

**A COMPARATIVE APPRECIATION OF "MY LAST DUCHESS" BY  
ROBERT BROWNING AND "OZYMANDIAS" BY PERCY BYSSHE  
SHELLEY**

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Two important poems of English Literature I have always found appreciation "My Last Duchess" by Robert Browning and " Ozymandias " by Percy Bysshe Shelley still deserve interpretation when they are seen as representations of "dramatic monologue", "multiple use of dramatic personas" and contemplations on "works of art". It is also a known fact that Browning has been influenced by Shelley in various ways. In the following we will try to interprate the poems according to before given presumptions.

**Robert Browning**

The moral and religious problems are the main theme of Robert Browning (1812-1889). His work suffered in the twenties and the thirties a period of disparaging criticism and indeed there was a time when he was better known for his rescue of Elizabeth Barrett from Wimpole Street than as a poet. Fortunately an ample number of biographies in the fifties and the sixties have re-established his position. The mid-twentieth century views of his poetry have become increasingly favourable. Of his elopement only two things need be said. First, the lady herself was a poet in her own right in their early married years she was far more popular as a poet than Browning. Secondly, Browning in his adventure had, as usual, all the luck.

In pursuing his study of the human mind, Browning drew upon a wide and unusual reading, which easily baffled the reader by the remoteness of its references. Already in *Sordello* (1840) he had employed a knowledge of medieval Italy with an allusiveness which no reader could hope to follow. He had developed also an independence of style, with an assumption of unusual rhythms, grotesque rhymes, and abrupt, broken phrasing. At its best this gave to his verses a virility which contrasts pleasantly with the over-melodious movement of much nineteenth-century poetry. That he was a master of verse can be seen from the easy movements of his lyrics, but his special effects, though they gave realism to his poems, were in danger, in his later works, of becoming a mannerism.

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The appearance of realism through a medium which was dramatic was what he most attempted to attain. In drama itself he was only moderately successful, though Macready was persuaded to play in *Sir afford* in 1837. He was happier in using drama without much thought of practical application to the theatre, as in *Paracelsus* (1835), a brilliant expression of his philosophy, or in *Pippa Passes* (1841), where his ideas are simply but aptly shown through a series of human actions. He was interested not so much in the conflict of a group of characters, as in the fortunes of a single mind, and for this purpose he evolved the 'dramatic monologue' ; it was in this form that many of his best-known pieces were composed, 'Andrea del Sarto', 'Fra Lippo Lippi', *Saul*, and 'The Bishop orders his Tomb'. Their appearances in a series of volumes, which included *Dramatic Lyrics* (1842), *Men and Women* (1855), and *Dramatis Personae* (1864), gave him in the latter half of the century a reputation second only to that of Tennyson, They remain his outstanding achievement.

He put his method to the greatest test in *The Ring and the Book* (1868-9), where a series of dramatic monologues is woyen to make one of the longest poems in the language. Browning had selected a sordid Italian crime, which Carlyle sardonically described as an Old Bailey story that could have been told in five minutes, and he so examined the minds of all that came into contact with it that not only their motives, but the whole of his philosophy of life become apparent. After *The Ring and the Book* his poetry develops in obscurity, though some of these later pieces have a subtle interest quite distinct from anything in the earlier work.

He remains one of the most difficult poets to assess. His poems are crowded with memorable characters, and the whole of Renaissance Italy comes to life in his pages. At first he seems to have created a world of living people as Shakespeare had done, but a closer inspection shows that Browning's men and women are not free. They live in a spiritually totalitarian state in which Browning is Chancellor and God is President, always with the proviso that the Chancellor is the President's voice on earth. His own life had been, in the best sense, fortunate, so that he knew little of evil, and yet, theoretically evil fascinated him. Had he known more of life he might have come to realize evil as a fierce and positive corruption in human life, and that realization would have deepened his poetry. The inevitable emphasis that any comment on Browning's poetry must give to its complexity can easily obscure the fact that he was a master of the short lyric. 'Meeting at Night' is typical of this gift for the short, simple, dramatic lyric, which in its brevity avoids the didacticism of some of the longer poems.

