



CRUELTY IN THE (PSEUDO) AESTHETE: BROWNING'S 'MY LAST DUCHESS'

Abdur Rahman Shahin¹

English Discipline, Khulna University, Khulna 9208, Bangladesh

KUS 07/23(2)-260707

Manuscript received: July 26, 2007; Accepted: December 6, 2007

Abstract: Usually an aesthete has a love for and understanding of art and beauty, and his aesthetic perception helps to develop ethical values that govern his behaviour. It is assumed that an aesthete will not show any cruelty to the beautiful aspects of life. But a heinous murder is observed in the artistic realm of the Duke in 'My Last Duchess' by Robert Browning. The Duchess is killed in a very cruel manner by the Duke because of her apparently indifferent attitude towards him. The aim of this article is to explore the nature of the triumph of cruelty that makes the appeal of aesthetic values dim.

Key words: Cruelty, aesthete, ethics, pseudo

Introduction

Robert Browning, the most prominent Victorian poet, was born in May 7, 1812 at Camberwell (London suburb) to Robert and Sara Anna Wiedemann Browning. His father was a learned man who worked in a bank and his mother was a pious woman who developed a love for music. Browning was an omnivorous reader, who read a lot at home but to acquire academic excellence, he joined a boarding school near Camberwell and was a student at the University of London. In 1846, he married Elizabeth Barrett without her father's knowledge, and finally they eloped to Italy. His poetry created a different taste for the readers who could mark the essence of a moral tonic in his works as Browning presented the human life as a joyful struggle. Browning's major works include *Pippa Passes*, *King Victor and King Charles*, *Dramatic Lyrics*, *The Return of the Druses*, *Colombe's Birthday*, *Luria and A Soul's Tragedy*, *Men and Women*, *Poetical Works* in sixteen volumes (the last edition supervised by Browning) etc. He is also well known for his significant Dramatic Monologues. Browning died in Venice at the house of his son in 1889 and was buried in Westminster Abbey.

¹ Corresponding address: Cell: 0191-4067569
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53808/KUS.2007.8.2.0723-A>

Many other critics have worked on Browning and his works; many literature reviews have been written by other authors. Here are some names of such scholars who worked on Browning- Harold Bloom, W. David Shaw, Algernon Charles Swinburne, J. Hillis Miller, Robert Langbaum, John Forster and Alfred Austin.

The objective of this article is to unmask the Duke's distorted and ugly mentality who apparently pretends to be artistic one but in reality he was cruel. There are many people in this universe like the Duke who are assumed to have a very strong love for art and beauty but their real figures are discovered by their way of activities and by their pretensions. Although, the Duke was proud of his blue blood and he led an aristocratic life abounded with paintings and sculptures in his house but the real nature of this man is so ferocious that who drew the end of an innocent life. Many scholars have written on various issues about the Duchess and the Duke and of their relationship but my concentration is to find out the nature of cruelty that undermined the Duke's pseudo aesthetic perception.

Analyses

We get a lot of evidences from Browning's 'My Last Duchess' that the Duke was very much conscious of art and beauty. At the same time, he developed possessiveness in his character and he wants to dictate over everyone and every thing. He does not like to share beauty with others, whereas his Duchess presents her grace and charm to everybody as she possesses a very simple mind. In his way, there develops a bitter misunderstanding in their conjugal life which ends in an abominable murder of the innocent Duchess. As a result, cruelty diminishes the impact of aesthetics in the personal life of the Duke.

The Duke did not endure such a liberal and simple manner of the Duchess who had been satisfied lavishly with a simple gift of bunch of flowers of any common people. The Duke says:

She had
A heart-how shall I say?-too soon made glad,
Too easily impressed; she liked what're
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.
Sir, 'twas all alone! My favor at her breast,
The dropping of daylight in the West,
The bough of cherries some officious fool
Broke in the orchard of 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 (My Last Duchess, lines 18-34)¹.

This is a mean expression of the Duke's arrogant mind which is self-centered as well as cruel. While the Duchess is showing her tender generosity mingled with love for beauty, the Duke is sowing seeds of cruelty in his jealous mind. By no means, he can appreciate

the acceptance of simple beautiful things so charmingly by the Duchess. Where he should have been happy marking the broadness of his wife's mind, the Duke feels disgust. He wants her to be only his, but as the Duchess knows better how to share the beauty of nature with others, she never yields to his whimsical wishes. In this way, cruelty germinates in the Duke's mind, and being devoid of ethics, he reaches the climax of ordering for her death.

