Robert Browning’s My Last Duchess Analysis

My Last Duchess is an example of Victorian dramatic monologue. The dramatis personae is a duke, who could be Alfonso II of Ferrara, a nobleman during Renaissance. The monologue is set in the duke’s castle in Ferrara, in particular, in his paintings gallery, in front of a fresco of her beloved. Throughout the poem the reader will find out about the Duke's attitude towards his wife and her murder but mostly about the Duke himself. There are two characters: the duke, whose point of view is adopted by the narrator, and a messenger, one of the few allowed to see the fresco, which is usually covered by a curtain.

By looking at the title, the intelligent reader should focus his attention on two key words: "my" and "last". The adjective "last" implies that there will be no other women after the "Duchess"; the adjective "my" gives an additional meaning to the title suggesting the idea of a man (probably the dramatis personae) who has a possessive attitude towards his woman. In addition, the word “Duchess” is a reference to the social status of the characters The reader's attention is also drawn by the subtitle "Ferrara": it may be the setting. However, by looking at the title and at the subtitle the reader can only make conjectures and ask himself: Why is the Duchess the last one? Why does the writer use the possessive adjective “my”? Who is the Duchess? English people were not very familiar with Ferrara: what is the point of choosing this setting? He will find the answers by reading the poem.

The structure immediately leaps out. It is a poem but it's not organized in stanzas and the careful reader will notice the unusual use of informal language suggests by the presence of markers of direct speech (exclamation marks, inverted commas).

The most engaging example in the dramatic monologue is probably the speaker himself. Indeed, even if the poem seems to be about the Duchess, as even the title suggests, the Duke reveals more about himself than the relationship with his wife. He is a weak and jealous man, whose individualism, as the insistent presence of the personal I confirms ("my last Duchess", "I call", "I said", "I have", "but I", "ask me",...) led to his wife's murder.

What makes the poem in some way ironic is that the Duchess did not do anything wrong. Her "faults" were her courtesy to those who served her ("She thanked men") and her delight in simple pleasures ("too soon made glad, too easily impressed") that the Duke could not understand ("I know not how"). She did not reserve her attention only for him and his power and it explains why the Duke felt "as if she ranked my gift of a nine - hundred - years old name". The line also puts in result the Duke's need of having name, a history, an identity based on certainties in order to exists.
The Duke's fragile and weak nature is also underlined by his inability to speak ("Even had you skill in speech - which I have not") which does not allow him to share his feelings, his emotions and his ideas with others. It follows that he will never be able to conceive and understand a different point of view rather than his own. The only way of surviving is by surrounding other people as the sentence "giving commands" affirms as well as the closing scene.

The reason why he killed his wife is now clear to the reader: he could not possess her.

After reading and analyzing the poem the reader will also understand why Robert Browning chose Ferrara. Indeed the "love" story reflects the one between Alfonso II D'Este and Lucrezia Borgia.

The use of language is very significant in the dramatic monologue.

First of all, as I said before, the presence of a pathological I, accentuated - for example - by the assonance of the sound "I" in line 10 ("by the curtain I have drawn for you, but I"), which reveals the Duke's individualism and his possessive attitude as well as his fragility. Indeed, this is a sign of his weakness, which is typical of those people who continuously need to assert their selves in order to have an identity and feel stronger.

The Duke's strength is underlined by his need of having everything and everyone under control. As a matter of fact the layout is visibly compact, the rhyme scheme is regular (AABBCCDD) and the structure is circular: the repetition of the second line "as if she were alive" in the ending scene of the poem.

Last but not least the intelligent reader will realize that there are multiple points of view in the poem: the dramatis personae, the envoy, the Duchess and the reader or listener. The latter feels directly involved thanks to the use of the direct speech and the presence of the pronoun "you".
In conclusion the reader will manage to comprehend that the monologue is not about the "last Duchess", as he could aspect from the title, but it is focused on the Duke. More specifically it is about the weak nature of human beings, whose are fragile; moreover, the reader evinces that a life dedicated to self-importance is not a authentic life: it just leads to an implosion that will end with pathology, leaving you outside the reality.