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DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF THE DRAMATIC MONOLOGUES OF ROBERT BROWNING

Abstract: The Victorian period was a time of great change in all areas, as well as time of introduction of new ideas, concepts and technologies, which challenge the traditional ideas and values. This set the stage for a contest and dialogue between a multitude of various discourses within the intellectual, scientific and political life of the period. The literature of the time also reflected this vibrant debate of ideas and voices, which can be seen in the prodigious literary output of the Victorian era. One of the genres which most reflected this and which was most productive for the dialogue between the various social, ideological, scientific and class discourses was the dramatic monologue. The most famous author of this genre was Robert Browning, which is why we have chosen his dramatic monologues as the subject of our analyses in this paper. The aim of the paper will be to show how the dramatic monologue as a genre is used to present the various discourses and voices of Victorian society and their interaction, as well as how R. Browning uses it as a forum to discuss some of the most pressing issues of the time, namely, religious, social, scientific, etc.

Keywords: Victorian period, Robert Browning, dramatic monologue, discourse, discourse analysis

1. Introduction

Even though discourse analysis has developed as a rather more of a linguistic discipline and approach, it's essential resource material—language and texts, make it quite flexible and open to an interdisciplinary approach and application in many other fields. That is why discourse analysis has proven really productive in the analysis of literary works and the historical and social conditions in which they are created, received and interpreted. Every genre of literature has its own rules, principles, themes and registers which in conjunction with the historical, ideological and societal factors of the period in which it is created, determine the discourses which it includes. The more stable the historical period it is, the more fixed and stable is the discourse of the literary genre is. This explains, for example, the stability of the epic discourse which was the predominant literary genre of the pre-Renaissance medieval period, subduing and silencing most other everyday genres and discourses, as Bakhtin calls them, which are present and vibrant in society, but



are not represented in the dominant literary genre of its period. However, in periods which experience great political, economic, social and technological change, the fixed and official structures, forms and institutions which constitute and represented the official identity of the period and society also face changes that lead to their weakening and transformation.

One such period was the Victorian period, which came at the apex of the industrial revolution which brought about great advancement in technology, but also great changes and transformations in society. The new scientific breakthroughs lead to the undermining of old and established truths about the origin of man and his world that were mostly based on religion, which also contributed to the weakening of faith in society. The new inventions in production and transport changed the perception of the dimensions of the world; the new geological knowledge changed the notions about how old the world is, while the movement from an agrarian to a more industrial and urban life lead to changes in the organization of society and its ideas and values. The new role of Great Britain as the economic and political leader in Europe and the world brought about a new sense of identity and empowerment, even though the means through which this was achieved also forced society to re-evaluate its ethics and values. All this changes inevitably were reflected in the literature of the period, which saw the weakening and demotion of some genres such as poetry and drama, while prose and especially the novel were taking up the leading place as the main literary genres that reflected and formed the identity of the Victorian period. With it, the period saw the emergence of new literary and societal discourses that were trying to find their place alongside the previously dominant and prevalent discourses.

The work of Robert Browning best represents the great changes in the Victorian period, as well as the main issues and doubts that plagued and tortured Victorian men and women. His output is versatile and profoundly erudite, traditional and experimental, conservative and innovative, of its time and in a sense looking into the future. This duality is also embodied in his main poetic form—the dramatic monologue, which is a hybrid form between drama and poetry, deriving its origin from the monologues and soliloquies of Elizabethan drama, but preserving the unity of the poetical form. Even though it preserved the single narrating subject of the Romantic period, it differed in that it didn't represent the lyrical subject of the author, but a dramatic personae in the vein of drama. The split of the dramatic personae from the subject of the author already allowed for the presence of two different voices and discourses, while the heritage of the drama genre also allowed the representation of other personages into the poem, which were addressed by the dramatic personae. This novelty also allowed for the introduction of a multiplicity of discourses, out of which none is truly dominant, due to the unresolved dominance between the voice and views of the dramatic personae and that of the author. That is why the dramatic monologue was seen as a step forward from the essentialising tendencies of Romantic lyrical poetry, as Glennis Byron states that it is a form, which “emerges primarily in reaction to Romantic lyricism and Romantic theories of poetry” (Byron 2003:3). Furthermore, it is also a very conducive poetic form which serves as the medium and arena for the dialogue and interaction of the various social forces and

discourses. Furthermore, it served as a place where Browning could try to illustrate, illuminate, reflect and discuss about the issues and dilemmas facing Victorian men.

