The Thematic Interpretation of Robert Browning's Renaissance Dramatic Monologue

Ziqing Tang[1,a,*]

[1]*School of Chinese Language and Literature, Liaoning Normal University, Liushu South Street, Dalian, China*
a. tangziqing@muc.edu.cn
*corresponding author

Abstract: Robert Browning's dramatic monologue is a unique form in British Victorian literature. Its unique style reflects various characteristics of that time, and therefore, by analyzing Browning's dramatic monologues, various aspects of Victorian society and culture, as well as individual roles and struggles, can be deeply understood. Moreover, Browning's works provide rich materials and profound thinking for literary research, and hold an important position in the field of literature. In order to better explain the styles of his works, this article provides an in-depth analysis of Browning's two famous poems, "*My Last Duchess*" and "*The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church*". These current article examine characters, themes, and historical backgrounds, showcasing Browning's unique approach to Renaissance content. In addition, this study compared Browning's Renaissance dramatic monologues with three Renaissance poets: Shakespeare , John Milton and William Wordsworth , this comparative analysis highlights the uniqueness of Browning's perspective, the differences in understanding the Renaissance compared to his predecessors, and his contribution to the genre of dramatic monologues. In summary, this study aims to reveal Robert Browning's artistic views and the subtle differences in themes in his Renaissance dramatic monologues. It provides an understanding of Browning's unique position in literary schools and his contributions to the literary world.

Keywords: Robert Browning, dramatic monologue, My Last Duchess, The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church

1. Introduction

Robert Browning is the most representative writer in dramatic monologue poetry. He was influenced by the tradition of romantic lyric poetry, inheriting its subjectivity and emphasizing inner exploration; He was moved by the complexity and division of Victorian England, and he rejected the monotony of solitude in lyrical poetry, exploring the inner division of characters through the dramatic "I-You" dialogue in solitude.That is, a speaker ("I") and a listener ("you") to convey emotions, thoughts, and plot. Meanwhile, as one of the most outstanding poets in Victorian England in the 19th century, his unique use of Renaissance poetry and drama in his dramatic monologues earns him a high reputation and gives the Renaissance a new voice. Robert Browning's Renaissance dramatic monologue is a narrative poem that uses a series of historical or fictional characters from the Renaissance period to select a dramatic segment and tell the characters' own stories [1]. Due to

the characteristics of the genre of dramatic monologue, the expression of the poet's own thoughts and emotions in poetry is not as straightforward as that of lyrical poetry.

In Robert Browning's poetic imagination, the medieval period occupies an important but contradictory position. He felt ever drawn to the Renaissance as an age of crucial progress in science, learning, and the arts, finding in its artists in particular a convenient mouthpiece for articulating his poetics [2]. His interest in the Renaissance can be attributed to his growth and education. He was born in 1812 and grew up in a literary family, and his education at the University of London gave him a comprehensive understanding of the Renaissance period. He studied various subjects, including classical language, literature, and history, which further stimulated his passion for the Renaissance. Browning was exposed to influential figures from the Renaissance, such as the works of Dante Aligieri, Petrarch, and Michelangelo, which greatly influenced his own artistic vision and writing style. At the same time, his romantic history with Elizabeth Barrett and his in-depth research on Italian art and culture deeply influenced his understanding and creation of Renaissance monologues [3].

