistence on having the envoy's master's daughter as the inevitable wife since the envoy's master's munificence, regarding the bride's [his daughter's] dowry, is out of question:

Then I repeat

The count your master's known munificence

Is ample warrant that no just pretense

Of mine for dowry will be disallowed (lines, 48-51).

Consequently, ugly materialism and lack of love, as some of the Victorians values, are apparently discussed. The word "dowry" indicates materialism, since the former is a financial settlement given to the bride by the bride's father as an Italian custom (Kearns, 1984, 24). The duke properly knows how to seize the opportunity. He accepts to get married to a lady, whom he hasn't been familiar with, only for her richness and nobility. Thus, the duke doesn't pay attention to love; caring for money and rank, as the word "count" suggests.

## **FEMINIST THEMES IN BROWNING'S "MY LADY DUCHESS"**

### **The Need for Love**

The Victorian Age lacks love as it glorifies materialism, assured by the fact that half-a-million Victorian women were unmarried due to the Victorian greed. Matter opposes emotion and love. Thus, you can't find someone who is greedy and lover simultaneously since seeking chance and utility entails making heart out of emotion and senseless as a stone... As well, the percentage of poor Victorian women exceeds the rich's, and so the poor were left without marriage as a result of the absence of love and the pursuit of money and position (Abrams, 2000, 1056). Moreover, the duke's preparation, for a new marriage, denies his love to his passing wife as he doesn't express his sorrow for losing her. On the contrary, he talks about her shortcomings that lead him to kill her, instead of mentioning her pros.

It's obvious, then, that the duke neglects his dead wife's emotions and identity, depicting and criticizing her in accordance with his anti-feminist point of view. This attitude towards women is strongly refuted by the second-wave feminist criticism refutes since women are no longer trapped inside a male truth, but women are able to express themselves better than man do (Selden: 1993, 121).

### **Man's Authority and Women's Freedom**

The Victorian Age is known for its patriarchal superiority to women. And the paternal autocracy can be figured out in this poem. "Who'd stoop to blame / this sort of trifling?..And I choose / Never to stoop" (lines, 34-5, 42-3). The duke doesn't bother himself to tell his partner that her kindness to the lower-class people, parallel to her courtesy to him, severely irritates him. Thus, the duke prefers not to "stoop", to lower himself to his wife as a result of being not noble or, simply, a woman. The duke, who symbolizes the tyrannical Victorian men, thinks that it humiliates his manliness if he discusses with his wife her mistaken behavior. As a result, he selects the direct cruel punishment, and what can be sought for more cruel punishment than death as if she commits a sin.

The duke also represents the god-like figure while the wife stands for the submission and powerlessness. His injustice, wrought to his wife, is apparent when he gets benefit and utility from his wife even after her death. The husband exhibits his dead wife as a bad model not to be followed by the new wife; otherwise the latter will face her counterpart's similar fatal end (Keach, 1996, 624).

The idea of the arranged marriage is another instance of the Victorian paternal oppression the Victorian women undergo as they are imprisoned in the golden, fundamental holy-like family. The Victorian women cannot decide their inevitable decisions. (Abrams, 2000, 1057).

The final trait of the Victorian masculine dominion over the Victorian women is the duke's painting of "Neptune." "Notice Neptune / taming a sea-horse." (Lines, 54-5).

Neptune' is the *Roman god* of sea, identified with the Greek 'Poseidon', who is Herculean and responsible for sending storms and earthquakes (Lurker, 1987, 285). Neptune, then, shows us a trait of the Victorian domineering men over women; "sea-horse" is a signifier of the weak Victorian women since "sea-horse" is female and notice that their kinship is like the master-servant affinity. Browning's use of the word "tame" underlines, again, the severe Victorian treatment of women.

### **The Image of Women as a Symbol of Colonization**

Browning, as being religious, alludes to his opposition to the Victorian colonization via the dead duchess. The weak dead wife stands for the weak nations whose savagery, innocence and simplicity justify the duke's, as a symbol of the greedy Victorian materialists, punishment or colonization. In addition, the duchess is a female who stands for the nations' lands, the greedy Victorian males aim to colonize. And this point complies with the "Mother Earth", as a universal archetype, that is a goddess] who is a symbol of motherhood, nature, fertility and creation. (Mother Earth, n.d, retrieved 2015 from <http://Wikipedia>).

This female fertile earth is the goal of the colonizing Victorian materialists.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

In light of the discussion of the Victorian women's humiliation in Browning's "My Last Duchess", wrought by the Victorian men; the study pin-points Browning's indirect criticism of the paternal abuse of the Victorian Women. Browning smartly gets the benefit of using "the dramatic monologue" that depicts the dead duchess, a symbol of the persecuted Victorian women, as the victim of the Duke's arrogance and egoism. The wife's sole mistake was in giving the duke's dignity and position a blind eye. Thus, the duke mercilessly and brutally killed her.

Accordingly, Browning can be conceived as a feminist since he is against the paternal dehumanization of the Victorian women as he refuses the embodiment of the Victorian women as an emblem of slavery and colonization. It is worth mentioning that Browning does intentionally set his poem in the Renaissance Italy to approximate the influential picture of the urban boasted Victorian society before the readers. It is known that 'Renaissance' means the flowering of humanism and civilization that began earlier in Italy than in England; yet the early Italian adoption of humanism and civilization does not change the stereo-typical image of women in the sense they do not deserve dignity and respect. Likely, the Victorian women conditions worsened in the early troublesome phase of the Victorian period as they were

dehumanized by the machinery upheaval, devoid of dignity and esteem in a society that considered itself the most civilized and urban ever. Thus, the modern Victorian Age resembles the Renaissance Italy in terms of depressing and oppressing women.

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