Born out of the apparent inability of classical and romantic poetry to respond satisfactorily to the shifting moral and societal landscape of British society, the dramatic monologue was developed by the two most prominent Victorian poets, Tennyson and Browning and was very popular among both poets and readers of the period. Browning especially expounded and incorporated the main issues facing Victorian times and his poetry was seen by the Victorian public as a true exponent of its values and virtues, to the extent that they formed special reading societies devoted to the discussion of his poetry. That's why we think that it would be worthwhile and enlightening to carry out discourse analysis of 4 of his dramatic monologues: *My Last Duchess*, *Fra Lippo Lippi*, *Caliban Upon Setebos* and *A Toccata of Gallup's*. We hope to show how Browning, through the interplay of the various discourses, both showed the dialogue between the established and new ideas which through the loosened form and experimentation of the dramatic monologue foretell the new tendencies in poetry that would develop in the 20th century, but also embodied the values and principles of the Victorian period, though not in a demagogical or essentialising form, but in constant dialogue with the changing times.

In our analysis of the various discourses, their interaction and the meaning of their treatment in the dramatic monologues of Browning, we shall apply the principles of critical discourse analysis, as first introduced by Fairclough and Wodak (1997), which define that:

- Social and political issues are constructed and reflected in discourse
- Power relations are negotiated and performed through discourse
- Discourse both reflects and reproduces social relations
- Ideologies are produced and reflected in the use of discourse.

We will also analyse the discourses of the poems on the level of the syntax, language, the historical context and the relation between the speaker, auditor and reader.

2. Analysis of the Dramatic Monologues

The four dramatic monologues that we have chosen are concerned with main social and political issues of the time, especially those concerning faith and religion, the worrying effects of consumerism and capitalism, the changing social relations, such as the emergence of the middle class as well as the moral issues which arose with the changes in society. What is important in our analysis is to show the various discourses and codes which Browning engenders in the poems, how they reflect the different ideologies and the varied positions of those ideologies in Victorian society. We shall also see how different registers are used and to what effect, to both hide, elucidate and problematise social relations and institutions, as well as reflect the changing hierarchy of the registers, classes and values in Victorian society. We shall

consider the different discourses on the level both of syntax, language and on the level of the overall form of the dramatic monologue to see how Browning both incorporates them and uses them to present and reconstruct the processes that went on in Victorian society. His monologues are also a place of dialogue between the past in the guise of the historical characters and periods that he uses as the background for his poems and the present through the incorporation of the present day issues that peer through the ruptures in the language of the characters which is transformed by modernity and its registers and discourses.

2.1. My Last Duchess

My Last Duchess posits through the character of the Duke of Ferrara both the changing fortunes of the landed aristocracy in Great Britain, but also discretely speaks about the subordinate position of women in Victorian society, as well as the more metaphysical issue of the presence of evil in the modern world and the moral dilemma whether wealth can be used as justification for its non-punishment. The dramatic monologue *My Last Duchess* consists of several different discourses with their respective codes: the love poem, the mystery discourse, Victorian morality, the detective discourse which lies in the interpretation of the reader, the discourse of painting, the code of chivalric poetry.