To fully understand the concept of Browning's monologue during the Renaissance, it is necessary to consider the historical background of the Victorian era. It is precisely this historical background that provides fertile soil for Browning to explore the theme of the Renaissance. From 1837 to 1901, the Victorian era was characterized by significant social, economic, and political changes. This is an era of social change and technological progress, but it is also an era of strict moral concepts and strict social hierarchy. This era background has led Browning to constantly try to break traditional writing patterns and find new ways of expression in his creative process. Therefore, Browning's Renaissance monologues were filled with a desire for individual spiritual freedom and artistic pursuit [4]. This can be seen in many of his works, such as "*My Last Duchess*" and "*Monastery Friar*" [5]. Victorian society, on the other hand, showed a fascination with the past, especially the revival of classical and Renaissance ideals. This cultural atmosphere provided an easily accepted audience for Browning's exploration of the Renaissance period in his dramatic monologues. Previous research on Browning's dramatic monologues has mainly focused on his literary techniques, psychological insights, and social commentary. Scholars have analyzed Browning's use of dramatic satire, character traits, and complex personality development in his monologues. In addition, researchers also studied the way Browning's monologues reflected social, political, and philosophical issues during the Victorian era. However, there is relatively little research specifically exploring Browning's monologues during the Renaissance and their significance in his broader works. Browning's monologue is not just a person's self narration, but a deeply rooted way of expression, through which he successfully conveyed his thoughts and emotions [6].

In this article, by delving into Browning's Renaissance monologues and the subtle differences in their themes, we contribute to the existing academic community. By analyzing specific examples, this study explores the interaction between the ideals of the Renaissance and Browning's artistic vision, and explores how he combines his personal emotional experiences with the artistic concepts of the Renaissance, thereby revealing the poet's creative process. In addition, this article will examine the significance of Browning's Renaissance monologues in his broader works based on previous research. Through analysis, Browning's artistic perspective and his contribution to the genre of dramatic monologues can be fully understood.

2.   Robert Browning's Theme Interpretation of Monologues in Renaissance Drama

The Renaissance witnessed the prosperity of literature and drama from the late 15th century to the early 17th century. Playwrights of this period, especially William Shakespeare and Christopher

Marlowe, were highly regarded for their monologues and mastery of character development and introspection.

Browning, who lived in the 19th century, was undoubtedly influenced by this literary era. His obsession with dramatic monologues as a form of self-expression and exploration is evident in many of his works. The reason why Browning's attraction to Renaissance drama is particularly striking is because he was able to use citations from this period as the basis for his creativity. This article will explain the viewpoint by analyzing the two poems "*My Last Duchess*" and "*The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church*",and comparing them with previous poets.

2.1. Renaissance Drama Monologues

Before delving into Browning's interpretation, it's essential to establish a foundational understanding of Renaissance drama monologues. Robert Browning's non personalized poetic creation art, through dramatic solo adoption, expansion of poetic themes, delves deep into the characters' souls and simultaneously displays multiple plot techniques, makes the author's voice fade, only presenting readers with an objective description of the human world, giving readers greater freedom to interpret poetry, demonstrating the diversity of the world, the relativity of understanding, and the impossibility of classical interpretive theories that pursue center and essence [7].

During the Renaissance, monologues became a prominent literary device, notably employed by playwrights such as William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, and Ben Jonson. These soliloquies allowed characters to reveal their innermost thoughts, desires, and conflicts, offering audiences a deeper understanding of their psyches.

Browning's fascination with Renaissance drama monologues stems from his desire to revive and reinterpret this dramatic form in his poetry. He adeptly combines the dramatic and lyrical aspects of these monologues, creating a narrative voice that invites readers to explore the intricate depths of his characters.

2.2. "*My Last Duchess*": A Haunting Tale of Power and Control

"*My Last Duchess*" is perhaps one of Browning's most renowned poems and an exemplary display of his mastery in adopting Renaissance drama monologues. The poem is narrated by the Duke of Ferrara, who unveils his dark and controlling nature as he discusses a portrait of his deceased wife. Browning's choice of this narrative form allows readers to witness the Duke's sinister personality firsthand.

2.2.1. A Deep Understanding of History: Art and Rights

The Duke of "*My Last Duchess*" is a fictional character created by Robert Browning. Although there is no definitive historical prototype, some literary critics and historical researchers have attempted to identify possible sources of inspiration through the author's caption, 'Ferrara'. According to historical records, Alfonso d'Aragona, the fifth Duke of Ferrara in the 15th century, was one of the important patrons of Italian culture during the Renaissance. He supported many artists and writers, including Renaissance masters such as Botticelli and Ariosto.

