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# A Pragma - Stylistic Analysis of Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess"

## ABSTRACT

This research paper sheds light on understanding dramatic texts using Grice's maxims. It presents Grice's maxims and how they can be violated or flouted in a conversation. The research paper aims at investigating the effectiveness of implicature and how it can be used in the interpretation of the literary texts; particularly those having dramatic monologues. It also aims at drawing special attention to the use of inferences in analyzing literary texts. The text under investigation is Robert Browning's poem "My Last Duchess". Grice's (1975) model of implicature is used in the analysis of the data of this study. The research paper concludes that Grice's maxims and the violation of these maxims are very powerful and effective in analyzing and interpreting literary works having dramatic monologue. The characters' failures to fulfil Grice's conversational maxims reflect the disagreement and failure in the relationship between them. The study also shows the poet's effective style in presenting his poem to the readers as he makes use of the features of dramatic monologue successfully.

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### **1.1. Introduction:**

The present study sheds light on the importance of understanding dramatic monologue while interpreting some literary works. Readers should be aware of the use of dramatic monologue and the role it plays in clarifying the poet's intention behind using such technique in certain literary genres. Understanding the features of dramatic monologue helps readers interpret such literary works successfully. Therefore, understanding a poem like Browning's "My Last Duchess" requires the readers' understanding of the features of dramatic monologue; a literary form that shows the effective style adopted by Robert Browning. Without understanding such features, readers may misinterpret such a literary work. Browning's characters often focus on one image. The use of ironic structure and the distance reveal the characters to the readers in a way that is contrary to their self-image. Stylistically, the present study focusses on uncovering the style used by Robert Browning in this poem. It also attempts to answer the following questions:

Can Grice's maxims and the violation of these maxims work as a powerful tool to uncover speakers' intention and what they imply?

Can these maxims and their violation be used effectively in analyzing literary works having dramatic monologue?

Can the poetic style as represented by dramatic monologue denote the poet?

### **1.2. Dramatic Monologue:**

Maehount (2007, p.11) states that Robert Browning is considered to be a well-known figure as he developed dramatic monologue as a new literary form. Abrams (1957, p. 25) mentions that this poetic form is first introduced and developed by Robert Browning. He (1957, p. 25) adds that this form in which a single character is speaking, resembles the soliloquy, but it differs from it in that the speaker in soliloquy expresses his thought; what he is thinking of, loudly, and that "the audience overhears him talking to himself". Finch (2010, p. 7) states that dramatic monologue is "the genre derives certain aspects of its effects from theater, namely the crucial elements of the poem's speaker as distinct from the poet and an audience for that speaker". Abrams (1957, p. 25) believes that the complete form of a dramatic monologue, as employed by Robert Browning, has the following characteristics:

(1) A single character (not the poet) presented speaking at a critical moment. For instance, Browning's dramatic monologue has various characters who act in first person speaker but they are still separated from the real author (Semino 1996, p. 02).

(2) This character addresses another one (sometimes more than one). In such case, the hearer's presence and who he is can be inferred from the speaker's speech.

(3) This form is contrived, so that it mainly concentrates on temperament as well as the character revealed by the dramatic speaker (the fictional speaker) including the fictional speaker's character.

Eliot (1975, p. 43) confirms that poetry is a powerful tool that can express emotional and non-emotional feeling, therefore, the technique that he employed in presenting some of his poems includes the use of both dramatic scenes and voices in order to describe the reality of society as it is. Easthope (1983, p. 333) mentions that the presence of scenes and voices is considered to be an effective tool for representing urban life and it also reflects an essential part of cinematic editing. In this case, the character feels free to do whatever he wants and that he is self-conscious of his own actual feeling and attitude. In dramatic monologues, “the speech is powerful and effective, but it is the exposition of the speaker’s thought and it acts as the stage to the performance of the speaker’s thought and speech.” (Moulavi Nafchi et al, 2015, p. 225). Kasher & Kasher (1976, p. 99) contend that it is very necessary to understand the speaker’s purposes and attitudes in order to understand his utterance in a certain context. Langbaum, as cited in Easthope (1983, p. 342), argues that consciousness in the dramatic monologue is present beyond what the speaker can say. This consciousness which is beyond the speaker's knowledge is represented by the attitudes and emotions of the reader who herself/himself is situated outside (or sometimes inside) the fictional world.

