My Last Duchess

POEM TEXT

FERRARA

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive. I call
That piece a wonder, now; Fra Pandolf's hands
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.
Will't please you sit and look at her? I said
"Fra Pandolf" by design, for never read
Strangers like you that pictured countenance,
The depth and passion of its earnest glance,
But to myself they turned (since none puts by
The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)
And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,
How such a glance came there; so, not the first
Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, 'twas not
Her husband's presence only, called that spot
Of joy into the Duchess' cheek; perhaps
Fra Pandolf chanced to say, "Her mantle laps
Over my lady's wrist too much," or "Paint
Must never hope to reproduce the faint
Half-flush that dies along her throat." Such stuff
Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough
For calling up that spot of joy. She had
A heart—how shall I say?— too soon made glad,
Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.
Sir, 'twas all one! My favour at her breast,
The dropping of the daylight in the West,
The bough of cherries some officious fool
Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule
She rode with round the terrace—all and each
Would draw from her alike the approving speech,
Or blush, at least. She thanked men—good! but thanked
Somehow—I know not how—as if she ranked
My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name
With anybody's gift. Who'd stoop to blame
This sort of trifling? Even had you skill
In speech—which I have not—to make your will
Quite clear to such an one, and say, "Just this
Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,
Or there exceed the mark"—and if she let
Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set
Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse—
E'en then would be some stooping; and I choose
Never to stoop. Oh, sir, she smiled, no doubt,
Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without
Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;
Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands
As if alive. Will't please you rise? We'll meet
The company below, then. I repeat,
The Count your master's known munificence
Is ample warrant that no just pretense
Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;
Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed
At starting, is my object. Nay, we'll go
Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though,
Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!

SUMMARY

The speaker (the Duke of Ferrara) directs the attention of a guest to a painting of his former wife, the Duchess of Ferrara, which hangs on the wall. The Duke praises the painting for looking so lifelike and then remarks on how hard the painter, Fra Pandolf, worked hard on it. The duke asks the guest to sit and look at the work. The duke then explains that he deliberately mentioned the name of the painter, because strangers like the emissary always look at the duchess's painted face—with its deep, passionate, and earnest glance—and turn to the duke (and only the duke, since only he pulls back the curtain that reveals the painting) and act as though they would ask, if they dared, how an expression like that came into her face. The duke reiterates that the guest isn't the first person to ask this question.

The duke continues by saying that it wasn't only his presence that brought that look into the painted eyes of the duchess or the blush of happiness into her painted cheek; he suggests that perhaps Fra Pandolf had happened to compliment her by saying "her shawl drapes over her wrist too much" or "paint could never recreate the faint half-blush that's fading on her throat." The duke insists that the former duchess thought that polite comments like those were reason enough to blush, and criticizes her, in a halting way, for being too easily made happy or impressed. He also claims that she liked everything and

everyone she saw, although his description suggests that she was ogling everyone who crossed her path. The duke objects that, to his former duchess, everything was the same and made her equally happy, whether it was a brooch or present from him that she wore at her chest, the sun setting in the West, a branch of cherries which some interfering person snapped off a tree in the orchard for her, or the white mule she rode on around the terrace. He claims that she would say the same kind words or give the same blush in response to all of them. The duke also objects to her manner of thanking men, although he struggles to describe his concerns. Specifically, he complains that she values his pedigree and social position (his 900-year-old name) as equally important to anyone else's gifts to her.

The duke rhetorically asks whether anyone would actually lower themselves enough to argue with someone about their behavior. The duke imagines a hypothetical situation in which he would confront the former duchess: he says that even if he were good with words and were able to clearly say, "This characteristic of yours disgusts me," or, "Here you did too little or too much"—and if the former duchess had let herself be degraded by changing, instead of being stubborn and making excuses— that even then the act of confronting her would be beneath him, and he refuses to ever lower himself like that.

The duke then returns to his earlier refrain about his former wife's indiscriminate happiness and complains to his guest that, while the duchess did smile at him whenever they passed, she gave everyone else the same smile as well. The duke explains that she began smiling at others even more, so he gave orders and all her smiles stopped forever, presumably because he had her killed. Now she only lives on in the painting.