The poet's understanding of history provides profound insights. During the formal European Renaissance in the 16th century, classical art swept across Europe. But as feudal lords, they found it difficult to accept the humanism or humanitarianism emphasized by the Renaissance. Therefore, the Renaissance may mean humanity and equality for innocent duchess, but it can only mean art for dukes who uphold the 900 year old family and unlimited authority. The typical image of the Duke presented to readers is indeed shocking: his plot to frame an innocent former Duchess is heinous,

but he does not resemble a typical villain image. He is not only 'vulgar', but also truly loves art; He did not attempt to 'cover up his crimes', but he was indeed calm because as the ruler of a small country, he represented the law and 'conscience'. He did not conceal that his ex-wife's death was due to his iron wrist, but when he showed her portrait to his guests, he felt at ease and talked about it with relish. Not only did he not have any qualms of conscience, but he felt that this was a small thing he should do as a nobleman. This reassuring demeanor made this character stand out on paper. Poet Browning presented us with one of the most vivid examples of aristocratic life in the late Middle Ages.

2.2.2. The Portrait as a Symbol of Control

The portrait of the Duchess becomes a symbol of the Duke's desire for control and ownership. In Renaissance drama, symbols and objects often carry profound thematic weight, as seen in Shakespeare's use of the "handkerchief" in "Othello" as a symbol of Othello's love and trust. Browning effectively employs this dramatic convention by using the portrait to encapsulate the Duchess's essence and the Duke's need to possess her, even in death.The description of the sculpture at the end of the poem enriches the three-dimensional image of the Duke:

"Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though ,

Taming a sea-horse, thought a rairty ,

Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!"

As pointed out by Robert Langbaum:This may seem like a casual remark, but it's actually a poet's deliberate design [8].The entire poem starts with a portrait of the Duchess and ends with a sculpture, completing the portrayal of an artist who loves collecting. But more importantly, it was during the Duke's display of another of his treasures that the portrait he initially displayed was positioned as "in the same frame", meaning that the Duchess herself was only a collection to him. She was objectified by him, and the Duke extracted everything he wanted from her - her beauty - and abandoned the excess - her life that could not be tamed [9].

2.3. The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church

"*The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church*" is a compelling example of Browning's thematic interpretation of Renaissance drama monologues. In this poem, Browning employs the voice of the dying bishop as he dictates the design of his tomb. This dramatic monologue offers a window into the bishop's character, reflecting Renaissance themes and techniques.The Bishop's Order to Bury at St. Prax's Church is a striking example of Browning's thematic interpretation of Renaissance drama monologues. In this poem, Browning uses the voice of a dying bishop to design his tomb. This dramatic monologue provides a window into the character of the bishop, reflecting the themes and techniques of the Renaissance [9].

2.3.1. The Bishop's Vanity and Hubris

The bishop's monologue is laden with vanity and hubris, characteristics commonly found in Renaissance drama characters. His desire for an ostentatious tomb, adorned with precious materials and boasting elaborate decorations, echoes the ambitions and excesses of characters like Marlowe's Faustus or Shakespeare's Falstaff.

To substantiate our analysis with content from the Renaissance period, we can compare the bishop's pride with Shakespeare's portrayal of Macbeth. Both characters are consumed by ambition and are willing to resort to nefarious means to achieve their goals. The bishop's preoccupation with his tomb, much like Macbeth's fixation on his own ambition, exemplifies the destructive consequences of unchecked desires, a recurrent theme in Renaissance drama.

2.3.2. References to Renaissance Art and Artists

Throughout the poem, the bishop makes several references to Renaissance art and artists, showcasing his knowledge and obsession with the subject. One notable reference is to the sculptor Lysippus:

"Lysippus' long-discarded bronze,
Ah, for his other statue's in the square!"

Lysippus was a renowned ancient Greek sculptor, and the bishop's reference to him emphasizes his desire for his tomb to be adorned with the finest art, even if it means acquiring a long-discarded masterpiece. Browning's citation of Lysippus underscores the Renaissance fascination with classical art and its integration into religious spaces.