In this regard, Robert Langbaum says:

---such an effect produced in a poem about a cruel Italian duke of the Renaissance who out of unreasonable jealousy has had his last duchess put to death, and is now about to contract a second marriage for the sake of dowry (Langbaum, pp. 96)².

So, the Duke is not satisfied by killing the Duchess only, now he is trying to marry for the second time, intending to achieve a large amount of dowry. All these symbolically project the idea of naked cruelty of the Duke who is also preserving a beautiful portrayal of his last Duchess as a token of her beauty. But if we penetrate into the deep core of his heart, we shall be startled to notice the real intention- he is exploiting the painting of the Duchess to create an atmosphere by which he is influencing the envoy to send the cruel message to his second wife. That is why there is a great confusion about the Duke's aesthetic feelings. It is easy to guess the gap between his appearance and reality, and so it can be claimed that he was not an aesthete, rather he was a pseudo aesthete.

The Duke's taste for art is controlled by his power and freedom. It is true that the shining character of the Duchess is revealed by the Duke and he makes no attempt to conceal it. This is a 'paradoxical nature'³ of the Duke that is evident from the beginning to the end of the poem. Although he is praising the beauty of the Duchess highly, he is also showing cruelty against the polite manner of her. Not only that, finally he is doing the most immoral act by killing her wife. 'Duke at last gives his last Duchess a place in his archive. She takes her place as one of a line of objects in an art collection',⁴ and in this way an aesthete like the Duke is doing the cruelest act in his pseudo world of art and beauty. Finally the aesthetic mask falls down and the real ferocious appearance of the Duke comes out, and cruelty triumphs over the ethics of a quasi aesthete.

As two opposite humors of cruelty and aesthetic values run simultaneously in the character of duke, an ethical tension grows in him and this awkward situation directs him towards more immoral activities. The final catastrophe takes place when the Duke loses all of his patience and takes the ultimate decision to murder his wife. Robert Langbaum says, 'The combination of villain and aesthete crates an especially strong tension, and Browning exploits it in My Last Duchess.'⁵ So the sense of cruelty is stronger than the sense of aesthetics in the Duke for which he commits such a heartless deed. Consequently, the Duke stoops to reveal a domestic frustration because the revelation enables him to demonstrate his knowledge of art and he exploits the appeal of aesthetics.

After committing that black deed, we observe no repentance in duke rather; he is busy to convince the envoy to have a handsome dowry. So no possibility of regeneration is marked in his life. According to Basil Willey, 'Milton believed in the fall, but he also believed in the power and freedom of the human will to stand firm or to recover itself after a lapse.'⁶ But we find no notion of effort to recover this lapse. Moreover, he is trying

intellectually to exploit his collection of art and sculpture to be benefited. He shows no passion towards his dead wife rather he asserts his dictatorship arrogantly to the envoy:

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 (My Last Duchess, ll, 1-4).

In this way, no true impact of aesthetic values is identified in the Duke's mental make up. As a result, he is morally disintegrated and he can commit any unbelievable misdeed, like murdering of his own wife. His jealousy and cruelty put a dark shadow on his aesthetic mind. In a sense, it can be said that his appreciation for art is nothing but simply hypocrisy or eyewash.

In this connection, we can quote here some lines from Francis Bacon's essay 'Of Marriage and Single Life', where he quotes, 'when a man should marry: A young man not yet, an elder man not at all.'⁷ Here, Thales (6th century B.C.) who was the confirmed bachelor, made this remark. He was one of the seven Sages of Greece. May be the Duke lacks enough experience of life to maintain a happy conjugal life through sacrifices and marries too young who can not show his tolerance towards his simple, beautiful wife rather ordered to kill so easily. Bacon says, 'It is often seen that bad husbands have very good wives.'⁸ We find a close relation of this comment with the Duke and the Duchess. But for the cruelty in pseudo aesthetic mind of the Duke, the artistic life of the Duchess is nipped in the bud.