The duke then asks the guest to stand up and to go with him to meet the rest of the guests downstairs. He also says that the Count, revealed here as the guest's master and the father of the duke's prospective bride-to-be, is so known for his generosity in matters of money that no request the duke could make for a dowry could be turned down. The duke also adds quickly that he has always insisted since the beginning of their discussions that the Count's beautiful daughter, and not the dowry, is his primary objective.

The duke ends his speech by demanding that he and the Count's emissary go downstairs together, and on their way, he directs the emissary's attention to a statue of the God Neptune taming a seahorse, which is a rare work of art that Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze specifically for him.

THEMES

THE OBJECTIFICATION OF WOMEN

"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.

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.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-5
- Lines 9-10
- Lines 13-15
- Lines 19-34
- Lines 39-47
- Lines 49-56

SOCIAL STATUS, ART, AND ELITISM

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 intimated 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 emphasis 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.

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.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-13
- Lines 21-22
- Lines 31-35
- Lines 45-56

CONTROL AND MANIPULATION

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 subtly.

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?

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 5-13
- Lines 21-22
- Lines 31-37
- Lines 45-46

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive. I call
That piece a wonder, now; Fra Pandolf's hands
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.
Will't please you sit and look at her?

From the poem's opening line, Browning shows the duke of Ferrara's obsession with possessing and objectifying women. The duke is describing a painting of his former wife rather than the woman herself, but he still describes the painting itself as "my last Duchess," thereby eroding the differences between the art and the woman who inspired it. Both are essentially the same in the duke's mind, or at least he'd prefer it if this were so.

The duke personifies the painting throughout this passage, both by saying "there she stands," as though the duchess herself and not her image in the painting is standing against the wall, and "will't please you sit and look at her," instead of asking the messenger to look at "it" or "the painting." This again suggests that he views the woman and the work of art as one and the same.

The duke also makes it clear that he cares for the status the painting can give him and not for the nostalgia or memories about his former wife. He remarks on the artistry of the painting in seeming so lifelike ("looking as if she were alive"), rather than on missing her, since the woman herself as we will soon find out, has died. Likewise, he describes the artwork as "a piece" and "a wonder," and brags about how "busily" the famous Fra Pandolf worked to paint it, in a move calculated to impress the emissary with the quality of his art collection and therefore his wealth. It's also worth noting that, although the duke focuses on Fra Pandolf's hands, there's no mention of his former wife's hands—or, in fact, of any part of her body in this section, an absence that suggests the duke's interest in the painting's monetary rather than sentimental worth.

These lines also reveal the duke's subtle control of conversations and physical spaces. The duke is clearly guiding the emissary through his estate and art collection like a tour guide, telling him what to admire, what to think about it, and even when to sit. By having the emissary sitting while he stands, the duke literally elevates himself above his guest and shows him the power hierarchy that he tries to preserve in all his interactions with others.

The poem's opening also shows that Browning is controlling the meter and rhyme scheme of the poem as carefully as the duke controls the conversation and the space: when read aloud, the poem sounds almost conversational in tone, and people are often surprised to realize it consists of iambic pentameter rhyming couplets. The many enjambed lines (such as lines 2 and 3: "I call / That piece a wonder, now") make sentences extend well beyond the confines of the lines and the frequent caesuras introduce natural pauses into the middle of lines (as with "Looking as if she were alive." in line 2). By having so many caesuras and so few end-stopped lines, Browning deemphasizes the lines themselves, with their five feet and their rhyming couplets. He instead creates a style that sounds more akin to prose.

LINES 5-13

I said
"Fra Pandolf" by design, for never read
Strangers like you that pictured countenance,

The depth and passion of its earnest glance,
But to myself they turned (since none puts by
The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)
And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,
How such a glance came there; so, not the first
Are you to turn and ask thus.

In these lines, the duke uses the picture of the duchess to brag even more about his power. He repeats the name of the artist to hammer home to his guest that he can afford to commission works from such an important painter, and also to suggest that Fra Pandolf's skill is the reason for the depth and passion of the duchess's facial expression.

However, the duke also uses the picture to brag about his control and power over the painting and over his audience. The duke mentions that he put curtains over the painting so that only he can reveal or conceal the portrait at will, completely dictating who can view it and when. He is also very aware of this power, given that he harps on his own actions by saying "I" twice in line 10 when mentions that "none puts by / The curtain I have drawn for you, but I."