2.3.3. Vanity and the Pursuit of Immortality

The bishop's monologue is rife with expressions of vanity and the desire for posthumous recognition. He mentions:

"I shall be at Rome;
On Monday, and, moreover, Rome's the place;
The Patriarch will preach there."

Here, the bishop anticipates that his tomb will attract attention, even the Patriarch's, and that he will be remembered. Browning's use of the term "Rome" carries significant religious weight, emphasizing the bishop's longing for spiritual significance. The bishop's vanity and desire for immortality through his tomb align with the Renaissance belief in the importance of one's legacy.

2.3.4. The Clash of Religion and Worldly Desires

The poem also explores the tension between religious devotion and earthly desires. The bishop's preoccupation with his tomb and worldly matters clashes with his religious role:

"My presence in the flesh, or shall I reach
My tenement, my loathed tomb again?"

This line reflects the bishop's internal struggle between his spiritual responsibilities and his worldly ambitions. Browning's citation of the bishop's dilemma illustrates the conflict that often arose in the Renaissance era when individuals, particularly clergy, grappled with worldly pursuits in the midst of their religious duties.

2.4. Browning's Interpretation Compared to Earlier Poets

Browning's poetry creation stood out in the Victorian poetry world in England, embodying the poet's optimistic and unwavering outlook on life and art, as well as showcasing the diverse souls of humanity [10]. The poet's exposition of imperfect love in numerous poems challenged the traditional concept of love in literature,but his interpretation of the themes of Renaissance dramatic monologues set him apart from early poets in several aspects. During the Renaissance, playwrights often used monologues primarily for theatrical purposes, while Browning seamlessly integrated drama and lyrical elements, creating a narrative voice that was both intimate and charming. lyrical elements, creating a narrative voice that is both intimate and captivating. In this section, Robert Browning will be compared with Shakespeare, John Milton and William Wordsworth, to illustrate Browning's unique understanding of Renaissance themes.

2.4.1. Shakespeare and Dramatic Monologues

William Shakespeare, one of the greatest playwrights of the Renaissance era, also extensively used dramatic monologues in his works. Shakespeare's dramatic monologues are characterized by:

·Profound insights into character psychology, such as Hamlet's soliloquy on "To be or not to be."

·Multilayered character emotions, exemplified by Macbeth's soliloquies that reveal his inner conflicts and descent into madness.

Dramatic monologues serving as pivotal tools for advancing the plot and conflicts within his plays.While both Browning and Shakespeare employ dramatic monologues, their styles and purposes differ. Shakespeare's dramatic monologues primarily serve to delve deep into character and plot, while Browning's focus more on individual emotions and inner struggles. A comparison of the two poets' works reveals:

·Browning's dramatic monologues tend to be more introspective, emphasizing individual emotions and the complexities of life.

·Shakespeare's dramatic monologues are more theatrical, often involving interactions and conflicts between characters.

2.4.2. John Milton and Religious Monologues

John Milton, another great poet in English literary history, included numerous religious monologues in his epic poem "*Paradise Lost.*" Milton's religious monologues are characterized by:

·Profound contemplation of religious beliefs and moral issues, as seen in Satan's rebellion and Adam and Eve's original sin.

·Expression of inner struggles through dialogue and confession, such as Lucifer's dialogue with Michael.

While Milton's religious monologues differ in theme from Browning's dramatic monologues, both poets use dialogue and confession to explore profound human dilemmas. A comparison of their works reveals:

·Browning's dramatic monologues primarily focus on individual emotions and the complexities of life, whereas Milton's religious monologues emphasize faith and morality.

·Both poets employ dialogue and confession as means to convey deep insights into the human experience.

2.4.3. William Wordsworth and Natural Monologues

William Wordsworth, a representative figure of English Romantic poetry, often incorporated natural monologues in his works. Wordsworth's natural monologues are characterized by:

·Detailed descriptions of natural scenery, such as his praise of daffodils in "*I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud*."