### **My Last Duchess**

The time is the 16 th century, the scene the city of Ferrara in northern Italy. The speaker is the Duke of Ferrara.

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.  
Will't please you sit and look at her? I said  
"Fra Pandolf by design, for never read  
Strangers like you that pictured countenance,  
The depth and passion of its earnest glance,  
But to myself they turned (since none puts by  
The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)  
And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,  
How such a glance came there; so, not the first  
Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, 'twas not  
Her husband's presence only, called that spot  
Of joy into the Duchess' cheek: perhaps  
Fra Pandolf chanced to say "Her mantle laps  
Over my lady's wrist too much," or "Paint  
Must never hope to reproduce the faint  
Half-flush that dies along her throat": such stuff  
Was courtsey, 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 whate'er  
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.  
Sir, 'twas all one! My favor at her breast,  
The dropping of the daylight in the West,  
The bough of cherries some officious fool  
Broke in the orchard for 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. Who'd stoop to blame  
This sort of trifling? Even had you skill  
In speech—which I have not—to make your will  
Quite clear to such an one, and say, "just this  
Or that in you disgust me; here you miss,  
Or there exceed the mark"—ah! 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. 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. Will't please you rise? We'll meet  
 The company below, then. I repeat,  
 The Count your master's known munificence  
 Is ample warrant that no just pretense  
 Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;  
 Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed  
 At starting, is my object. Nay, we'll go  
 Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though,  
 Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,  
 Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!<sup>1</sup>

### Percy Bysshe Shelley

Shelley, the most intense and original lyrical poet in the language, was born on August 4, 1792 in Sussex. In 1815, he wrote his first considerable poem, *Alastor*, in a Wordsworthian style but subtly directed against Wordsworth. In March 1818, Shelley went into exile to Italy, never to return. During his four Italian years, Shelley wrote his succession of major poems : *Julian and Maddalo*, *Prometheus Unbound*, *The Cenci*, *The Sensitive Plant*, *The Witch of Atlas*, *Epipsychidion*, *Adonais*, *Hellas*, the unfinished death poem, *The Triumph of Life*, scores of magnificent lyrics, and the major prose essay, his *Defence of Poetry*. Personally all but selfless, almost preternaturally benevolent, Shelley was also habitually gentle, urbane, and by all accounts the most lovable of human beings. T.S. Eliot, F.R. Leavis, Alien Tate and W.H. Auden are typical of the majority view in modern criticism that prevailed until recently. Their Shelley is a confused emotionalist, a bad craftsman, a mock lyricist, a perpetual adolescent. Shelley is a crucial, sometimes the dominant, influence upon Beddoes, Browning, Swinburne, Yeats, Shaw and Hardy.

The central form of Shelley's poetry is remorseless quest, for a world where Eros is triumphant always, where desire shall not fail, and a confrontation of life by life is always taking place. His poetry carries a great idealism. This idealism aims at seeing people apart from society and religion. Life is a bad dream and our cry could only be understood by nature. We can contact with universal spirit and endless beauty by means of nature. The deep inspiration of romanticism of Shelley is this sort of understanding. The concepts of sorrow, melancholy and distress are dominant in his poetry. Even though Shelley is an atheist, he considers human soul and nature interrelated.

There is, despite his own yearnings, an unmistakable pattern of deepening despair in the cycle of Shelley's poetry. From the dead end of *Alastor*, Shelley rose

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<sup>1</sup> Helen McDonnell, Neil E. Nakadate, John Pfordresher and Thomas E. Shoemate : England in Literature, Medallion Edit. America Readers (Glenview-Illinois, Scott, Foresman and Company, 1982), p. 3 74

to the highly qualified hope of *Prometheus Unbound*, and then came full circle again to the natural defeat of imaginative quest in *Adonais* and in the unfinished but totally hopeless *The Triumph of Life*, which is not a *Purgatorio* but an *Inferno*. He claims the view that one can talk about art of poetry not only in universal sense but also in restricted sense. His best work *A Defence of Poetry* includes his most remarkable views. The faculty of imagination is a different presentation of love. At the very beginning of his work, two concepts draw attention; these are reason and imagination. These concepts belong to the function of brain. Imagination is the basis of synthesis, and reason is the basis of analysis. To Shelley, art of poetry is the expression of imagination in the common sense. Art of poetry and the existence of humanity were born at the same time.