The duke also makes it clear that he has had this conversation about the duchess with others several times, since the emissary is "not the first" to wonder at the painting's facial expression. In mentioning that others have been in the emissary's position, the duke reminds the guest that he is not special or unique, and perhaps that other families have sent representatives to argue over dowries before him. These factors together make it easy to see why the duke's guests fear him and only ask him questions "if they durst": he is an expert in making his audience feel intimidated by his power, even in something as simple as discussing a painting.

Browning manipulates the length of lines and sentences with as much control as the duke manipulates the emissary. This entire passage contains only one sentence, in fact, although it is broken up with parenthetical remarks and semicolons. By writing such lengthy sentences, Browning suggests how much the duke loves the sound of his own voice, and how much he dislikes sharing the conversational floor with anyone else.

Browning also demonstrates the duke's love of control through typographical details: he enclosed the duke's description of the curtain that hides the painting of the duchess in parentheses. This punctuation echoes the curtains that surround the painting: each parenthesis is like one of the curtains, having been pulled back to reveal the sentence about curtains being pulled back.

LINES 13-19

Sir, 'twas not
Her husband's presence only, called that spot
Of joy into the Duchess' cheek; perhaps
Fra Pandolf chanced to say, "Her mantle laps
Over my lady's wrist too much," or "Paint
Must never hope to reproduce the faint
Half-flush that dies along her throat."

The duke begins to air his supposed grievances about his former wife, complaints that reflect more poorly on the *duke* than they do on the duchess. The duke's initial objection is that things other than her husband would make the duchess blush, or have a "spot of joy" on her cheek. By saying that it wasn't "her husband's presence only" that made her blush, the duke implies that he and he alone should be allowed to do so, and suggests that she behaved inappropriately. This hints at his controlling and domineering nature.

However, instead of providing examples of her flirtatiousness, the duke then provides sample flirtatious statements Fra Pandolf might have said to the duchess ("Paint / Must never hope to reproduce" her blush). Yet instead of blaming the painter for flirting with his wife, the duke blames his wife for blushing in response to this flirtation! With this example, Browning hints that the duke's interpretation of events is suspect. The duke's criticisms of his wife reveal more about his own character than hers.

What's more, though the duke uses these examples to complain about his former wife, he also indirectly praises her in them. One of Fra Pandolf's hypothetical quotations lauds the duchess's beauty by saying that paintings wouldn't do her loveliness justice. Essentially, then, the duke claims that a famous painter said that the duchess is more beautiful than any work of art. This claim shows that the duke still boasts about the duchess and her appearance as though she herself were a work of art that can reflect well upon him and his status—even while he insults her personality.

This passage also marks an instance of extended enjambment. The enjambment could be interpreted at least two ways. First, since the content of the lines spills over beyond their boundaries, the enjambment could seem to demonstrate the duke's getting carried away with jealousy over his former wife's perceived transgressions: neither the boundaries of the lines nor the rules of decorum or appropriate behavior can contain him. Second, the enjambment combined with the many caesuras subtly obscures the line boundaries and rhymes—the components that control and structure verse. They make such components less obvious, in the same way that the duke hides his true motivation: an obsession with control.

LINES 19-24

Such stuff
Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough
For calling up that spot of joy. She had
A heart—how shall I say?— too soon made glad,
Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.

Here the duke implies that his former wife was unfaithful, but Browning suggests that the duke is actually just confusing her

kindness with infidelity. The duke insists that the duchess blushed at comments like Fra Pandolf's because she was flirting and wanted the attention, when she was just as likely being friendly and polite.

The duke also appears to be grasping for words (e.g. "how shall I say?") when describing his primary objection to his former wife, as though he were trying to find a way to euphemistically explain her crime. In particular, by insisting that she liked "whate'er / She looked on" and that "her looks went everywhere," he seems to say that she sought out people to ogle and that her sexual appetite was insatiable. The duke's repetition of the word "too" ("too soon made glad" and "too easily impressed") further hammers home the idea that her desires are excessive. In fact, the passage is full of words containing doubled, or repeated letters ("stuff," "calling," "shall," "too," "soon," "impressed," and "looks"), and this extreme repetition emphasizes the idea of her excess even more.