The fact that it takes place in the past, first posits the reader in a comfortable position of expecting the already known discourses and issues that bring with them already resolved and fixed meanings. However, the presence of modern language in the context of an antiquated character and the past, puts the reader on his or her toes and makes him question the veracity and truthfulness of the story and the speech. The dramatic monologue as a form and as a genre not only allows, but also demands the reader to question the words, meanings and motives of the *dramatis personae* and all social values and ideas they represent. This is especially emphasized by the sense of a detective mystery that pervades the poem, alluding to the investigative and interpretative role of the reader, who is not only given the task to deduce whether a murder had occurred, but also is there to give his or her judgment on the various conflicting discourses and the issues discussed in the poem.

The discourse of painting is symbolized by the portrait of the Last Duchess, but also in the attempt of the Duke to frame the perception and representation of the Duchess by society, as is the case with the image, representation and identity of women in patriarchal and male dominated societies. However, the chance to view the portrait by lifting the curtain that covers the portrait in its domestic safety and imprisonment also allows the reader to take a look at the truthfulness of the story and the image of the Duchess. Just as the strict framework of the story that the Duke thinks he controls gradually loosens through the narration of the Duke, thus also the strict control over the image of the Duchess which also symbolizes Victorian women also loses its grip, as it can be seen in the following lines (Browning 1994:318):

*"...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".*

This inadequacy and incongruence is a major operative factor in the dramatic monologues of Browning, serving his purpose of involving the reader in the interpretative process, which is not handed to the reader on a plate with the fixed and established rules and strict expectations of the literary genres of the past. The next marker which warns the reader that s/he must be on the lookout is the speech of the Duke which starts forcefully and assuredly, but slowly starts to break into hesitations and stuttering, revealing the true emotions of the speaker that he tried to hide through the formalities of speech. This is all shown in the breaks and failures of the syntax, a common method used by Browning in the constructions of his characters and the narrative and language constructions of his poems, which is visually obvious in this part of the poem (Browning 1994:318):

*"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."*

Finally, the speech, as well as the person cannot bear the burden of lying and deception, as well as the scrutiny of the perceptive eye of the reader. The established values and norms disintegrate under the shock of revelation and the true character of the false values and the true power relations between the aristocracy and the lower classes, as well as between man and women that have existed both several centuries ago, so starkly and succinctly portrayed by Browning (Browning 1994:318):

*"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."*

This moment of truth lasts for only a brief time, before the old masquerade and pretended civility is restored, but Browning, as we can see, uses short and terse lines to paint this sudden and revealing confession which fully exposes the harshness and cruelty of the patriarchal system with regards to women.

2.2. A Toccata of Galuppi's

A Toccata of Galuppi's includes the discourses of history, music, especially in the theme and its form, the morality of past and present civilizations—Venice and the Victorian, the decadence of the past and present, the conflict between the

discourses of science and art. This dialogue between the past and the present, as well as the dialogue within the Victorian society is presented through the presence of three characters, the narrator scientist from the 19th century, the composer and musician Galuppi, as well as the voices of Galuppi's audience at a ball. However, the voice of the author, Browning, is also present, being the organizing force behind the construction of the dialogue and the poem, as well as the voice of the reader who has the role of interpreting the poem. The structure of the poem is not in the more traditional blank verse, but in rhyming tercets with frequent caesura in the middle of the line, as if mimicking a musical composition. The lines are 15 syllables long, adding to the dreamlike sense of the remembrance of the past, a memory which is often interspersed with lines of dialogue of the party revellers listening to Galuppi. The organizing voice of the poem is the voice of the scientist who is trying to cast a rigid and judgmental eye on the frivolity of the 18th century and its decadence, but his musings are constantly interjected and interrupted by both the voices of the party guests and their prosaic discussions and flirtations and the music and the voice of the composer, Galuppi. We can see this interplay and interaction of the voices within the stanzas, but also between the subsequent stanzas (Browning 1994:220):

*"Were you happy?" — "Yes." — "And are you still as happy?" — "Yes. And you?"
— "Then, more kisses!" — "Did I stop them, when a million seemed so few?"
Hark, the dominant's persistence till it must be answered to!*

