

## Robert Browning: Poems Summary and Analysis of "My Last Duchess"

### Summary

"My Last Duchess" is narrated by the duke of Ferrara to an envoy (representative) of another nobleman, whose daughter the duke is soon to marry. These details are revealed throughout the poem, but understanding them from the opening helps to illustrate the irony that Browning employs.

At the poem's opening, the duke has just pulled back a curtain to reveal to the envoy a portrait of his previous duchess. The portrait was painted by Fra Pandolf, a monk and painter whom the duke believes captured the singularity of the duchess's glance. However, the duke insists to the envoy that his former wife's deep, passionate glance was not reserved solely for her husband. As he puts it, she was "too easily impressed" into sharing her affable nature.

His tone grows harsh as he recollects how both human and nature could impress her, which insulted him since she did not give special favor to the "gift" of his "nine-hundred-years-old" family name and lineage. Refusing to deign to "lesson" her on her unacceptable love of everything, he instead "gave commands" to have her killed.

The duke then ends his story and asks the envoy to rise and accompany him back to the count, the father of the duke's impending bride and the envoy's employer. He mentions that he expects a high dowry, though he is happy enough with the daughter herself. He insists that the envoy walk with him "together" – a lapse of the usual social expectation, where the higher ranked person would walk separately – and on their descent he points out a bronze bust of the god Neptune in his collection.

### Analysis

"My Last Duchess," published in 1842, is arguably Browning's most famous dramatic monologue, with good reason. It engages the reader on a number of levels – historical, psychological, ironic, theatrical, and more.

The most engaging element of the poem is probably the speaker himself, the duke. Objectively, it's easy to identify him as a monster, since he had his wife murdered for what comes across as fairly innocuous crimes. And yet he is impressively charming, both in his use of language and his affable address. The ironic disconnect that colors most of Browning's monologues is particularly strong here. A remarkably amoral man nevertheless has a lovely sense of beauty and of how to engage his listener.

In fact, the duke's excessive demand for control ultimately comes across as his most defining characteristic. The obvious manifestation of this is the murder of his wife. Her crime is barely presented as sexual; even though he does admit that other men could draw her "blush," he also mentions several natural phenomena that inspired her favor. And yet he was driven to murder by her refusal to save her happy glances solely for him. This demand for control is also

reflected in his relationship with the envoy. The entire poem has a precisely controlled theatrical flair, from the unveiling of the curtain that is implied to precede the opening, to the way he slowly reveals the details of his tale, to his assuming of the envoy's interest in the tale ("strangers like you...would ask me, if they durst, How such a glance came there"), to his final shift in subject back to the issue of the impending marriage. He pretends to denigrate his speaking ability – "even had you skill in speech – (which I have not)," later revealing that he believes the opposite to be true, even at one point explicitly acknowledging how controlled his story is when he admits he "said 'Fra Pandolf' by design" to peak the envoy's interest. [The envoy](#) is his audience much as we are Browning's, and the duke exerts a similar control over his story that Browning uses in crafting the ironic disconnect.

In terms of meter, Browning represents the duke's incessant control of story by using a regular meter but also enjambment (where the phrases do not end at the close of a line). The enjambment works against the otherwise orderly meter to remind us that the duke will control his world, including the rhyme scheme of his monologue.

To some extent, the duke's amorality can be understood in terms of aristocracy. The poem was originally published with a companion poem under the title "Italy and France," and both attempted to explore the ironies of aristocratic honor. In this poem, loosely inspired by real events set in Renaissance Italy, the duke reveals himself not only as a model of culture but also as a monster of morality. His inability to see his moral ugliness could be attributed to having been ruined by worship of a "nine-hundred-years-old name." He is so entitled that when his wife upset him by too loosely bestowing her favor to others, he refused to speak to her about it. Such a move is out of the question – "who'd stoop to blame this kind of trifling?" He will not "stoop" to such ordinary domestic tasks as compromise or discussion. Instead, when she transgresses his sense of entitlement, he gives commands and she is dead.

Another element of the aristocratic life that Browning approaches in the poem is that of repetition. The duke's life seems to be made of repeated gestures. The most obvious is his marriage – the use of the word "last" in the title implies that there are several others, perhaps with curtain-covered paintings along the same hallway where this one stands. In the same way that the age of his name gives it credence, so does he seem fit with a life of repeated gestures, one of which he is ready to make again with the count's daughter.

And indeed, the question of money is revealed at the end in a way that colors the entire poem. The duke almost employs his own sense of irony when he brings up a "dowry" to the envoy. This final stanza suggests that his story of murder is meant to give proactive warning to the woman he is soon to marry, but to give it through a backdoor channel, through the envoy who would pass it along to the count who might then pass it to the girl. After all, the duke has no interest in talking to her himself, as we have learned! His irony goes even further when he reminds the envoy that he truly wants only the woman herself, even as he is clearly stressing the importance of a large dowry tinged with a threat of his vindictive side.

But the lens of aristocracy undercuts the wonderful psychological nature of the poem, which is overall more concerned with human contradictions than with social or economic criticism. The first contradiction to consider is how charming the duke actually is. It would be tempting to suggest Browning wants to paint him as a weasel, but knowing the poet's love of language, it's clear that he wants us to admire a character who can manipulate language so

masterfully. Further, the duke shows an interesting complication in his attitudes on class when he suggests to the envoy that they "go Together down," an action not expected in such a hierarchical society. By no means can we justify the idea that the duke is willing to transcend class, but at the same time he does allow a transgression of the very hierarchy that had previously led him to have his wife murdered rather than discuss his problems with her.

Also at play psychologically is the human ability to rationalize our hang-ups. The duke seems controlled by certain forces: his own aristocratic bearing; his relationship to women; and lastly, this particular duchess who confounded him. One can argue that the duke, who was in love with his "last duchess," is himself controlled by his social expectations, and that his inability to bear perceived insult to his aristocratic name makes him a victim of the same social forces that he represents. Likewise, what he expects of his wives, particularly of this woman whose portrait continues to provide him with fodder for performance, suggests a deeper psychology than one meant solely for criticism.

The last thing to point out in the duke's language is his use of euphemism. The way he explains that he had the duchess killed – "I gave commands; Then all smiles stopped together" – shows a facility for avoiding the truth through choice of language. What this could suggest is that the duchess was in fact guilty of greater transgression than he claims, that instead of flirtation, she might have physically or sexually betrayed him. There's certainly no explicit evidence of this, but at the same time, it's plausible that a man as arrogant as the duke, especially one so equipped with the power of euphemism, would avoid spelling out his disgrace to a lowly envoy and instead would speak around the issue.

Finally, one can also understand this poem as a commentary on art. The duke remains enamored with the woman he has had killed, though his affection now rests on a representation of her. In other words, he has chosen to love the ideal image of her rather than the reality, similar to how the narrator of "[Porphyria's Lover](#)" chose a static, dead love than one destined to change in the throes of life. In many ways, this is the artist's dilemma, which Browning explores in all of his work. As poet, he attempts to capture contradiction and movement, psychological complexity that cannot be pinned down into one object, and yet in the end all he can create is a collection of static lines. The duke attempts to be an artist in his life, turning a walk down the hallway into a performance, but he is always hampered by the fact that the ideal that inspires his performance cannot change.