'Art that is not useful or does not teach moral values'⁹ is not appreciated by common people as they expect a moral development by the practice of aestheticism. Immanuel Kant, a German philosopher in his Critique of Aesthetic Judgment says, 'Aesthetic experience consists of a disinterested contemplation of an object that pleases for its own sake, without reference to reality or to the external ends of utility or morality'.¹⁰ So if we justify the Duke with the Kantian philosophy of aestheticism, without any doubt we can call him an aesthete with a cruel heart. But afterward Kant declares:

In its extreme form the aesthetic doctrine of art for art's sake veered into the moral and quasi-religious doctrine of life for art's sake, with the artist represented as a priest who renounces the practical and self profiting canons of ordinary existence in the service of the religion of beauty.¹¹

But, what is the purpose of the religion of beauty? Obviously, the spirit of beauty will not inspire anybody to kill his innocent wife. But the Duke did it in the most inhuman way. The following lines are the living evident of this misdeed.

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 (My Last Duchess, ll, 41-46).

Actually, the Duke exploited the works of art to gain worldly profits. He is using the portrayal of the Duchess showing it to the envoy to warn the next Duchess. So, all these

cruel acts finally lead him towards the murder. It seems to us, from the Duke's authoritarian expression to the silent envoy that he was happy being able to punish her by death. In fact, 'the commands were that she should be put to death, or he might have had her shut up in a convent.'¹² How cruel a husband can be!

The reference of Neptune represents the Duke's harshness and cruelty, although the sculpture itself has a sense of beauty but the Duke here is misusing the image to show his power to the envoy. Then the Duke says:

Notice Neptune, though,
Taming a sea-horse, Thought a rarity,
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me (My Last Duchess, ll54-56)

The Duke shows the sculpture of Neptune to envoy to make him understand that he is as powerful as Neptune. Neptune was 'the ruler of sea, Zeus's brother and, second only to him in eminence. He had a splendid palace beneath the sea. Besides, being the lord of Sea he gave the first horse to man.'¹³ So, the Duke knows very well about the background of powerful God and Goddess and that is why he chooses the sculpture of the Neptune by which his mission to present his cruelty and to convince the envoy becomes successful. To create a message for the next Duchess 'Duke is staging a show for the envoy drawing and closing curtains and speaking rhetorically.'¹⁴ His language and gesture both are artistic but full of cruelty.

David Shaw, a famous critic, says, 'isolated by the greedy idolatries of his producer's art, the duke's theatrical self has fiercely willed the extinction of every other self.'¹⁵ And the Duchess was the first victim of this project of extinction. So, the Duke deserves to be addressed as a pseudo aesthete. The Duke is 'fully conscious of the effect that he has made,'¹⁶ because from the very beginning, he shows a 'lordly gesture'¹⁷ to establish his 'god-like omnipotence'¹⁸.

In our final analysis, we notice that although the Duke had a love for art and beauty, he did not have very strong ethics to control him. As a result, cruelty captures his aesthetic feelings and by his misdeeds he identifies himself as a pseudo aesthete who pretends to be artistic one but finally, his cruel appearance is known to all and in this way cruelty misguides the pseudo aesthete.

Conclusion

In our final analysis, we notice that although the Duke had a love for art and beauty, he did not have very strong ethics to control him. As a result, cruelty captures his aesthetic feelings and by his misdeeds he identifies himself as a pseudo aesthete who pretends to be artistic one but finally, his cruel appearance is known to all and in this way cruelty misguides the pseudo aesthete.

References

- ¹ Loucks, F.J. (ed). 1979. *Robert Browning's Poetry*. Norton & Company, London.
- ² Langbaum, Robert. 1957. *The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition*. Random, New York.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Willey, B. 1975. *The Seventeenth Century Background, Chatto and Windus*. Penguin Books, London.
- ⁷ Arams, M.H. (ed.) 1993. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. 6th edn., Vol. 1, Norton & Company, Inc., London, pp.1261.
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Abrams, M.H. 1993. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 6th edn., Prism Books Pvt. Ltd., India, pp. 2-3.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ Ibid
- ¹² Much latter, Browning said it. It is provided in the footnote of 'My Last Duchess', Loucks, F. J. (ed.) 1979. *Robert Browning's Poetry*. Norton & Company, London.
- ¹³ Hamilton, E. 1969. *Mythology*. Little Brown and Company, Massachusetts.
- ¹⁴ Shaw, W.D. 1979. Browning's Duke as theatrical producer. In: James F.Loucks (ed.), *Robert Browning's Poetry*. W.W. Norton & Company, London, 537 pp.
- ¹⁵ Ibid, pp. 538.
- ¹⁶ Ibid, pp. 538.
- ¹⁷ Ibid, pp. 538.
- ¹⁸ Ibid, pp. 538.