### **1.2.1. “My Last Duchess” as a Dramatic Monologue:**

Browning’s style is mainly represented by the use of dramatic monologue. According to Abrams, as cited in Hawlin (2002, p. 61), the poem “My Last Duchess” is termed a dramatic monologue because:

- (1) It contains three formal elements: an occasion, a speaker, and a hearer.
- (2) All its words are heard--and are intended to be heard--by an implied auditor.
- (3) In it we hear only one voice--and as is typical of pre-twentieth century verse that voice is male.
- (4) Rather than being “narrative” by virtue of its scansion and diction it appears to have been excerpted from the body of a verse drama such as a poem by Browning.

Hawlin (2002, p. 61) emphasizes that the dramatic monologue is a kind of genre between drama and lyric where the “process of perception, thought, and feeling are not (directly) the poet’s own, but that of an imagined character, and they come into being in a particular setting at a given moment in time: a dramatic context”. Hawlin (2002, p. 61) adds that one can think of the dramatic monologue as a one speech-play uttered by a single character from which one can comprehend the situation but through speech only.

### **1.3. Grice’s Conversational Maxims:**

Grice (1975, p. 42) was interested in “the everyday use of logic.” Formal logic represents a set of axioms that allows lawful deductions. A simple syllogism such as:

**All psycholinguists are clever.**

**Jim is a psycholinguist.**

Implies (makes the implication), that is, allows us to infer (or make the inference): **Jim is clever.**

Chapman & Routledge (2009, p. 87) state that the main components of Grice's theory are a speaker, a speech act, and a hearer. According to this theory, speech acts are governed by what is called Cooperative Principle (CP). Grice (1975, p. 45) formulates (CP) as "Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged."

The major (CP) leads to maxims and supermaxims of conversation. They are classified into four groups (Grice, 1975, pp. 45-46):

**Maxims of Quantity:**

- (1) "Make your contribution as informative as required."
- (2) "Don't make your contribution more informative than is required."

**Maxims of Quality: Be truthful.**

- (1) "Don't say what you believe to be false."
- (2) "Don't say what you lack adequate evidence for."

**Maxim of Relation: "Be relevant."**

**Maxims of Manner: "Be perspicuous."**

- (1) "Avoid obscurity of expression."
- (2) "Avoid ambiguity."
- (3) "Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity)."
- (4) "Be orderly."

Levinson (1983, p. 102) confirms that the main role of the maxims is to determine what interlocutors should do to speak efficiently, rationally and cooperatively: "they should speak sincerely, relevantly and clearly, while providing sufficient information." He (198, p. 103) adds that "Grice's point is not that we always adhere to these maxims on a superficial level but rather that, wherever possible, people will interpret what we say as conforming to the maxims on at least some level." Accordingly, "we, thus expect a person's contribution to interaction to be genuine, neither more nor less than is required, as well as clear and appropriate to the interaction." (Paltridge, 2008, p. 63). Archer, Aijmer, & Wichmann (2012, p. 51) believe that Grice is not telling interlocutors how to behave, rather suggesting that:

- (1) the conversation is governed by certain conventions;
- (2) hearers tend to assume speakers are confronting with these conventions; and
- (3) if speakers are not confronting, they have a good reason(s) not to.

#### **1.4. Implicatures:**

Chapman & Routledge (2009, p. 89) mention that Paul Grice made the first contributions to a theory of implicature that purports to describe "whatever is conveyed beyond what is said when a certain speech act is sincerely performed in a certain context of utterance and to show how to

derive what is conveyed but not said from the speech act and its context of utterance.”

Horn (2006, p. 3) admits that implicature is an element of speaker's meaning that is considered as part of speaker's utterance to mean something without saying it directly and without being part of what speaker said.

Violating any of the four maxims is the basis for inferences that can be drawn in conversation. Grice called such a violation *implicatures*. According to Grice (1975), types of implicatures depend on different ways of violating these maxims.