*So, an octave struck the answer. Oh, they praised you, I dare say!
"Brave Galuppi! that was music! good alike at grave and gay!
"I can always leave off talking when I hear a master play!"*

Browning uses these interchanging voices to portray the attempt of science to be the ultimate judge and describer of life and society, a role that was once taken up by art, but which mantle is firmly taken up by science in the Victorian 19th century. This is a recurring theme in Browning, as will see with the example of Fra Lippo Lippi, but here he reveals that the assured and stable voice and judgment of science based on reason still fails before the ultimate secret of life, that is death (Browning 1994:220).

*Then they left you for their pleasure: till in due time, one by one,
Some with lives that came to nothing, some with deeds as well undone,
Death stepped tacitly and took them where they never see the sun.*

*But when I sit down to reason, think to take my stand nor swerve,
While I triumph o'er a secret wrung from nature's close reserve,
In you come with your cold music till I creep thro' every nerve.*

This is a feat much better served by music, i.e. art which both can embody, portray the nuances of life, as well as its trivialities, but it can also serve as comfort, something which science in Victorian times was not able to do. Yet, the ultimate knowledge about the state and fate of the soul lies in religion, in the Christian faith, which the science of the day undermined, (Browning 1994:220).

*Yours for instance: you know physics, something of geology,
"Mathematics are your pastime; souls shall rise in their degree;
"Butterflies may dread extinction,—you'll not die, it cannot be!

"As for Venice and her people, merely born to bloom and drop,
"Here on earth they bore their fruitage, mirth and folly were the crop:
"What of soul was left, I wonder, when the kissing had to stop?

"Dust and ashes!" So you creak it, and I want the heart to scold.
Dear dead women, with such hair, too—what's become of all the gold
Used to hang and brush their bosoms? I feel chilly and grown old.*

Browning does not resolve this issue, but leaves it to the ultimate judge in literature, the reader. It is up to the Victorian reader to best resolve the dilemma of which two main fields of human thought and achievement that grappled for the attention and faith of the Victorian citizen – science and religion – provides the best hope and reassurance in the face of death. Here we have another great example how Browning uses the dramatic monologue to posit the different ideas and discourses of his time within a historical framework to once again enable the one of the debates with great ramifications for the contemporary Victorian reader.

2.3. Caliban Upon Setebos

Caliban upon Setebos, Or Natural Theology in the Island speaks about one of the most conflicting issues of the Victorian period, that is the Copernican revolution and effect of Darwin's theory of evolution on religion and faith. The poem includes the discourse of nature, scientific discussion, biblical discourse, discourse of nature, Shakespeare, the hierarchy and class structure of British society the discourse of drama in the form of the monologue with the prologue and epilogue.

The main narrator is Caliban, the unnatural creature from Shakespeare's *Tempest*, which immediately introduces the expectations of the Shakespearean discourse to the reader, both thematically and language-wise. The reader enters the reading and interpretation of the poem with the knowledge of the play *The Tempest* and the character of Caliban, who is uneducated and speaks in a creole and illiterate language, but who also questions the authority of the ruler of the island, Prospero. Browning uses this linguistic specificity of Caliban's, yet he also invests him with greater eloquence within those limits. This is partly due to the fact that he also grants him the honour of meditating on the main ontological issue, where does man come from and who is the originator, God or Nature, as can be seen in the following lines (Browning 1994:492):

*'Thinketh He made it, with the sun to match,
But not the stars; the stars came otherwise;
Only made clouds, winds, meteors, such as that:
Also this isle, what lives and grows thereon,
And snaky sea which rounds and ends the same.*



The Christian God and religion are represented through the pagan god Setebos, who was the god of his mother, Sycorax, the previous ruler of the island. However, he also hints at the existence of a previous entity, Quite, the nothingness of both originary myths and of religious non-belief. Caliban represents the brute new forces and classes who want to disrupt the old order with their new ideas, as well as the evolution man of Darwin's theory, who dares to question with his existence the existence of god, as Browning portrays him in his primitive monologue (Browning 1994:492):