### Ozymandias

I met a traveller from an antique land  
 Who said : Two vast and trunkless legs of stone  
 Stand in the desert....Near them, on the sand,  
 Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,  
 And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,  
 Tell that its sculptor well those passions read  
 Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,  
 The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed :  
 And on the pedestal these words appear :  
 "My name is Ozymandias, king of kings :  
 Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair !"  
 Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
 Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare  
 The lone and level sands stretch far away.<sup>2</sup>

### A Comparison Between The Poems and The Poets

Percy Bysshe Shelley, who is a platonist in some ways, is the early romantic. He has been accepted as the modern lyrical poet proper who always searches ultimate values in this world. The main form of Shelley's poetry is a ceaseless quest for a world of love. During his life he wants to escape from the harsh reality of everyday life. Shelley's poetry has affected many poets and showed a way in their poetries throughout whole centuries. One of these poets is Robert Browning who grew to maturity during the decline of romanticism and he was affected mainly by Shelley. He has also been described the most considerable poet in English since the major romantics. After reading a volume of Shelley's lyrics Browning decided

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<sup>2</sup> a.g.c., 329



to become a poet. As in Shelley's poems, in Browning poems, for a while, there is a seek for a world which is full of love and desire. The family in Browning's poems has never changed, it has always resembled to the family in Shelley's poems. Browning's main formal device was the dramatic monologue, in which he tried to show "action in character, rather than character in action" and he tried to display incidents in the development of a human soul. Therefore he has been described as the initiator of dramatic monologues. Shelley is a quester for a perfect world of love but Browning is the admirer of the Italian Renaissance. For him the most interesting country is Italy and the most interesting period is Renaissance. While Shelley prefers to display a world where love is always triumphant and desire shall not fail, Browning prefers to display the people and the life style of the Italian Renaissance.

Though Shelley's *Ozymandias* is written in sonnet form, Browning's *My Last Duchess* is written in ballad form. In English poetry the sonnet is perhaps the most difficult form to achieve perfection. It is very strict form : the thought has to be made to fit into fourteen iambic pentameters, no more and no less, having one of several possible rhyme-schemes. It is a satisfying form for a skilful poet. By means of it a poet expresses his thought, only a single thought, perfectly, but it is too short to allow digression and repetition. Its popularity, among poets of nearly every generation since the middle of the sixteenth century, is due to these factors and to it being a fairly hard test of skill. In generally speaking, English poetry has avoided rigid formalism and external rules. However, by the time, poets have turned to a form which imposes strict limits to thought and expression, as in the case of Shelley. Shelley was temperamentally opposed to external discipline and all forms of tyranny. That is why he did not excel, as some of his contemporaries did, in the sonnet form. His main form is lyric form as in Browning's poems.

As we mentioned before Browning's 'My Last Duchess' is in ballad form, but ballad is a good name for the lyric species. It is an intricate fixed form whose name, historically, belongs to courtly dance song. The English interest in ballads mainly from Bishop Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*. It differs for every country and every generation. Ballads are especially about fundamental emotions : love, jealousy, ambition, and frustration as it is in 'My Last Duchess'. In generally speaking for some countries the ballad form is fixed, for other countries it is not. There is no standardized structure as there is for sonnets and ballades. The characteristic English ballad form is stanzaic. The English ballad measure derives from the septenarius line of medieval Latin hymns. This line of 14 syllables, 7 feet with rising or iambic metrical flow. Ballad is a good form for dramatic monologues.

