

Analysis of the Speechless Feminine in “My Last Duchess”

Yulan Liu

College of International Studies Shenzhen University, Shenzhen 518000

Abstract: “My Last Duchess” is a dramatic monologue written in 1842 by the Victorian poet Robert Browning. In the monologue, the Duke is standing in front of a portrait of his passed wife, criticizing her to an envoy who has come to propose marriage. The actions and words of the Duke reveal him to be a controlling and possessive man while the female characters in the poem is controlled, objectified and is deprived of the discourse. This paper will focus on analyzing the image of the speechless woman in the poem in order to explore the social situation of women in Victorian England.

Keywords: My Last Duchess; Robert Browning; Speechless feminine; Objectification; Victorian England

1. Introduction

“My Last Duchess”, a masterpiece of monologue by the British Victorian poet Robert Browning, uses dramatic monologue to portray the image of a cold, cruel, possessive and hierarchical duke. The monologue arouses the reader’s sympathy for the Duchess, and at the same time stimulates the reader to think about the situation and living conditions of women in the Victorian period. “My Last Duchess” is based on the true story of Alfonso II, Duke of Ferrara, a city-state in northern Italy in the 16th century. In the poem, the Duke is preparing to marry again after being widowed, by marrying the daughter of a certain count’s family. In order to determine the amount of the dowry, the Duke is negotiating with an emissary from the Count’s family. The poem depicts the scene in which the Duke shows a portrait of the last Duchess for the emissary. Through the description in the poem, readers can feel that the Duchess is a warm, cheerful and naive young girl. Her face is lovely, her eyes are sincere, and she is able to find beauty in all parts of life. However, her demeanor is so offensive to the Duke that he forbids all smiles. Here the poem brings the conflict between the Duke and the Duchess to a climax, leaving endless room for the reader’s imagination. The tragedy of the Duchess reflects the sadness of Victorian women who were sacrificed to the male-dominated society, and it expresses the miserable situation of women to the fullest extent.

2. Lack of female perspective:

The most striking feature of the poem “My Last Duchess” is that it is a dramatic monologue. The speaker of this poem is Duke of Ferrara, he is preparing to marry again after his last Duchess passed, by marrying the daughter of an Earl’s family. In order to determine the amount of the dowry, the Duke was negotiating with an envoy from the earl’s family.

The poem begins with “That’s my last Duchess painted on the wall” (line 1) and throughout the 56 lines of the poem, the Duchess is never named. It is always the Duke who speaks, slandering that the Duchess is unfaithful, frivolous and stubborn. He describes his previous wife in this way, “She had a heart -- how shall I say? -- too soon made glad, too easily impressed; she liked whate’er she looked on, and her looks went everywhere” (21-24), implying that the Duchess was acting frivolously, having an affair not only with the painter but also with the fools in the orchard.

The narrator of the poem is the Duke himself, and his comments to the Duchess in front of the painting demonstrate his dissatisfaction and disdain for his wife. The Duchess, however, is absent throughout the poem. The Duke speaks throughout while the Duchess is only a dead person who is blamed but has no right to argue, especially between 39-43 lines showcase the Duchess’s speechless: “If she let herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set, her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse, -- E’en then would be some stooping; and I choose never to stoop.” This ironically shows the Duke’s pride and arrogance, he does not care to listen to the Duchess’s defense even if it is not her fault. Women’s discourse is submerged in the Duke’s strong male discourse and can only express their indictment of the patriarchal society through the silent gaze in the portrait.

Skillfully, Browning utilizes the poetic form of dramatic monologue, with a single narrator yet a lack of a female perspective. The

Duchess in the painting, as a victim, could not defend her behavior only to be slandered by the Duke. This vividly reflected the social phenomenon that women were marginalized and became speechless in Victorian times.