*“Oh, He hath made things worthier than Himself,
And envieth that, so helped, such things do more
Than He who made them! What consoles but this?
That they, unless through Him, do nought at all,
And must submit: what other use in things?”*

His musings take him from blind obedience of God to questioning his authority, to at last denying his existence. However, divine authority in the form of thunder prove that divine existence is both beyond doubt and at the same time needed by humans, regardless of the sometimes unfathomable cruelty and violence of the world which is his creation (Browning 1994:492):

*“While myself lit a fire, and made a song
And sung it, “What I hate, be consecrate
To celebrate Thee and Thy state, no mate
For Thee; what see for envy in poor me?”
Hoping the while, since evils sometimes mend,
Warts rub away and sores are cured with slime,
That some strange day, will either the Quiet catch
And conquer Setebos, or likelier He
Decrepit may doze, doze, as good as die.”*

With regards to this dramatic monologue, we can conclude that Browning deftly uses the literary source and all its historical and semantic weight to frame the discussion about the existence of god and the doubts which Darwin's ideas brought to the faith and beliefs of Victorian men.

2.4. Fra Lippo Lippi

Fra Lippo Lippi uses a real historical figure, the Italian Renaissance painter who was one of the first painters who introduced innovations to the strict rules of medieval religious painting and helped bring in the spirit of the new time. In a sense, he embodies the spirit of Browning and the novelties and ideas that he wanted to bring into poetry which was harnessed by the strict rules of neoclassical and romantic poetry, an idea embodied in his use and practice of the dramatic monologue. Fra Lippo Lippi also represents the free spirit of art which defies the strict official rules of morality, symbolically the restrictive morality of British and Victorian era England. The discourses involved here are that of the Renaissance, the Victorian

period, Christianity and its ideas, rules and morality, as well as the discourse of art and painting.

The strict Victorian morality is represented by the morality and ethics of the Christian monks and church. Through the discourse of Fra Lippo Lippi, but also of the monks in his order, Browning exposes the hypocrisy of the established social institutions and the restrictions they pose both on ordinary people and the arts and artists (Browning 1994:427):

*One fine frosty day,
My stomach being empty as your hat,
The wind doubled me up and down I went.
Old Aunt Lapaccia trussed me with one hand,
(Its fellow was a stinger as I knew)
And so along the wall, over the bridge,
By the straight cut to the convent. Six words there,
While I stood munching my first bread that month:
"So, boy, you're minded," quoth the good fat father
Wiping his own mouth, 'twas refecton-time,—
"To quit this very miserable world?
Will you renounce" . . . "the mouthful of bread?" thought I;
By no means! Brief, they made a monk of me;*

The contrast here is between the words of the good father who prepares Fra Lippo to be initiated into the Christian life which requires the rejection of all worldly pleasures, which is contrasted with his ruddy health and fat physique which is hardly a result of a life of restraint and abnegation. Furthermore, the hypocrisy of the official representatives of the Christian church and its discourse is also challenged and mocked by the Lippi's cheeky interjection that he has no plans to renounce "the mouthful of bread" in this world. This intersection of the two discourses serves to emphasize the falseness of the official church discourse and practice in the Victorian period.

Another very important dialogue is the one between the restrictive classical and socially sanctioned views on art and the artist's desire to represent nature, life and truth as they are, realistically and true to life. This echoes Browning's artistic ideal and philosophy of poetry that attempted to break free from the restrictive ideas of classical poetry and Romanticism. The Priest as representative of the Church and its ideology demands that art should serve the principles and purposes of the church and renounce its secular interests or depictions (Browning 1994:427):

*"Ay, but you don't so instigate to prayer!"
Strikes in the Prior: "when your meaning's plain
It does not say to folk—remember matins,
Or, mind you fast next Friday!"*