'Ozymandias' is also a dramatic monologue but it is in the sonnet form. In fact it is Shelley's only well known sonnet. Although the thought in the poem is clear and striking, it is not completely successful. The first line "I met a traveler from an antique land" reminds us a remote setting. At first glance this poem looks like a traveller's tale. The scene is probably Egypt. Ozymandias is, probably,

Ramses II of Egypt, 13 th century |B.C . Some of the obvious narrated details of this poem are "...traveller... legs of stone ... desert... shattered visage.... sneer... pedestal... "my name is Ozymandias"... lone and level sands."<sup>3</sup> The words are so effectly fitted together that we begin to imagine a desert and the remains of a great statue in the middle of the desert. This statue must have been dedicated to by a great king or ruler. Now, only the legs are left standing and most of the other parts of the body have disappeared, or are unrecognizable. However, one detail that the traveller particularly observed were the fragments of the face. Although the face is broken into pieces, it tells many things. In the poem, it is described very vividly :

"Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown  
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,"<sup>4</sup>

The "frown", "the wrinkled lip" and "sneer of cold command" remind us that the original statue represents a man who is bad-tempered, heartless and cruel. It attracts our attention that the sculptor tries hard to give the qualities of the face of that statue. Perhaps, he tries to display his skill or he wants to show that, once he had suffered under the cruelty of the king and carried out his work, as a kind of retribution. In 'Ozymandias', the stress on the statue attracts our attention because there is also a stress on the work of art in 'My Last Duchess'. Maybe, it is supposed that the immortality of art is emphasized in both of the poems.

After the broken fragments, the narrator describes to us the pedestal, on which an inscription is still visible. So we learn that the name of the figure is 'Ozymandias' and then follow highly significant details about his title and his message to the world. When we hear this name, we realise two new aspects about that statue : pride ("king of kings"), and a sense of defiance of all other rulers who may have hoped to be compared with him. It is almost same in 'My Last Duchess', hence the duke is so proud of himself he defies everybody and he gives order to kill his duchess for she treats him in the way that she behaves other people. His giving order to kill his wife shows his awful great pride.

We read 'Ozymandias' carefully, this question appears in our mind : we are all the "mighty works" of which Ozymandias seemed so proud ? Certainly, all of them have disappeared without trace as the poet indicated in these lines :

"Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare  
The lone and level sands stretch far away"<sup>5</sup>

The poem, 'Ozymandias', is satirical like 'My Last Duchess'. In the duke's words about his duchess there is an irony; the duke praises his duchess but beneath

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<sup>3</sup> a.g.e.

<sup>4</sup> a.g.e.

<sup>5</sup> a.g.e.



this praise there is a condemnation. On the other hand, Ozymandias is being condemned and perhaps also mocked, for his foolish presumption that his power was permanent. Because when traveller searches the desert, he doesn't find any single sign of the "works" of "Ozymandias". At the same time, we begin to sense a poignant contrast, as between the duke and his duchess while the duke describes his duchess, between the great king and his employee who expressed his bitter feeling about the tyrant while he was carving the statue.

In 'Ozymandias', Shelley uses a clear language while Browning in 'My Last Duchess' uses an intricate language. The whole powerful effect of 'Ozymandias' depends on the clear bold presentation of the situation. When we look at the poem, firstly we see that it is like a conventional account for introducing us 'Ozymandias' that makes a bridge between the "antique" and the present. In fact, the whole structure of the poem seems more complex than an ordinary traveller's tale. It represents its time and there is no exaggeration in the poem and the well organized verse form compensate any slight unnaturalness of expression.

The main theme of this poem is that nothing lasts forever. How mighty and how strong a thing, which comes to this world, is, it isn't important because it is condemned to vanish. However all the tyrants who ever existed or will exist must disappear. "Look on my works, ye mighty and despair !" <sup>6</sup> the double meaning in this line has an irony. At the same time the title of the poem, "Ozymandias", and "antique land" are the symbols like Neptune in 'My Last Duchess'.