### 1.5. How to Violate Conversational Maxims:

Taghiyev (2017, p. 835) affirms that maxims can be violated in four different ways:

(1) Quietly and unostentatiously

**A: *Do you like John?***

**B: *Yes.***

When speaker B does not really like John, in this case, he definitely violates the maxim of quality.

(2) By opting out a maxim

**A: *Which meal do you prefer most?***

**B: *Sorry, that is confidential.***

Where speaker B does not provide explicit information. In this case, the maxim of quantity cannot be satisfied.

(3) Coping with a clash between maxims

**A: *Where can I find this book?***

**B: *Somewhere in the library.***

Accordingly, the speaker B does not know exactly where to find the book. Since the speaker B does not have complete information, he tries to provide less information to avoid violating the maxim of quality.

(4) Flouting a maxim in order to exploit it.

**A: *Mark is the manager of the company, isn't he?***

**B: *Uh-huh, and I am the headmaster of the school.***

Here, speaker B flouts the maxim of quality deliberately and he expects the listener to notice that. Clifton & Ferreira (1989, p. 22) elucidate that:

“Conversational implicatures are not tied to linguistic form. To make a conversational implicature, a listener must have already parsed the sentence, assigned it its literal interpretation, realized that additional inferences must be added to make it conform to the Gricean maxim, and determined what these inferences are. Such activity could not reasonably affect the initial steps of parsing.”

Flouting maxims to create implications can be a powerful and creative way to get across a point. Inference can provide more meaning with relatively little actual speech. Instead of wasting time expressing or verbalizing the actual sounds and interpreting what others said, violating



the maxims or implying what is said seems to be quicker. Therefore, saying a little while implying a lot is a way to communicate more efficiently.

### 1.6. Text Analysis and Discussion:

Browning's poem 'My Last Duchess' is one of the well – known poems in which the poet uses dramatic monologue effectively. The incident the poem dramatizes comes from the life of Alfonso II, the Duke of Ferrara in Italy during the sixteenth century and the way he addresses his wife, the duchess, who died only three years into her marriage. In writing his poem 'My Last Duchess', Browning successfully presents the features of dramatic monologue through the speech of the Duke and the way the Duke reveals his thoughts and attitudes. The analysis of this poem is based on the abovementioned violations of Grice's maxims which he called *implicatures* and it also uncovers the effectiveness of the poet's style and its expediency in interpreting such a literary work.

**Said:** (Line 1-2)

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,  
Looking as if she were alive. (Browning, 2011, p. 52)

The Duke of Ferrara, Alfonso II, here is addressing the Duchess as a wall painting "That's my last Duchess painted on the wall". He describes the personality of his wife as an object or a thing on a wall. In his speech, the Duke violates the maxim of quantity. He is giving more information than is required. He can refer to the Duchess directly by her name or as his wife. By giving more information about the Duchess he attempts to emphasize the sense of owning 'the Duchess'. By using the word "last", the Duke is accentuating the 'sequence' as if possessing women one after the other. He would like to emphasize the idea of not possessing women only, but possessing the paintings as well. The line suggests self-satisfaction. The poet's style exhibits the Duke's personality and attitude towards possessing women the last of whom is the Duchess. He also addresses the portrait of the Duchess as if she were still alive.

**Said:** (Line 3-5)

I call  
That piece a wonder, now; Fra Pandolf's hands  
Worked busily a day, and there she stands. (Browning, 2011, p. 52).

In these lines, the Duke provides less information than what is expected. So, maxim of quantity has been violated. He is not clear in addressing the duchess whether he is addressing the Duchess herself or addressing the portrait itself. Maxim of quality has also been violated deliberately. Therefore, he is not telling the truth rather predicting to do so. He tries to delude the envoy with his discernment. He believes that only work of art can remind him of the beauty of the wonder of the past. The Duke was egotistically insensitive to the living beauty before him when the Duchess was alive. Now, after the death of the Duchess, he finds it a wonder as it has been transformed into a timeless, ageless beauty that only a work of art can contain. The poet shows the Duke's admiration in the work made by Fra Pandolf's hands by describing the latter's hard work in

portraying the Duchess. The Duchess being live in a portrait, the Duke considers this a “wonder”.