·Reflections on the relationship between humans and nature, often presented as dialogues between the poet and the natural world.

Although Wordsworth's natural monologues differ in theme and form from Browning's dramatic monologues, both poets deeply reflect on the inner world of humans and their surroundings. A comparison of their works reveals:

·Browning's dramatic monologues predominantly focus on human emotions and the complexities of life, while Wordsworth's natural monologues emphasize the emotional connection between humans and nature.

·Both poets use dialogue and confession as vehicles to convey profound insights into the human condition.

3.   Conclusions

In conclusion, this article has explored Robert Browning's dramatic monologues, delved into the background of his dramatic monologues, and focused on exploring the differences between his approach to Renaissance monologues and mainstream Renaissance concepts. Robert Browning's dramatic monologue is a unique poetic form that allows for in-depth character exploration and complex themes. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Browning delves into the intricate content of the Renaissance and depictes it in a unique way.

The current article has analyzed Browning's two poems: "*My Last Duchess"* portrays a character obsessed with control and possession, while "*The Bishop Orders a Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church*" portrays a priest who focuses on his own heritage. These characters provide valuable insights into the dark side of human nature, making Browning's works relevant and attractive. It is also evident that Browning's personality is multifaceted, and his exploration of power, art, and morality in the context of the Renaissance is thought-provoking. This article has also elaborated on Browning's reference to the Renaissance period and comparison with three other poets: Shakespeare, John Milton and William Wordsworth. In addition, Browning's use of Renaissance references in his dramatic monologues adds depth and complexity to his poetry. By drawing on the historical, artistic, and literary elements of the Renaissance, Browning created rich meanings in his works. His meticulous study and fusion of Renaissance ideas set him apart from his contemporaries and demonstrated his commitment to creating poetry that inspired intelligence.

However, this article only focuses on Browning's two poems, which have certain limitations. Future studies are encouraged to explore Browning's more works from the perspective of dramatic monologues, and are encouraged to delve deeper into his portrayal of Renaissance content and its impact on poetry, in order to demonstrate his outstanding innovation, development, and contribution to dramatic monologues.

In short, Robert Browning, a Victorian poet in England, is renowned in the poetry world for his significant contributions to "dramatic monologues".And his dramatic monologue is a fascinating literary form that provided valuable insights for the Renaissance period. Through the analysis of "*My Last Duchess*" and "*The Bishop Orders a Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church*", it is clear that Browning's unique approach to characters, themes, and historical references made him an outstanding poet of the time. Further research in this field is suggested to contribute to a comprehensive understanding of Browning's contribution to the world of poetry.

References

[1]   Lu X. (2012). *Robert Browning's Renaissance monologue and its relevance to the Victorian era* (Doctoral dissertation, Peking University).
[2]   Martens, B. (2005). *Knight, bard, gallant: The troubadour as a critique of romanticism in Browning's Sordello.* Palgrave Macmillan US.
[3]   Hawlin, S. (1992). *Robert Browning. Macmillan International Higher Education.*
[4]   Cervo, N. P. (1987). *Browning's men: A study in Victorian character and values. Greenwood Publishing Group.*
[5]   Karlin, D. (2012). *The Courtship of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett. Victorian Poetry, 50(1), 57-78.*
[6]   Ryals, C. (1981). *The Life of Robert Browning: A Critical Biography. Blackwell Publishers.*
[7]   Meng X. (2008) *The Mirror of the Times - Robert Browning's Non Personalized Dramatic Monologue Journal of Sichuan Normal University (Social Sciences Edition).*
[8]   Langbaum, R. (1957). *The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition. Oxford University Press.*
[9]   Fei, B. (2021). *Robert Browning: A Critical Reader. East China Normal University Press.*
[10] Liu X. (2001) *On the Artistic Style of Browning's Poetry Foreign Literature Review (4), 8.*