

Power Is For Men: A Relatively Traditional Reading to “My Last Duchess,” a Poem by Robert Browning, Regarding the Victorian Age

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Abstract

During the Victorian age the feminist movement got power, but women still robbed of their vital place both within their family life and social environment. Men exercised their power over them and made them stay home and do house work. In other words, women had no right to struggle for social participation and they were passive in their life as if they were the slaves of men. So according to masculine functionality, they oppressed, marginalized and debarred from love. In his poem Browning tries to show the negative side of the power or the “Big Error” that has been committed by Victorian men, and at the same time to condemn them of their wrong actions that they had toward their wives. Browning is not the supporter of the feminist but like Percy Shelly he wants to generalize equity between both “genders.” However, his poem clarifies the exercising mode of power, namely, the negative, undesirable and traumatic effect of masculinity within family and community relations during the stifling Victorian atmosphere.

Keywords: Masculinity, Femininity, Power and Victorian Age

INTRODUCTION

Although the Victorian age is the age of paradoxes that it can be blamed and praised by many of the critics, it is not determined by the equal right between both sexes. In this age the women were completely secluded from their men, had their own private life while their men were like lords and possessed all kinds of freedom. The patriarchal system which gave all the power in men’s hand also potentially made men assign jobs for their wives. The women were forced to give birth to children and look after the houses. They were deprived of the property and if they had property, they were forced to donate it to their husband even though the relationship ended up in divorce. Thus the long and wrong established assumption about the women in this period even intensified in comparison with other last periods.

According to Abjadian,

although many critics say that Victorians emancipated women from age-old bondage, but to their disgust they robbed them of a vital place. The peculiar province of women is to stay home and do their best to keep their husband and children healthy. They even should not go to school [as far as education is power] but instead they must be kept at home to do embroidery and not even make their own dresses (2006, p. 309).

Unfortunately these wrong assumptions in Victorian age made a split in the relationship of men and women. It defined and determined the role of men and women which later led to "*Gender Bifurcation*." By "*Gender Bifurcation*" the Victorian society gave the power to one pole, men, and deprived the other, women, from it. Having been quoted by Julian Wolfreys, Stoller regards gender as a rule which is "culturally determined." He also believes that while men's and women's biological difference is an inescapable fact, inequality between them stem from culturally generated biases concerning the gendered categories of "masculinity" and "femininity" (2000, p.39). As such the Victorians women had nothing but to live under masculine ideology, something which was culturally and particularly defined to them.

Finally this definition stabilizes one concrete form, that is, men have power as far as the gender bifurcation exists and there is no wonder that this power has political agencies and moves toward the negative side of enforcement. Therefore, the present study which analyzes "*My Last Duchess*" conducts the similar investigation into the pernicious influence of masculinity which has been socially constructed and it also testifies to its traditional boundaries that masculinity as a signifier of the power of man can suppress and impose its masculine ideologies over women.

DISCUSSION

According to Sokhanvar the personal life of Robert Browning falls in to three phrases: his years as a child and young bachelor, as a husband, and as a widower. Each of these phrases is most appropriately considered as in relation to his development as a poet (2008, p. 839).

Robert Browning was born on May 7, 1812 in Camberwell, a London suburb, and belonged to a middle class family. His mother was an accomplished pianist and at the same time she was a religious-minded woman whom he loved so much. And his father was a bank clerk who held a subordinate though honorable position in the bank of England and who read omnivorously. During his life time Browning did not travel so lot but instead he attended a boarding school and later was a student at the University of London but it only took for a short period of time. According to Flecher his formal schooling was irregular, so soon he came back his home and he showed much interest in painting, music and began to acquire from his father's large and strangely-assorted library the vast fund of information which astonishes the reader of his poetry (2005, p.154). Furthermore, during this time he dedicated most of his time to studying other

languages as Latin, Greek and French which they added to his store of knowledge that later he used for writing his poems.

Later in his life Browning did a lot of activities, He buried him with studying Shelly's poems and was influenced by his ideals and inspirations and even declared himself as vegetarian and atheist in emulation of the poet. Browning even tried very hard to make his voice heard in every place but he couldn't because he imitated Shelly's personal manner intensely in his poems. Later in his life, however, Browning's sense of atheism subsided when he published his first poem and he managed again to stick to his mother's emotional bases in religion. Yet, the effect of Shelly's poem is considerable in his poems. Like Shelly's poems especially "*Revolt of Islam*," which is a long allegorical narrative and deals with inequality between sexes, Browning in the "*My Last Duchess*" deals with dysfunctional relationship between the sexes too.

Browning, for his trips, also went to different places but he spent most of his time in Italy. After visiting and returning from Italy, Browning decided to visit Elizabeth Barrette and read her poems. By reading her poems, which gave him the great excitement the poet decided to marry her but he couldn't because of Barrette's father's dissatisfaction. So he insidiously and against to Barrett's father's wish, who was a well-intentioned but strangely a selfish man, eloped her and the couple went to Italy to live there. They lived there happily for fifteen years till Barrette's death in 1861. Before Barrette's death, Browning started his profession in drama too, and he published "*Paracelsus*," "*Sordello*," "*Men and Women*," and others ones chronologically but for the most part they came out unsuccessful. Nevertheless, the techniques that he used like dramatic monologue and diction are regarded as the most important contribution to poets like Ezra Pound and T.S Eliot. Finally after his wife's death which was so painful for him, he and his son decided to come back to London. Upon his arrival, he soon settled in one place and for one or two decades he tried so hard but unfortunately he suffered from mechanical repetition of mannerism and excess of argumentation. when he died, 1889, he was buried in Westminster Abbey.