In the passage, Browning yet again uses caesura and enjambment to obscure the ending of each line. The first three lines of the passage have no punctuation at the end of them, which causes each line to spill over into the next, as though the iambic pentameter weren't expansive enough to contain the duchess's excess.

However, a closer look at the wording shows a different narrative. The duke blames his former wife for blushing because he seems to believe that blushing is voluntary, since he says that she "call[ed] up" her blush. Blushing is actually involuntary, but, more importantly, blushing can also be caused by modesty or embarrassment—meaning that his claim that her blushing is provocative is questionable at best. Thus far, the duke has merely given his guest an example of a woman blushing at being told she is beautiful, and then being "glad" and too easily made happy—none of which are examples of infidelity, or really any transgression at all.

LINES 25-31

Sir, 'twas all one! My favour at her breast,
The dropping of the daylight in the West,
The bough of cherries some officious fool
Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule
She rode with round the terrace—all and each
Would draw from her alike the approving speech,
Or blush, at least.

The duke keeps trying to justify his disapproval of the duchess, but Browning shows yet more holes in the duke's argument. The duke particularly objects to the fact that he did not receive sufficiently preferential treatment from his former wife ("twas all one"). He cites several things that would inspire her to say kind words or to blush, including a gift (most likely a brooch) from him which she wore near her chest, a sunset, cherries from their orchard, and riding a mule on their terrace. Instead of unfaithfulness, or even immodest behavior, the duchess's only crimes are being too modest, polite, and happy.

Ironically, many of the things he cites are only possible because of their marriage—the cherries come from their orchard, the terrace she rides the mule on is part of their estate, and she is wearing the gift from him—so she clearly does appreciate and enjoy aspects of their life. To him, however, anything that makes her happy that is not directly by his order is inappropriate, and he believes she has essentially cheated on him with the sun, some cherries, and a mule.

This extremely controlling attitude, Browning suggests, is an extension of the objectification of women. In the poem's opening, the duke viewed the painting of his former wife as having worth not as a sentimental reminder of the woman herself, but rather as a marker of status and a method of controlling and intimidating others. This passage reflects the same attitude. The duke doesn't care about the duchess herself or her happiness; he only cares about her as a decorative object he can show off to emphasize his own status. Her smiling at sunsets or eating fruit is something that would be for her own fulfillment, and is therefore too autonomous and out of his control.

LINES 31-34

She thanked men—good! but thanked
Somehow—I know not how—as if she ranked
My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name
With anybody's gift.

The duke explains the issue with social class that underlies his frustration. The duke objects to the duchess's kindness to all because he believes that his own aristocratic status—his "gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name"—is proof of his inherent superiority to everyone else, and that as a result, he should be treated in a superior fashion. It's also worth noting that the duke considers his marriage—and thus his sharing of title and name with the duchess—to be a "gift": in his mind, then, marrying her was practically a favor for which she should always be grateful and eternally in his debt. Essentially, the duchess is not unfaithful, but rather too egalitarian.

The idea of her treating others with generosity that isn't parceled out in accordance with someone's social station is so unthinkable—and unspeakable—to the duke that he stumbles over his attempts to put words to it: he interrupts himself several times, as notated by the dashes, repeats the words "thanked" and "gift," and even says "I know not how." His confusion also disrupts the meter:

She thanked | men—good! | but thanked

The dash between "men" and "good" is a caesura that occurs in the middle of the iambic foot that contains, a metrical hiccup that brings the rapid movement of the poem stumbling to a temporary halt.

While the duke's verbal stumbling can be read as a genuinely stunned disbelief at the duchess's actions, it can also be read as another example of his love of controlling others and how they view him. The duke's earlier comments show that he has given this spiel to other guests in the past (he says the guest to whom he is speaking is not the first), so it is fair to assume he has spoken of his horror at his former wife's actions before. If he has choreographed the scene enough to put curtains and a bench in front of the painting, then why wouldn't he have scripted his actual comments about the duchess as well? If so, then this is another example of his love of control and power: he even controls the moments where he pretends to have lost control of his sentences.

