

My Last Duchess

Overview: In this poem, the Duke of Ferrara speaks to the servant of his intended father-in-law about his previous wife, having first shown him her portrait. It quickly becomes clear that his wife was a pleasant, friendly and probably lonely young woman whose early death was brought about by the jealousy and cruelty of her controlling husband – it is hinted that he may have had her murdered.

Context:

- The Duke of Ferrara (in Italy) from 1559 to 1597 was Alfonso II d'Este. Alfonso II married the young Lucrezia di Cosimo de' Medici in 1558. The cause of her death two years later, at the age of 16, was widely attributed to poisoning at the time (though we now think it was probably tuberculosis).
- *Dramatic Lyrics*, the volume of poems in which Browning published 'My Last Duchess' in 1842, includes a variety of dramatic monologues including 'Porphyria's Lover', in which a jealous (and probably mad) man murders his lover, Porphyria.
- Browning was one of the first and perhaps the greatest writers of the Dramatic Monologue form, in which a single 'speaker' talks to a silent implied audience
- Browning set many of his poems in Renaissance Italy and other distant past locations, but used them to explore some of the issues of his day (huge shifts in science and religion; the conflict between morality and wealth; and the movement away from art which sought to teach towards 'art for art's sake').

Structure:

- The poem is composed in iambic pentameter (ten syllables per line with alternating weak and heavy stresses; a common metre for verse drama – notably, the majority of Shakespeare's plays are written in iambic pentameter) and heroic couplets (the lines rhyme in pairs). There is a lot of enjambment to mimic free-flowing speech; look at where there are end-stopped lines and caesuras (pauses in the middle of a line) to see if there is any significance in them.
- Throughout the poem, we 'hear' only one speaker – Ferrara himself, linking perhaps to the prevalent theme of control. As Ferrara tells the story of his last duchess with a kind of righteous anger, Browning condemns the Duke through his own words. What little we know of the listener's actions comes solely through Ferrara.
- Browning makes the reader wait until the last eight lines before revealing that Ferrara is seeking a new bride.

Key Images:

- The literal image – the picture of the Duchess which begins the conversation; but also, note the Duke's other piece of artwork (a symbol of control: a Greek god taming a seahorse). Notice also that the Duchess seems more pleased by the natural world than the carefully created beauty of the Duke's world, and he resents this.
- Ideas relating to power – the Duke's interest in his "nine-hundred-years-old name" and the belief that he is superior to everyone else ("I choose not to stoop").

Potential Comparisons

Unsatisfactory Relationships:
'My Father Would Not Show Us'



Power and Control: 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci'

Self-Awareness:
'First Dates'