**Said: (Line 6-14)**

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. (Browning, 2011, p. 52).

The Duke violates the maxim of manner since he is not clear when he addresses the Duchess without referring to her as a person or as a portrait while talking. He addresses the portrait as a living person. He also addresses the curtains which means that he is flouting the maxim of manner; he addresses the portrait while implying the features of the duchess as a person. By expressing the exact details of the Duchess, he is trying to make the portrait look as if it is real. The Duchess's look causes *ignorant* observers, if they *dare*, to look as if they would ask Ferrara, and only Ferrara, because the portrait is curtained off, and only he can pull back the curtain to reveal it, just what elicited that “passion” in her. The Duke, in fact, has no evidence of the “passion” he is talking about. So, he is violating the maxim of quality. In this case, the speaker, the Duke, talks directly to Fra Pandolf to reveal his intention and feeling to deliberately neglect the Duchess. Using such a style makes it easy to predict the speaker's personality.

**Said: (Line 15-21)**

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.” (Browning, 2011, p. 52)

The Duke is providing more information than is required when he describes the relationship between the Duchess and someone else. In his speech, he violates the maxim of quantity by giving more information rather than telling the sort of the Duchess' relationship with someone else directly. This also reflects a violation of the maxim of the manner in that the Duke lacks the evidence of having his own power over the Duchess. Frà Pandolf might have observed that the Duchess should shift her mantle up her arm somewhat to show more of her wrist, its skin being attractive; reflecting her relationship with someone else. Speaking directly is an effective style used by the poet to uncover what the speaker wants to

convey to his hearer. So, the Duke accused the Duchess as having an affair with someone else.

**Said: (Line 22-24)**

Such stuff

Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough

For calling up that spot of joy. (Browning, 2011, p. 52)

The Duke confirms that the Duchess arouse the feeling of joy for any person or man; not only the feeling of the Duke. He says that without providing enough information about what he says. The Duke, in his speech, breaks the maxim of quantity by not giving adequate information about the reason behind describing the Duchess in these words. Again, as a direct style of loading accusations against others, the poet affirms that the speaker or the Duke talks about the Duchess as having affairs with others. The Duke describes her as practising that intentionally by means of arousing the feeling of joy in others.

**Said: (Line 25-35)**

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 favour 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. (Browning, 2011, p. 53)

The Duke here is providing more information than is required just to show how infidel his wife was. He breaks the maxim of quantity again. He describes the Duchess as insincere when he says that her eyes move here and there and that he is interested in her bosom to state that she is insincere. He also adds that the courtier's gift of some cherries and the white mule that she rode represent the infidelity of the Duchess. This also reflects that the Duchess pays no special attention to the Dukes' trial to attract her attention. The Duke's deliberate negligence and accusation of the Duchess as being infidel represents the effectiveness of the style used by the poet to reveal the real states and feelings of his characters; the Duke and the Duchess.

**Said: (Line 36-39)**

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. (Browning, 2011, p. 53)

The Duke attempts to attract the Duchess attention by repeating and giving more information just to emphasize the fact that she never pays any



attention to him. He also breaks the maxim of quantity again. The Duchess ignorance of the Duke's trials to attract her attention makes him give more excuses and reasons to show that. He tries to give her precious gifts however she ignores whatever he brings her. Again, the same style is used by the poet to confirm the complete breakdown of the relationship between the Duke and the Duchess.

**Said: (Line 40-49)**

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 disgusts me; here you miss,  
Or there exceed the mark”—and 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 . (Browning, 2011, p. 53)

The Duke admits that he is not skilful in his speech but in fact he is. Though he is not telling the truth; breaking the maxim of quality, he says he is not skillful. His speech shows that he is very skillful in talking to the Duchess and in describing her as well. The Duchess wore her feeling openly unlike the Duke who said nothing to her about what he feels. He does not want to lower himself to her level. When he describes her as missing or exceeding the “mark”, Ferrara uses archery describing the Duchess as if she was one of his soldiers, competing in a competition for prizes (his name). The Duchess herself was the prize. This represents the poet's style in showing the Duke's complete disgust of the Duchess because of her ignorance of his own feeling in spite of her skillfulness in speech, hence showing his complete disobedience to “stoop”.

