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- **“My Last Duchess” Themes**
    - **The Objectification of Women**
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“My Last Duchess” is a dramatic monologue in which the Duke of Ferrara tells the messenger of his potential wife’s family about his previous wife, the “last” duchess of the poem's title. Using a painting of that former duchess as a conversation piece, he describes what he saw as her unfaithfulness, frivolity, and stubbornness, and implies that he prefers her as a *painting* rather than as a living woman. Throughout the poem, the duke reveals his belief that women are objects to be controlled, possessed, and discarded. In many ways, this reflects the thinking of Browning’s own era, when Victorian social norms denied women the right to be fully independent human beings. Through this portrayal of the duke, Browning critiques such a viewpoint, presenting sexism and objectification as dehumanizing processes that rob women of their full humanity.

The duke’s treatment of the painting reflects his treatment of women as objects to be owned. His description of the painting as a “piece” and a “wonder” portray it as a work of art rather than a testament to a former love. By repeating the name of the painter (the famous “Fra Pandolf) three times in the first 16 lines of the poem, he again implies that he values the painting because of its status as an object that shows off his (that is, the duke's) wealth and clout. The painting is meant to aggrandize the *duke* rather than honor the woman it portrays.

This is made even clearer by the fact that the duke has placed this painting in a public area of his palace so he can proudly display it to guests, whom he invites to “sit and look at her” much like a museum curator would direct visitors to a famous work of art in a gallery. Such an attitude is reflected yet again when he tells the messenger that the Count’s “fair daughter’s self [... is his] object”: he intends to make his new bride another one of his possessions. Women, in the duke’s mind, are simply ornamental objects for men rather than actual people in their own right.

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The poem thus implies that the duke finds his former wife's actions unforgivable because they reflected her status as an independent person rather than an inanimate possession. Her crimes appear to be not sexual or romantic infidelity, but rather being happy ("too soon made glad,"), appreciative of others (she considered the duke's "gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name / With anybody's gift"), self-confident (she wouldn't "let / Herself be lessoned"), and willing to stand up for herself (she "plainly set / Her wits to [his]"). The duke, however, appears to believe that a husband owns his wife, and therefore has the right to dictate her feelings and to be the sole recipient of her happiness, kindness, and respect; any indication that she has thoughts or feelings of her own are unacceptable.

Ultimately, the poem heavily implies that the duke was so vexed by the idea that his former wife had an inner life of her own that he had the "last duchess" killed. Of course, the duke avoids explicitly confessing to assassinating his wife, and Browning himself allegedly once said in an interview that the duke may have simply had her sent to a convent. Regardless, the outcome is the same: there is no "last duchess" present in the poem to speak for herself and give her side of the story. The poem thus underscores how objectifying women ultimately silences them, robbing them of their voices and autonomy.

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o **Social Status, Art, and Elitism**

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Though the poem doesn't outright condemn the duke, it does suggest that he's a brutish figure whose social status is in no way a reflection of any sort of moral worth. The duke repeatedly draws his guest's attention to his wealth and power, and issues veiled threats about what happens to those who don't put a high enough price on his social standing. Through the duke, the poem takes a subtle jab at the snobbery of the upper class, suggesting the shallowness of an elitist society that bestows respect based on things like having a good family name or owning fancy artwork. Instead, the poem reveals the

various ways in which powerful men like the duke may use such markers of status simply to manipulate—and dominate—those around them.

The duke repeatedly reminds the messenger of the power in his title. He does this in part by mentioning the famous artists (Fra Pandolf and Claus of Innsbruck) who created works especially for him, but also by mentioning his “nine-hundred-years-old name.” The duke then moves quickly from intimidation to intimidated threats when he hints that he had his former wife killed for not valuing his status sufficiently: he objects that she “ranked” his “nine-hundred-years-old name / With anybody’s gift” and so he “gave commands” that “stopped” her “smiles.”

