

# CONSTRUCTION OF EXPERIENCE IN ROBERT BROWNING'S MY LAST DUCHESS: A SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS

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A word can cause us to sink into the deepest despair or lift us to inspired behavior. Words we share with our family, community and country become a bond that unites us. The systematic organization of these words is referred to as language. Language in a way is beyond human control. And yet another way it is very much in his hands. As we know language exists in a particular context and thus is a carrier of ideology. Therefore, a careful scrutiny of the language of any discourse results into the revelation of the ideology of the discourse-maker. With this assumption in view, this paper through a sustained linguistic scrutiny, intends to analyze masculine dominancy over feminine servility in 'My Last Duchess.'

It goes without saying that Browning holds a divine claim with respect to dramatic monologues. His monologues grow out of some 'crisis' or 'critical situation' in the life of the principal figure and embody the reaction of that figure to that particular situation.

"Browning's aim is to get the truth about human nature in very concentrated forms so he dramatizes those moments which make the inherent meaning of a life visible."<sup>1</sup>

His poetry reflects the contemporary interest in the under-dog, the waifs and strays of society. Much talked about, a bit controversial and a curiosity of all times, Browning's masterpiece in miniature is remarkable piece of character – study not only of the Duke but also of his last duchess and the messenger of the neighboring forms the listener and the interlocutor. Here, the tyranny, the pride and self-conceit, the hard heartedness, and the dictatorial attitude of the Duke have been thrown into sharp relief by contrast with the genial and cheerful good nature of the duchess. She was a frank-hearted, charming girl with a genial disposition and zest for life. But all her expressions of delight, and her frank innocence, uncorrupted by the ways of the world, received only a cold reception at the hands of her husband. The result was she pined away, or was murdered at the orders of the tyrant Duke, her husband.

*"This grew, I gave commands*

*Then all smiles stopped together "*<sup>2</sup>

Doubtlessly, the poem is debatable keeping in view Browning's one man show and the exclusion of female voice in his dramatic monologues and renewed concern for women, women rights, women education and women empowerment in the Victorian era. It was the era of what is called the 'first wave feminism' that culminated in the early 20th century with

women getting suffrage. In literature of this age, women got a centre stage as in Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy.

Halliday views language existing in some situational and cultural context and outlines three metafunctions of language- experiential, interpersonal and textual. At the experiential level, language is all about the representation of reality. At the interpersonal level, language builds relationships, communicates attitudes, beliefs and ideologies. And at the textual level, it organizes the reality into a text. The particular grammatical facility used for capturing experience in language is the system of Transitivity and for interpersonal and textual functions the resources used are Mood Block and Information Structure respectively. "Transitivity refers to the way meanings are encoded in the clause and to the way different types of processes are represented in language".<sup>3</sup>

Transitivity normally picks up three components of processes. The first is the process itself; which is typically realized in grammar by the verb phrase. The second is the participant(s) associated with the process, typically realized by noun- phrases. Perhaps less importantly for stylistic analysis, transitivity also picks out the circumstances associated with the process. This third element is typically expressed by prepositional and adverb phrases which fill up the Adjunct element in clause structure. Transitivity includes six types of process. Material processes, the first of the six are simply processes of doing. Associated with material processes are inherent participant roles which are the actor, an obligatory role in the process, and a goal, a role which may or may not be involved in the process. Mental processes contribute the second key process of the transitivity system and are essentially processes of sensing. These processes inhabit and reflect the world of consciousness, and involve cognition; reaction and perception and participant roles are sensor and the phenomena. Behavioral processes embody physiological action like 'breath' and 'cough'. They also represent processes of consciousness as forms of behavior, as in 'stare', 'dream' or 'worry' the key participant is the 'behavior'. Verbalization is processes of 'saying' and the participant roles associated with these processes is the speaker, the receiver and the verbiage. Another category is that of relational processes which are processes of 'being'. Existential processes constitute the sixth and last category of the transitivity model which include the word 'there' as a dummy subject and they normally only contain one participant role, the existent.

The context in which my last duchess occurs is already outlined above. Keeping this context in view, this paper will analyze what kinds of choices at the experiential level the narrator-Duke makes to narrate his content or his experience of reality and how these choices show the dominant cultural ideology of duke and its betrayal that is in tune with the local situational context of the Victorian era where a new voice was rising against patriarchy in favour of women suffrage, women education and women liberation.