**Said: (Line 50-53)**

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. (Browning, 2011, p. 54)

The Duke describes the Duchess that she smiled on him, whenever he “passed” her. He says that she shares the same smile with anyone else. The Duke here does not break any maxim. He says the truth with sufficient information clearly. This, of course, reveals the extent of the Duke's jealousy and disapproval of his last Duchess's behaviour. He expresses the conflict that caused him to ‘command’ an end to these blushes. Ferrara is outrageous and jealous so that his anger is shifted to the Duchess herself. The poet uncovers the Duke's true personality and temperament. At the same time, he expresses how the Duke looks at Ferrara as being jealous and outrageous.

**Said: (Line 54-56)**

There she stands  
As if alive. Will't please you rise? We'll meet  
The company below, then. (Browning, 2011, p. 54)

The Duke is not very clear since he is asking the Duchess to rise again to express to her his satisfaction. He is violating the maxim of quantity by not providing sufficient information about his real feeling. He talks to the portrait of the Duchess as if he is talking to a live person. Providing less information than expected, the Duke speaks directly to the Duchess requesting her to meet again or to meet the audience. The Duke returns to perplexity he suffers from; he addresses the portrait of the Duchess as if talking to the Duchess herself. This style is adopted by the poet on purpose to expose the characters' disposition.

**Said: (Line 57-62)**

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. (Browning, 2011, p. 54)

Breaking the maxim of quality, the Duke does not tell the truth. He pretends that the Count's "fair daughter's self" is his "object." He is wondering if this daughter too be an object like his own last Duchess. He treats women as "objects" that he can possess and keep for his own joy. The Duke uses words like "gift," "munificence," "ample warrant," "disallowed," "company," and—perhaps most significantly—"dowry." Just to show that he shifts from art to reality. Stylistically speaking, the personality of the Duke in treating women as objects is reflected clearly in these lines as the poet intends to expose the Duke's behavior.

**Said: (Line 63-66)**

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! (Browning,  
2011, p. 54)

Power is also reflected in what the Duke says. Neptune and the Duke have the same power as the Duke attempts to say. They both have the power of possessing and dominating what is natural and beautiful. He is making a kind of comparison between his taming of the Duchess and Neptune's taming of the sea horse. He provides very few information; breaking the maxim of quantity, in showing the real similarity he is seeking between his work of art (the portrait of his last Duchess) and the art of the seahorse as a symbol of brutal male domination of nature and beauty. The poet's style shows the Duke's love of being authoritative; the Duke here exposes himself as if having Neptune's power.

### **1.7. Conclusions:**

The analysis of this poem reveals the importance of dramatic monologue as a means of convincing others and which reflects at the same time the poet's style. Regardless of all the attempts that the Duke makes in persuading the Duchess to pay him attention, the Duke fails to achieve his goal. The Duchess' refusals of the Duke and all his attempts imply that she is unwilling to co-operate in a conversation whose purpose is courtesy and satisfaction (that she is opting out). This can be implied from the Duke's speech throughout the whole poem. He tries several times to draw her attention to what he desires and to make her involved in a conversation but all his attempts were in vain. Her continuous refusal of whatever he does makes the Duke speaks indirectly as a technique for face-saving. This reflects the influential style of Robert Browning in exposing the characters of his poem; whether directly or indirectly. He makes use of the whole features of dramatic monologue successfully to show the speaker's state, intention, temperament and personality.

The characters' failures to fulfil Grice's conversational maxims reflect the disagreement and failure in the relationship between them. The Duke violates some of the conversational maxims particularly the maxims of quantity and quality to allude others by not providing sufficient information and not telling the truth. To sum up, this study has successfully shown that this particular poetic style, namely 'Dramatic Monologue', represents Robert Browning. Ultimately, it shows the powerful use of the poet's style in presenting his poem "My Last Duchess" in addition to the effective use of implicature; violation of Grice's maxims, in analyzing and interpreting literary works having a dramatic monologue.

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