3. Deprivation of discourse:

Although the Duchess is unfaithful and frivolous in the Duke's monologue, we could get a sense of her warmth, cheerfulness, and kindness in the poem. "The dropping of the daylight", "The bough of cherries", and "The white mule she rode"(26-29), all the things can delight Duchess, as the poem describes, "all and each would draw from her alike the approving speech, or blush, at least" (29-31), we can feel that the Duchess is full of joy almost every day, the smile is the language of the Duchess, is her attitude towards life. However, the Duchess's smile aroused the Duke's dissatisfaction and anger, he felt that his wife's smile was too generous, and the evil desire to control and possessiveness made him unable to tolerate his wife's smile, so he gives commands, "Then all smiles stopped together" (46).

Every appearance of the Duchess's smile is accompanied by the Duke's criticism of her behavior, and the smile is a symbol of the Duchess's power of speech but to stop the smile is to deprive her power of speech. The word "commands" in the poem fully indicates the authority of the Duke's language and showcases that in the patriarchal society of that time, women were dependency, were embellishments, and were the private property of their husbands, they can be treasured, can be discarded but can never be independent, for which they were always just other's appendage. When the Duke counts the "faults" of the Duchess in front of the envoy, and shows off that he stops all the smiles of his wife, it actually discloses that in his innermost, his wife is an obedient and silent "angel" at his disposal, willing to be confined to the family, either managing the household or serving as a decoration in the living room. Therefore, from the Duke's "commands", it can be seen that in the male-dominated society of Victoria, women were speechless, aphasia and had no right to speak, and men control their wives through various ways, depriving them of the right to speak.

4. Objectification of women:

The pinnacle of women's speechlessness in society is reflected in they are objectified by men. "smiles stopped" in the poem implied that the Duchess was killed by the Duke. The cruel Duke got rid of his wife and replaced her with a portrait of her, preferring his wife to be a portrait possessed by him rather than an independent living person. The Duke's treatment of the painting reveals his treatment of women as objects to be owned. In the beginning of the poem, he describes the painting as "a piece of wonder" (3), he regards it as a work of art rather than a testament to a former love. By repeating the name of the painter "Fra Pandolf" three times in the first 16 lines of the poem, he again implies that he values the painting because of its status as an object that shows off his wealth and clout. The painting is meant to aggrandize the Duke rather than honor the woman it portrays. Additionally, in the eighth line, he uses the word "it's" rather than "her" to refer to Duchess's earnest glance. Throughout the poem, the Duke reveals his belief that women are objects to be controlled, possessed, and discarded.

This is made even clearer by the fact that the Duke has placed this painting in a public area of his palace so he can proudly display it to guests, whom he invites to "sit and look at her" (5) much like a museum curator would direct visitors to a famous work of art in a gallery. Such an attitude is reflected yet again when he tells the messenger that "Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed at starting, is my object"(52-53), which hints that he intends to make his new bride another one of his possessions. Women, in the Duke's mind, are simply ornamental objects for men rather than actual people in their own right.

The death and objectification of the Duchess marks a permanent loss of her voice, and she can only be hung on the wall as a painting, becoming a talking point in the mouths of others. The portrait of the Duchess becomes a wonderful work of art and an object of the Duke's wealth and ostentation, disclosing the fact that during the Victorian period, women were seen as subordinate to men, and the social norms of the time deprived women of the power to be fully independent. Sympathetically, they were marginalized and speechless.

5. Conclusion:

This paper analyzes the speechless image of women in Browning's masterpiece poem "My Last Duchess" from three aspects. The first is the unique compositional technique of "dramatic monologue", which depicts women only from the Duke's point of view and lacks a female perspective to illustrate the story, which not only reflects the lack of women's right to speak, but also ironically reveals the Duke's selfishness, brutality and hypocrisy. The second is the deprivation of women's discourse. Smile symbolizes the Duchess's language, and the commands of the Duke to stop smiling is to deprive her of the right to speak. The third is the objectification of the Duchess, who is shown to others as a painting, and whose death discloses her complete absence and silence in a patriarchal society. The speechless female figure in the poem reflects the fact that in the Victorian era, woman was absent and speechless, just an aesthetic object of men and an object of desire.

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