The Characterization in Robert Browning's Dramatic Monologue

英詩人白朗寧在其獨白詩中的人物刻畫

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During the Nineteenth Century, democracy and industrialization drove England to enter on a new phase. The reactions of Victorian literary men to the new age took a variety of forms. A few, such as Macaulay, were optimistic and had "confidence in the blessings of progress;" (1) others, like Carlyle and Tennyson, suffered from a sense of anxious uncertainty beneath the prosperous surface. Besides, there were debates going on between Utilitarians and "the philosophical conservatives," (2) led respectively by James Mill and Newman. No matter how different all these Victorians' attitudes were, they shared one thing in common—their attention was centered on contemporary problems.

It is very fascinating and surprising that we should find in notable contrast to the tendency of the Victorian writers a shining star, who was interested in the individual human being rather than in society as a whole, who was almost untouched by the political, religious and economic questions of his day, but rather was preoccupied with the "progress" of the individual life. Such concern with the individual is found in Robert Browning.

In his preface to "Sordello" Browning says, "My stress lay on the incidents in the development of a soul: little else is worth study." This remark states clearly that Browning's chief concern is with the human spirit and its problems. As a matter of fact, he takes so eager an interest in the analysis of the details of character and situation that a large proportion of his work deals with a subtle delineation of human characters.

Unique as Browning's subject-matter appears among his contemporaries, it is his constant use of the dramatic monologue as a medium of expression that makes his character-revealing work even more outstanding.

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What I see, what at bottom of my heart
I wish for, if I ever wish so deep—
Do easily, too— (60 ~ 63 )

No sketches first, no studies, that's long past:
I do what many dream of, all their lives,
—Dream? strive to do, and agonize to do,
And fail in doing. (68 ~ 71)

Nevertheless, he continues, "there burns a truer light of God in them," which makes them "reach many a time a heaven that's shut to" him. His "works are nearer heaven," but he still sits on the ground, because they are done by "craftsmen's hand," because they lack "soul." Andrea is, as Mrs. Orr says, painfully aware of his deficiencies. "He feels that even an ill-drawn picture of Rafael's—and he has such a one before him"(5)—shows depth of emotion and energy of thought, "which he cannot attain. His wife might have incited him to"(6) "God and the glory," and urged him to stand side by side with Agnolo and Rafael; "but Lucrezia is not the woman from whom such incentives"(7) may be derived; she has, Mrs. Orr goes on to say, neither heart nor mind, but only values his art which can bring her money. "Remorse has added itself to his inner sense of artistic failure. He thinks with great regret of the French king and of his honored and inspiring stay at the Court."(8) It is, as Mrs. Orr says, for Lucrezia's sake that he has sacrificed his moral—he has broken his promise to return to the French Court, and he has cheated Francis of the money;(9) and in some degree his art—had he stayed in France, he might have "left the ground" and left behind him a glorious fame. But what "reward" has he got from Lucrezia?—disdain from without and unrequited love in his home. Therefore, he lays blame on the woman:

Why do I need you?
What wife had Rafael, or has Angelo (135 ~ 136)

Even while he is thus accusing his wife, he is partly excusing her.

Nay, Love, you did give all I asked, I think—
More than I merit, yes, by many times. (119~120)

Even in the act of expressing his remorse at his ingratitude to the king, whose money he spends "upon her pleasures," he turns to ask Lucrezia quite naturally, taking it for granted:

Must you go?
That Cousin here again? he waits outside?
Must see you—you, and not with me? Those loans?
More gaming debts to pay? you smiled for that?
Well, let smiles buy me! have you more to spend?

(218~222)

Again the infatuation of the husband is shown; the flaw of Andrea's character is reinforced. Our sympathy is far less for the husband of an unfaithful wife than for the great painter whose potentiality is not fully fulfilled. Yet our compassion is all gone when we hear Andrea confess these lines:

I regret little, I would change still less.
Since there my past life lies, why alter it?
The very wrong to Francis!—it is true
I took his coin, was tempted and compiled,
And built this house and sinned, and all is said.
My father and my mother died of want.
Well, had I riches of my own? you see
How one gets rich! Let each one bear his lot.
They were born poor, lived poor, and poor they died:

(244~252)

For Leonard, Rafael, Angelo and me
To cover—the three first without a wife,
While I have mine! So—still they overcome
Because there's still Lucrezia,—as I choose.

(262~265)

Again the Cousin's whistle! Go, my Love.

(266)

Here, at the very end of the monologue, we discover the key to the soullessness of "The Faultless Painter!" Despicable as Lucrezia is, she
is not the cause of her husband’s failure. His immoral treatment of Francis, his unfilial “neglect of his parents in their poverty and old age,” his desire for resignation, and his uxoriousness—all these facts show what the man really is. Lucrezia does not ruin his soul, he has NO SOUL to be ruined!