For the purpose of analysis, the poem is divided into three parts keeping in view the distinct nature of things that are narrated. These parts are titled- orientation, justification and pretension. Further, the poem is divided into clauses. The clauses that are in some ways connected in a hypotactic or paratactic relationships are given the same numerical number. However, their co-ordinate or sub- ordinate wits are made to appear distinct by assigning them alphabets such as a, b, c, etc. The clause- level analysis is followed by experiential analysis in which the kinds of processes are discussed and the roles of participants are

specified. And finally, there is the interpretation of the choices at the experiential level and the conclusion is drawn.

### Three Parts

The first part comprises of 8 clauses. Here in the duke who is also narrator initiates the story and place it in a place and time, it is therefore named 'orientation'. It discloses the key- thing upon which the whole discussion of duke rests.

*"That's my last duchess painted on the wall,  
 looking as if she were alive. "4*

Here, the narrator- husband that is duke introduces himself and his fast duchess to the messenger of the neighboring count who forms the listener and interlocutor. He also acquaints the messenger with Frapandolf, the monk who makes the portrait of last duchess he second part is made of the next 15 clauses (9 to 23). This is named 'Justification' for in it the narrator- duke justifies his action of stopping the smiles of his duchess i.e. killing his wife under the name of the aristocracy of his nine-hundred years old family as well as supposed infidelity on the part of duchess. In a fit of jealousy the Duke gave orders and "then all smiles stopped together". The line has been left intentionally enigmatic. We cannot say for certain how the smiling stopped. But, most probably, the poor, innocent duchess was murdered at the command of her brutal and stone- hearted husband. The third and last part spreads over the last six clauses.

*"The count your master's known munificence  
 Is ample warrant that no just pretence  
 Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;  
 Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed  
 At starting, is my object?"5*

It is named 'Pretension' for in it narrator Duke pretends himself to be above any materialistic concerns that are associated with matrimonial alliance. He shows his grave concern for the counts 'fair daughter's self instead of any dowry. And also proves himself as a great lover of art in lines 'Notice Neptune, though, Taming a sea- horse' and uses such great names as 'clause of Innsbruck' to show his superficial worth and aristocracy.

S.No	Clauses	Sub-Clauses
1.	That is my last dutchess painted on the Wall	a. Looking as if she were alive
2.	I call that piece a wonder	
3.	Fra pandiot's hands worked busily a day	a. and there she stands
4.	Will not please you sit	a. and look at her
5.	I said Fra pandolf by design	a. for never read strangers like you that pictured countenance

6.	But to myself they turned	a. and seemed b. as they would ask me c. if they durest d. how such a glance came there
7.	“since none puts by the curtain I I have drawn for you”	a. but i
8.	Not the first are you	a. and ask thus
9.	Sir it was not her husband’s presence only	a. called that spot of joy
10.	Perhaps Fra pandlof chances to say	a. her mantle laps over my lady’s wrist b. paint must never hope to reproduce c. such stuff d. and cause enough for calling up that spot of joy
11.	She had a heart	a. how I shall say
12.	She liked she looked on	a. her looks went every where
13.	It was all one	a. the dropping of the day b. broke in the orchard for her c. my favour at her breast d. she rode with
14.	All and each would draw from her	
15.	She thanked man	a. but thanks somehow b. I know not how
16.	She ranked my gift of nine hundred years old name	a. who`d stoop to blame
17.	Had you skill in speech	a. which I have not b. to make your will quite clear
18.	Here you miss	a. there you exceeded the mark b. and make excuse
19.	Then would be some stooping	a. I chose never to stoop
20.	She smiled	a. I passed her
21.	But who passed without much of the same smile	
22.	This grew	a. I gave commands b. Then all smiles stooped together
23.	There she stands as if alive	
24.	Wil` t you please rise	a. we will meet the company below
25.	I repeat	a. your masters known munificence
26.	At starting is my object	
27.	We will go together	

28.	Taming a sea horse	a. thought a rarity
29.	Clause of Innsbruck	

It is note-worthy that in the first part, the very first clause gives us the idea of whom the poem is about. In the very clause, material process i.e. painting is going on, where as dutchess is shown in a passive role. Then in clause 2 and 3, the narrator emerges in the role of an actor. In clause 4, the messenger is made an actor and censor as he Is the being upon Duke has to make an influence. In clause 5, the Duke comes across as an actor as well as decision maker about the painter. In clauses 6, 7 & 8, the Duke shows his superiority as all turn towards him to know the reason of duchess's smile. She is reduced to passivity and servility.