The mentioning of the fast, besides the alliterative function, also serves to remind the reader of the hypocrisy of the fat monk who requires others to strictly follow the fast, while at the same time radiating from the sumptuous meals served

in the monastery. Yet, we are also aware of the strict moral and religious restrictions that were placed on art by the parochial and traditional British society, restrictions exemplified in the social ostracizing of his Romantic predecessors Byron and Shelley. Browning's response is transposed through the words of the Renaissance painter Fra Lippo Lippi, but it voices the views about art of the new age, about art depicting life in all its beauty and sensuousness, views which will be materialize mostly by one of the defining schools of art of the Victorian period – the Pre-Raphaelites (Browning 1994:492):

*“—The beauty and the wonder and the power,
The shapes of things, their colours, lights and shades,
Changes, surprises,—and God made it all!
—For what? Do you feel thankful, ay or no,
For this fair town's face, yonder river's line,
The mountain round it and the sky above,
Much more the figures of man, woman, child,
These are the frame to? What's it all about?
To be passed over, despised? or dwelt upon,
Wondered at? oh, this last of course!—you say.
But why not do as well as say,—paint these
Just as they are, careless what comes of it?
God's works—paint any one, and count it crime
To let a truth slip.”*

Fra Lippo Lippi is one of the liveliest and most energetic dramatic monologues of R. Browning, that teems with a variety of different discourses and best represents the process of the interaction and debate that occurs in Browning's monologues, reflecting the same process that was ongoing in Victorian society.

3. Conclusion

We hope that our paper has shown the various discourses and codes which Browning incorporated in his dramatic monologues and how they reflected the different ideologies and the varied positions of those ideologies in Victorian society. The four analysed dramatic monologues: *My Last Duchess*, *Fra Lippo Lippi*, *Caliban Upon Setebos* and *A Toccata of Galuppi's*, were concerned with the issues of faith and religion, the subordinate position of women in Victorian society, the metaphysical issue of the presence of evil in the modern, the issue of the loss of faith caused by the progress of science, as well as the question of art and the restrictions of the social and moral norms. We considered the different discourses on the level both of syntax, language and on the level of the overall form of the dramatic monologue. The critical discourse analysis of these dramatic monologues intended to depict how Browning, through the interplay of the various discourses, portrayed the dialogue between the established and new ideas in the Victorian period. Furthermore, we tried to show how the form and experimental nature of the dramatic monologue was

the ideal poetic form to embody the values and principles of the Victorian period, but also incorporate the new tendencies making it a poetic genre that is in constant dialogue with the changing times.

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ANALIZA DISKURSA DRAMSKIH MONOLOGA ROBERTA BRAUNINGA

Rezime

Viktorijanski period je bio doba velikih promena u svim oblastima, kao i vreme uvođenja novih ideja, pojmova i tehnologija koji prkose tradicionalnim idejama i vrednostima. Sve ovo je poslužilo kao osnova za nadmetanje i dijalog između velikog broja različitih vrsta diskursa u okviru intelektualnog, naučnog i političkog života tog doba. I književnost ovog perioda odslikavala je ovu živu debatu ideja i glasova, što se može videti i po izuzetnoj literarnoj produkciji Viktorijanskog doba. Jedan od žanrova koji je to najbolje prikazao i koji je najviše doprineo dijalogu između raznih društvenih, ideoloških, naučnih i klasnih diskursa bio je dramski monolog. Najpoznatiji pisac ovog žanra bio je Robert Brauning, zbog čega smo i izabrali da za predmet analiza u ovom radu uzmemo njegove dramske monologe. Cilj ovog rada je da pokaže kako se dramski monolog kao žanr koristi za prikaz različitih vrsta diskursa i glasova Viktorijanskog društva i njihove interakcije, kao i da prikaže način na koji ih R. Brauning koristi kao forum za diskusiju o nekim od najvažnijih pitanja tog doba, naime verskim, društvenim, naučnim, itd.

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