Since the duke and his potential father-in-law, the Count, are about to sit down to discuss the fiancée’s dowry, they will put a price on exactly how much his name is worth. Consequently, the duke’s claim that the Count’s generosity is “ample warrant”—that the Count will give him a substantial amount of money for the daughter’s dowry—can actually be read as a veiled threat: the duke implies that, if the in-laws want their daughter to live, they will value his name and pay him a large sum.

Immediately before beginning negotiations with the prospective in-laws, the duke also tells the emissary to admire a statue of Neptune “taming a sea-horse,” made by a famous sculptor. The duke emphasizes the statue’s aesthetic merit as a means of imbuing himself with more importance: the statue is a “rarity” and was created just for him.

This moment has nothing to do with the duke emphasizing his refined tastes and his appreciation of art. Instead, again, it serves as a warning: Neptune was the Roman god of the sea, and the statue depicts this god forcefully subduing a creature who challenged him. By drawing the emissary’s attention to this statue before the negotiation, the duke implies that he himself is a godlike figure like Neptune, who will tame the emissary and the Count just as he did the former duchess. The trappings of upper-class status are again mainly a means for the duke to bully people.

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The duke's seemingly refined manner and opulent surroundings are thus no indication that he's any better than those with lesser means—or that he's even a decent person at all. Through this depiction, the poem offers a subtle rebuke of elitism and the upper class. To men like the duke, beauty is not something to be valued and appreciated; instead, it is only something to dominate.

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o **Control and Manipulation**

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Closely tied to the duke's repeated emphasis on his social status and his objectification of women is his clear desire for control. By treating women as objects to be possessed, the duke can more readily dominate them; similarly, by drawing attention to his title and social clout, the duke can intimidate others into following his commands. Yet the poem also draws attention to quieter forms of control, as the duke dictates everything from the flow of conversation with his guest to the choreography of the scene itself. Through these forms of asserting dominance, the poem suggests the power—and danger—of such inconspicuous manipulation, which is made all the more insidious by its subtlety.

The duke uses his social status—indicated by his ancient name and opulent artwork—to intimidate and threaten his guest. More discreetly, however, Browning also shows the duke controlling the conversation via its physical setting. The duke has staged the area with the duchess's painting: the painting is behind a curtain so he can limit who can view it, thereby reminding his audience that he can give and take away whatever he wants. He has also placed a seat in front of the painting so he can command visitors to sit while he tells the story of his former wife, a power dynamic that literally elevates him above anyone else in the room.

The duke likewise controls the flow of the conversation. He never gives the messenger a chance to speak, and once goes so far as to pretend that the messenger has asked a question (“not the first / Are you to turn and ask thus”) even though the

messenger himself remains silent. This action gives the messenger the illusion of being an active participant in the conversation without having any actual agency in it whatsoever.

Most intriguingly, there is nothing improvisatory about the duke's words, even when he trips over them. He comments that "strangers" who have seen the painting have asked him about the former duchess's expression, and that the messenger is "not the first" to inquire. The duke's insistence that others have asked about the duchess's expression suggests that he has given this spiel about his wife's supposedly inappropriate behavior to others. It is hard to believe, therefore that his interjections about his inarticulateness ("how shall I say?" or "somehow—I know not how") are genuine hesitations: if he has given this speech before, then presumably he knows what to say and how. In other words, his actions contradict his stated lack of expertise. The improvised nature of the duke's speech, then, with its self-interruptions and hesitations, might all be an act. He is so committed to controlling others that he seemingly rehearses even his moments of self-deprecation and seeming uncertainty. He says he doesn't have any "skill in speech"—meaning he's not a good talker—but this clearly isn't the case.

By having the duke deliver the dramatic monologue to the emissary, addressed throughout the poem as "you," Browning forces his readers to experience the duke's manipulation to better understand how abuse of power operates. This form of address can encourage readers to imagine how they themselves would respond in such a situation: would they notice the manipulation and feel resentful, or would it slip past as they found themselves convinced by the duke's subtle coercion?