In second part named justification, the narrator tries to justify the killing of his wife to make a favourable impression upon the messenger. He evaluates and makes judgments. In clause 9, the Duke hints at infidelity of duchess as he reasoned out that it was every ones presence that brought joy to her. In clause 10, the Duke assumes that perhaps the reason behind duchesses smile is pandolf's compliment. In clause 11 'had' is a relational process and 'she' is the carrier who possesses the 'heart' which is, getting easily impressed and gladden In clause I I (a) T is a sayer and 'say' is a verbal process In clause 12 'liked' is a behavioral process as 'she' is the behavior. In clause 12(a) 'her looks' refers to sensor as 'went' is a mental process. In clause 13 'was' is a relational process and 'it' is in the role of carrier and attribute assigned to it is 'all one'. Clause 13(a) is a material process as in this a favour which duke does at duchess breast is talked about. In clause 13(b), 13(c) 'dropping' and 'broke' are material processes respectively. In clause 13(d) 'she' is in the role of an actor as 'rode' is a material process. In clause 14 'all and each' are again in the role of actor as 'draw' is a material process. In clause 15 and 15(a) 'she' is in the role of sayer and 'thanked' is a verbal process. In clause 15(b) 'know not' is a mental process a 'I' is a sensor. In clause 16 'she' is the sensor as 'ranked' is a mental process. In clause 16(a) again 'who' is a sensor as 'stop' is a mental process. In clause 17 'had' is a possessive relational process as 'You' is a carrier and attribute assigned to it is 'skill in speech'. In clause 17(a) 'have not' is again a relational process. In clause 17(b) 'to make' is a mental process. In clause 17(c) 'say' is a verbal process and all in quotes from the verbiage. In clause 18 and 18(a), mental process is going and in clause 18(b) made is a verbal process. In clause 19 'stooping' is a mental process. In clause 19(a) 'I' is a sensor and 'chuse' in a mental process. In clause 20 'smiled' is a behavioral process as 'she' is in the role of 'behavior'. In clause 20(a) T is the actor as 'passed' is a material process. In clause 21 'who' is an actor as 'passed' again is a material process. In clause 22, 22(a), 22(b) 'grew', 'gone' and 'stopped' are all material processes respectively. In this very clause complex, the actor involved in 22 is 'this' which refers to duchess behaviour of smiling, in 22(a) the actor is T who is narrator duke and in 22(b) the action of ending is done to 'all smiles' clause 23 'she' is the existent and the process involved is existential. In clause 24 and 24(a) 'rise' and 'meet' are material processes and 'you' and 'we' are actors respectively. In clause 25 duke assumes the role of sayer as 'repeat' is a verbal process. In clause 25(a) 'Is' is a relational process as 'master's known munificence is identifier which is identified with 'ample warrant'. In clause 26 'Is' is a relational process again in which 'my object' is a carrier which carries the attribute 'his fair daughter's self. In clause 26(a) T is a sayer as 'avowed' is a verbal process. In clause 27 'go' is a material process and 'we' is in the role of an actor. Again in clause 28 'taming' is a material process, the goal is 'sea-horse' and

actor is 'Neptune'. In clause 28(a) thought is a mental process. In clause 29 'clause of Innsbruck' is an actor as 'cast' is a material process.

### **INTERPRETATION**

It is noteworthy that in the first part, the very first clause gives us the idea of whom the poem is about. In this very clause material process i.e. painting is going on whereas duchess is reduced to the participant who acts as an agent or goal. Thus duchess is shown in a passive role. Then in clause 2 and 3 the narrator duke emerges in the role of an actor and shows his worth as well as love for art to the messenger in order to impress him as messenger's sole purpose of visiting him is to negotiate with him the marriage of count's daughter. In clause 3 the duchess is made the existent, a non- living entity who is made to stand on the wall or as a show piece by this patriarchal male society in order to impose their will as well as make out mean interpretations. Then in clause 4 the messenger is made an actor and sensor as he is the being upon whom duke has to make an influence. In clause 5 duke comes up as an actor as well as decision- maker regarding the appointment of a worthy person who could paint the portrait and in this very clause- complex the messenger is made the sensor who could not sense or perceive the reason behind the 'depth and passion' of duchess' glance. In clause 6,7,8 the duke shows his superiority as here in, he is the authority towards whom all inquiring eyes turned to ask the reason behind passionate looks of duchess. Further he points out that those inquiring eyes must possess the enough courage to question him, only then they could know the reason. In this first part the key thing is to orient messenger with the duchess as well as forewarned him regarding any flirtation on the part of his future wife. In this part the thing to be noted is that throughout the part not even once duchess comes up as an actor. She is reduced to passivity and servility to such an extent that even the reason behind her glances is judged upon by duke.