So far we have seen the character of the speaker and his work, reflected on himself. Now let us survey what effect the presence of his auditor may have on the revelation of his personality and art.

Although Lucrezia, the audience in the poem, is Andrea’s wife, she is totally indifferent to the passion, the work and the fame of her husband:

You don’t understand
Nor care to understand about my art. (54–55)

You don’t know how the others strive
To paint a little thing like that you smeared
Carelessly passing with your robes afloat. (73–75)

It is most pathetic that when Andrea quotes words spoken by Michel Agnolo about his artistic value, he finds that Lucrezia has even not known who is the speaker.

What he? Why, who but Michel Agnolo?
Do you forget already words like those? (198–199)

Lucrezia’s apathy represents Andrea’s emptiness shown in the cold correctness of his paintings. Her lack of morality reflects his own lack; her profligacy is commensurate with his own spiritual deficiency. For all this she is a symbolic embodiment of his character. Besides, her outward beauty is perfect.

How could you ever prick those perfect ears,
Even to put the pearl there! Oh, so sweet— (27–28)

—oh, with the same perfect brow,
And perfect eyes, and more than perfect mouth… (121–122)
So is the unique element of Andrea's own being—his flawless painting. But her soullessness is fully seen in the last imagery when she leaves her husband and goes straight out to the whistling "Cousin," thus revealing the spiritual quality of both Andrea and his work—represented in Lucrezia.

Browning's use of symbolism is not only applied to the presentation of an auditor, but also to certain technical ingredients handled in this monologue. First, let us consider the time element. It is a "twilight-piece"; the scene is opened to us in the evening; the setting is colored with silver-grey. All these are closely linked with Andrea's physical debility, his past and his art.

A common grayness silvers everything. (35)

Than the time-symbolism is strengthened by the time of year.

...... days decrease,

And autumn grows, autumn in everything. (44~45)

So that both season and time of day suggest Andrea's physical and spiritual weakness. Secondly, let us note the sound element. In this respect, the most obvious feature of Andrea's speech is his repetition of words and phrases:

Quietly, quietly the evening through, (17)

My face, my moon, my everybody's moon, (29)

Yet do much less, so much less, Someone says,

( I know his name, no matter)—so much less. (76~77)

His hue mistaken; what of that? or else,

Rightly traced and well ordered; what of that? (94~95)

And, best of all, this, this, this face beyond,

This is the background, waiting on my work (161~162)
Such repetitions—combined with the relatively simple words, short phrases, broken sentences, the hollow tones of the recurring vowel sounds (o, a, e) and the laborious movement of the stop consonants (p, b, t, d, k, g)—suggests a sort of timidity of his mind, and the "toned down" quality of his character. In this way, the sound-symbolism has also contributed to effect of the character-analyzing.

It has been mentioned above that the dramatic monologue when exemplified by Browning's work means more than character revelation; it is conceived as a medium for the investigation and inculcation of truth. This is certainly true with "Andrea Del Sarto." The faultless painter can express exactly what he conceives; not a single line ever goes astray; but for the very reason, his work lacks the highest qualities of art:

All is silver-gray
Placid and perfect with my art: the worse!  (97 ~ 98)

In contrast, others "strive to do", they "do much less"; yet "less is more". We know it is through moral defects, the want of loftiness, that he fails to reach an ideal he sees. So, "Andrea Del Sarto" lays down the principles that the more we know of the personal and inner life of an artist, the more readily can we understand his work; that "the soul of the true artist must exceed his technical powers"; 02 that any work of art which can be called perfect must have aimed at mere external beauty and must be inferior to those efforts which strive for higher spiritual qualities. Hence Browning's interpretation of Andrea also expresses his ideas in regard to "progress" and the "philosophy of the imperfect". 03 Failure and struggle are necessary in life, because they push us to make further effort and because they are stepping-stones to perfection. Since man is ever "On the way" to the ideal and truth, we should always aim beyond the possibilities of actual achievement on earth. That is why Browning says through the mask of Andrea:

A man's reach should exceed his grasp,
Or what's a heaven for?  (96 ~ 97)
It is for such immortal lines of Browning's, as well as for his other philosophies expressed through the mouth of speakers in various monologues, that he is remembered as a philosophical teacher forever.

Notes:
(2) Ibid., p. 637.
(3) This idea is from Park Honan's *Browning's Characters*. New Haven; Yale University Press, 1961, pp. 243 ~ 283.
(6) Ibid.
(7) Ibid.
(8) Ibid.
(9) Ibid.

Bibliography