Robert Browning is remembered for his mastery at capturing the essence and power of the dramatic monologue. Through symbolism, structure and technique, Browning creates the model of the ideal dramatic monologue in the poem, which according to Fletcher it epitomizes Browning's use of the form which without having actually invented it he developed into an instrument of thitherto unsuspected power, namely the dramatic monologue in which a character discusses his situation or life or some central part of incident, of it, under circumstances which reveal with wonderful completeness its significance and his own essential character. This poem tries to portray and interpret life and gives his readers vivid understanding of its main forces and conditions in representative moments (2005, p. 155). Thus Browning manipulates such a great technique in his poems to notify the readers of the stifling condition of woman in the troublesome Victorian era which culminates in woman's reliance, subservience, traumatic experiences and more importantly the deprivation of love.

From the beginning of the poem the duke shows that he is the symbol of power. He is ready to speak with the envoy whose daughter the duke is supposed to marry. He breaks the ice with envoy about the murder of his wife he has committed by inviting the envoy to see his wife's portrait hanged on the wall of his gallery by a monk and it is also pulled down by a curtain "*that's my last Duchess painted on the wall, ... will't please you sit and look at her?*" (Browning, 2004, p. 252). According to Kian Pishkar the beginning provides the first clue to the dukes depraved character, he was so jealous of his young wife that apparently had her painted by none other than a monk and the sitting for the portrait was only allowed to last a single day (p.369). Therefore, showing such a portrait emboldens his ego and emphasizes his social standing which is equal to the status of a king. Moreover, His power and his social status are clear from his diction and the content of his speech that he has no intention to let his envoy speak. And more considerably his tone and attitude are condescending as he considers the envoy as stranger and his reason that he shows and speaks about the portrait reveals that the envoy must be careful and the envoy should admonish her daughter that if she disobeys the duke, she will have the same life as the portrait.

In other lines the duke speaks about his harsh, strict and god-like character once he had when his wife was alive. During the unveiling of curtains he explains to the envoy that his wife, the duchess, was an extraordinary woman with a beautiful smile. He goes on and says that she was a kind of person that with a small compliment he could bring blush on her "*cheek,*" and "*too soon made [her] glad*" (Browning, 2004, p. 252), but because she had a flirtatious nature he could not control her and possess her smile, laughter and her joy so he lost his temper and killed her.

Browning here wants to discuss his period that men in his era that he lived were so sensitive to their wives and even without any good reasons they were always apt to destroy their wives' life; Browning also pinpoints on Duke's character and calls him "*mean*" since Duke, though he is from a noble family, he tells of his wife. He even is an accomplished liar as he conjures up lots of other bad things. He overdoes since her wife is dead and she cannot defend herself. Browning resumes but this time he gets angry and directs his diatribe toward the woman because he believes that the lion part of the power that Victorian men had in their hands comes back to women's fault; he blames the Victorian woman for such suppression and ruining their own identities because the women easily allow their husbands to control their feelings as if they are children, as a result it lets their husbands demean them by behaving toward them like small fool children. Moreover, as they are acting like children, men treat them awfully in order to conform them to their wills. Therefore, the duke, who symbolizes the tyrannical Victorian men in the poem, has authority and does not hesitate but simply kills his wife.

The poem also criticizes the rules of England in such a way that the men had the right to do everything with their wives and no one is responsible for that. The duke does not blame himself that he is guilt-ridden because he thinks what he has done is righteous. And if there will be any person to complain, she will be condemned because in England during the Victorian age all credit goes to men since they are in the center of power.

In the last lines of the poem the poet provides the symbolic statements. These symbolic statements are directed toward both the Duke and his wife. The duke is like the Neptune who has the complete control over the sea and sea horse. In other words the Neptune is the Roman god of the sea which stands for every man in the Victorian age whereas the sea horse is the symbol for each woman in that era that they must follow the rules of their men. Thus in such undesirable societies, like Victorian age, women had no choice but to submit to their husbands' wishes. As Browning sarcastically say if the woman are not "tamed," they must see the hell of Duke's wife on earth.

CONCLUSION

The Victorian age, according to some critics, was a period of social and political flux and anxiety. It was also a period that the power of men over women is visible, which is shown by both poets and novelists of the age. As a liberal in his thought Browning was too sad with his age as he saw that women are the slaves of men. His poem deals with it and describes the negative side of the power that even he condemns. In his poem "My Last Duchess" he reveals the satanic character of duke who is the symbol if not all but some men in England during the Victorian age who wanted to suppress their women and make them dominated. Finally the poem deals with the devastating impact of masculine power over the feminine but what Browning conveys to his reader is exactly the opposite.

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