In the second part of the poem which is named Justification, the narrator- duke tries to justify himself regarding the killing of his wife in order to make favourable impression upon messenger so that his act of killing and his decision for remarriage appears to be reasonable. He evaluates and make judgments,- Interestingly in his evaluation, his duchess does not come up as an actor as she does in his reporting( In clause 9 duke hints at infidelity of duchess as he reasoned out that it was not her husband's presence only which brought joy into duchess cheek. In clause 10 duke assumes that perhaps the reason behind duchess' smile is making out of certain statements on the part of Fra- pandollfo here in he assumes the role of sayer but duchess remains a passive participant whose very expressions are judged upon by others. (in clause 11, gradually reaching towards his goal of proving the infidelity of duchess' the duke makes out further statements as in this clause her very heart is made the carrier who possesses the attribute of getting easily impressed by using a relational process. In clause 12 'she' i.e. duchess is made the behavior, a little evolution in her roll is carried out and also 'her looks' are made the sensor. [In clause 13 through a relational process duchess, is again degraded due to her lack of distinguishing between what is really worthwhile and what is not] In this very clause complex duke comes up as an actor as 'My favor' and duchess a passive participant i.e. goal' In clause 15 she comes up in the role of sayer. A further evolution occurs in her role in clause 16 as she becomes the sensor in giving equal ranks to all favors and it is this very reason which becomes the ultimate cause of her doom. In clause 17 by taking the help of relational process duke shows his inability of making her will clear

to others i.e. another justification which comes out in the disguise of superficial innocence. In clause 18 again duchess is reduced to a passive participant i.e. goal. In clause 19 the duke comes up in the role of sensor and in clause 20 duchess is made the behavior who used to smile and duke as an actor in its sub- pa However the entire procedure of justification which duke begins from clause 9 culminates in clause 22 i.e. This grew, I gave commands; Then all smiles stopped together. Here, duke comes up in the role of an actor, a jealous and vain aristocrat who in fit of jealousy gave orders of his duchess' assassination. But the justification which he gives in this very clause is 'This grew' i.e. her habit of smiling grew and it is only in order to get rid of her indecent habit he took that step. Thus proves himself to be an innocent, helpless being. Simultaneously his speech is intended to convey to the messenger that his future wife must have a sense of decorum and dignity unlike his last duchess. Thus we see in this entire part there is constant evolution in duke's role from on observer and reporter to an evaluator and judge which we call in terms of transitivity as sensor and sayer and then from these positions to role of an actor On the contrary, in first part duchess becomes existent for once and a passive participant throughout. In the second part she becomes a sensor in clause 10, a carrier in clause 11, a sensor again in clause 12, a sayer in clause 15, a behavior in clause 20, a goal in clause 22 and, a life- less existent in clause 23. Therefore we see constant devaluation in her role from sensor to carrier, a carrier to behavior, a behavior to an agent, an agent to goal and finally a passive existent.

The third and final part is named Pretension. Here in, the narrator duke talked about prospects of his intended marriage with the daughter of the count. Here, duchess is not mentioned even once. Instead of duchess, the messenger assumes the role of an actor as well as an agent where as duke assumes the role of an actor, carrier. The count's fair daughter is also mentioned in this very part. In clause 24 both duke and messenger assume the role of actor in order to proceed their negotiation. In clause 25 and 26 duke becomes the sayer as he repeats in order to emphasize his point and cunningly adds and pretends that his primary concern is not the dowry but fair daughter of count. Then further in clause 27,28 and 29 the duke and messenger assume the role of actor and duke calls the attention of messenger to a bronze- statue of Neptune, the sea- god which shows the god riding and controlling a sea-horse. Thus duke tries to impress the envoy with his artistic tastes. Thus in this very part duke just pretends.

The summing up is that the poem checkmates the female's free and innocent nature under the cover of infidelity and indecency. Duchess who is a sensor, behavior, existent, an actor in 1st and 2nd part is reduced to an agent, a goal and non- entity towards the end of 2nd part. The narrator-duke who is an observer and a reporter in the first part is elevated to an evaluator, a judge, a sensor and ultimately an actor. Above all, this downplaying of female surgency and over playing of male dominance is shown fully just cable. Thus in this male- dominant society the innocence and refusal of women to surrender before men's will is looked down upon as infidelity on the part of women. The wheel of irony comes full circle when a trifle action of smiling on the part of duchess is taken as grave sin, a threat to duke's nine hundred years old family where as brutal act of killing in a fit of jealousy on the part of duke is taken as justicable.

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