While 'Ozymandias' is a portrait of a cruel and proud king, 'My Last Duchess' is also a portrait of a cruel and proud duke of ferrara at the time of Renaissance in Italy. The poem is like the reflection of the life and the people of the Renaissance. At the beginning of the poem the duke shows the painting of his last duchess to a guest and speaks about it : "That is my last duchess painted on the wall," <sup>7</sup>. The first thing which attracts our attention in the poem is the duke's insensitiveness in front of the painting of his last duchess who is ordered to be killed by himself. The interesting point in this poem is that the duke does not feel sorrow for his wife's death. On the contrary, he feels only a kind of pleasure for watching a kind of masterpiece of art reflecting the beautiful face of his ex-wife. As it is seen clearly, Browning, in the brief story of the duke who is now getting ready for another marriage, tells us about the aristocrats of the Renaissance who were proud, cruel ruthless and immoral, but at the same time educated to be fond of art. When the duke speaks, we catch glimpses of not only his character but also his wife's character. The duke is angry with his duchess because of her naive and childish temperament : she behaves nicely to everybody and her manners are good, she is interested in nature and she becomes happy when she is complemented. Her approach to everybody is the same, even to her husband. As a matter of fact, the

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<sup>6</sup> a.g.c.

<sup>7</sup> a.g.c. 374



main reason for the duke's annoyance to his duchess is this, namely his wife's attitude. Browning reflects this point clearly in these lines :

"...Sir, 'twas not  
Her husband's presence only, called that  
spot  
Of joy into the Duchess' cheek :  
perhaps"<sup>8</sup>

And he adds :

"...She thanked men-good ! but thanked  
Somehow-1 know not how-as if she ranked  
my gift of a nine hundred-years-old name with  
anybody's gift..."<sup>9</sup>

The duke resents her putting his respectable, nine hundred years old name, in the same scale with the other ordinary people. As Ozymandias' pride, the duke's pride also strikes us here; he sees himself as an extraordinary man, as Ozymandias sees himself as an extraordinary king, and he thinks that he possesses the duchess as one of the rare elements of his property. However his selfishness attracts our attention too, as he wants his wife to smile only for him not for other people. The feeling of vanity, pride and selfishness causes him to give orders to kill his wife. Browning's lines suggest this event:

"...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....."<sup>10</sup>

After mentioning his wife's story, we realize that he wants to remarry because he speaks about the dowry he is going to take as in these lines :

"The count your master's known munificence  
Is ample warrant that no just pretense  
Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;"<sup>11</sup>

Toward the end of the poem, before the duke brings his guest for joining to the other guests, he shows a statue and the poem ends with his these words :

".. .Notice Neptune, though,

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<sup>8</sup> a.g.c. 374.

<sup>9</sup> a.g.c.

<sup>10</sup> a.g.c.

<sup>11</sup> a.g.c.

Taming a sea horse, thought a rarity,  
Which claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me !"<sup>12</sup>

As it is seen, the poem begins with the commentaries on the appreciation of works of art and it ends with the commentaries on the appreciation of works of art, thus, the portrait of the duchess has been put on the same scale with the statue of Neptune, though the former should mean more to the duke.

The main theme in 'My Last Duchess', in my opinion is the duke's new marriage. Yet, this is not the only theme in the poem, there are several themes in it. First of all, the duke represents, like Ozymandias, ruthless authority. Browning reflects this side of the duke, as Shelley did very vividly. Although 'Ozymandias' and 'My Last Duchess' were written in different times, they share many things in common such as in 'Ozymandias', Shelley stresses that nothing lasts forever. How mightily and how strong a thing, which comes to this world, is, it is condemned to vanish. Also all the tyrants 'who ever existed or will exist must dissappear in the course of the time, the work of art never dissappears. In 'My Last Duchess' Browning also speaks about the ruthless authority of the man in Italian Renaissance who will also die in the course of the time but the works of art in his collection will live.

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<sup>12</sup> a.g.e.