

(4th Sem) Give a critical appreciation of the poem - "My Last Duchess".

Ans. *My Last Duchess* is one of the successful dramatic monologues of Browning. Here Browning's dramatic genius for character-study is illustrated in the subtle and ironical characterisation of the Duke. The Duke is showing his picture gallery to the envoy of a count whose daughter he is about to marry. He is standing before the portrait of his last duchess painted by Fra Pandolf. He is proud of the mere possession of a masterpiece. His conceit of connoisseurship is also evident when he draws the attention of his guest to the bronze statue of Neptune taming a sea-horse. This pride of mere possession of statues and pictures is a phase of the decadent Renaissance. The duke is a man without any liberal and human outlook. He is greedy, jealous and cruel. Yet he takes pride in the fact that the statue was made for him by Clause of Innsbruck and the portrait was made by Fra Pandolf. Here Browning's irony and detachment in the portrayal of the duke are evident. Another charm of the poem is the suggestion of several delicate points. When the duke says "Fra Pandolf" by design, he desires to impress on the envoy and his master the Count, the sort of behaviour he expected from the woman he is about to marry. He intimates that he would tolerate no rivals for his next wife's smiles. When he begs his guest to "Notice Neptune—taming a seahorse", he further intimates how he has tamed and killed his last duchess. All this is to convey to the envoy and through him to the lady, that he demands in his new wife the concentration of her whole being on himself, and the utmost devotion to his will. His easy pretence as art connoisseur and polished gentleman does not conceal his pride, greed and heartlessness.

As a dramatic monologue, the poem is remarkable for character-studies. The Duke in depicting the frivolous nature of the last duchess succeeds in painting his narrow and hideous heart. The Duke is proud of his ancestry and hoped that his wife would give some special response to his favours: "As if she ranked my gift of a nine hundred years old name with anybody's gift." The irony here is unmistakable. The Duke seeks special response for his high ancestry. The Duke's cruelty is shown in that he coldly represses her little enthusiasms and finally gets her murdered. The character of the last duchess is also revealed in flash-lights. Her expansive nature, her courtesy and kind attention to all, her geniality and gaiety are suggested in the speech of the Duke. The icy-hearted tyrant is thrown into bold relief by the warm human character of the last duchess. From the mouth of her destroyer, the last duchess shines as a simple, sweet girl.

The poem exhibits Browning's genius for objectivity and condensation in the presentation of the character. The Duke's avarice (no just pretence of mind for dowry will be disallowed) and cruelty (all smiles stopped

together) are as much evident as the depth and passion of the earnest glance of the last duchess. "Then all smiles stopped together"—shows the poet's power of compressing a whole life story in two or three words. "I gave commands"—is a rare example of significant suggestion with economy in words.

The poem is a good monologue. The presence of the second character is suggested. His action and his responses are clearly hinted at. When the Duke speaks of the 'officious fool' who brought the cherries and when he says "all smiles stopped together", then the envoy looks at him with a fearful question in his eyes, but the Duke's face resumes its mask of complacency. The poem has the background of the decadent renaissance.

The heroic couplets superbly capture the rhythms of natural conversation. The crabbed style and ellipses adequately represent Browning's method of characterisation. The ironic contrast between the liveliness and sweetness of the last duchess and the greedy cruel nature of the Duke is successfully developed through the enigmatically condensed verse of Browning.

—R.D.