LINES 34-43

Who'd stoop to blame
This sort of trifling? Even had you skill
In speech—which I have not—to make your will
Quite clear to such an one, and say, "Just this
Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,
Or there exceed the mark"—and if she let
Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set
Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse—
E'en then would be some stooping; and I choose
Never to stoop.

In these halting, rambling lines, the duke reveals the fear underlying his objections to the duchess. He insists that, even if the duchess didn't stand up for or justify herself, it would have been beneath him to tell the duchess about his frustrations—so he chose to stay silent. That he was aware that she might have argued back and refused to be "lessoned" shows his worry that he actually couldn't control her as easily as he can control the painting of her in his estate; there weren't simple curtains he could hide the duchess behind if she "set / her wits" to him. To the duke, who is obsessed with manipulating and dominating others, even the idea of this degree of autonomy on the duchess's part is a challenge to his authority. As a result, the only way to maintain authority is not to verbally engage at all (although he does take drastic action in other ways, as the next section demonstrates).

It's also telling that the duke's imagined discussion with the duchess consists of a series of insults or instructions, similar to the way a particularly harsh master would talk to a servant: he imagines telling her that she "disgusts" him in multiple ways and that she either falls short of expectations or does too much. Essentially, then, what he wants to change about her is everything: he wants her to be nothing more than a passive, pretty face for him to show off at parties, which is precisely what he does with the painting.

In this section, as in the previous one, Browning has the duke metrically trip in a few spots. Take the line:

This sort | of tri-| fling? Ev- | en had | you skill

This line still has the expected five feet, but the caesura in the form of a question mark after "trifling" puts a break in between the unstressed and stressed parts of the iamb.

This pattern occurs two more times in this section: the semicolon caesuras in "me; here" in line 38 and "stooping; and" in line 42. These irregularities could be read several ways: Browning could have created these supposed glitches to confirm the duke's claim that he lacks "skill / In speech." Conversely, Browning could be showing readers that the duke's confusion, enacted by the metrical hiccups, is as deliberate an act and performance as is the duke's pulling apart the curtains to reveal the painting. Other possible readings including Browning splitting the iambic feet to reflect the impending split between the duke and the duchess, or Browning doing a form of metaphorical violence to the iamb to foreshadow the violence the duke may have done to the duchess.

LINES 43-47

Oh, sir, she smiled, no doubt,
Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without
Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;
Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands
As if alive.

In this passage, Browning shows the duke's overzealous response to a perceived threat to his authority. The duke explains that, while the duchess would smile at him every time they saw each other, it was not a sufficiently different smile from the smiles she gave others. And after a series of these not sufficiently distinguished smiles, he had her either killed or sent away ("then all smiles stopped together"). Essentially, then, he had her punished because she was made happy by things beyond her husband, and because he feared her standing up to him.

Although the duke does not directly state that he ordered her death, it is very strongly implied. First, after several long sentences throughout the poem, the duke says four extremely concise, terse sentences: 1. "This grew"; 2. "I gave commands"; 3. "Then all smiles stopped together"; and 4. "There she stands / As if alive." The short, clipped sentences—which themselves cut lines into shorter segments—echo the duchess's life being clipped short. Additionally, the duke uses the juxtaposition of her stopped smiles and the painting that makes her look "as if alive" to hint more directly to the fact that she is now dead, thanks to his commands.

Why would Browning have the duke implicitly admit to having his wife killed when speaking to the man here to negotiate for on behalf of his future bride? Perhaps because the duke is deliberately intimidating the emissary to get a higher dowry in exchange for the bride. Throughout the poem, the duke has orchestrated the space and conversation to appear inflexible

and imposing, and to literally stand above the emissary. The duke has already said that he will refuse to "stoop" or to be beneath others, and that he will have people killed for not sufficiently praising and respecting his "nine-hundred-years-old name." With that in mind, the duke's story becomes a warning to his possible future family, as the next section makes clearer.

Browning also continues to add caesuras between the two parts of an iambic foot:

> Whene'er | I passed | her; but | who passed | without
> Much the | same smile? | This grew; | I gave |
> commands;
> Then all | smiles stopped | together. | There | she
> stands

The semicolon in "her; but" and the period in "together. There," as with caesuras in earlier sections, enact the separation between the duke and the duchess. And, since the caesura in the second example is a period—the punctuation mark that most signifies finality—this interruption can be read as further evidence of the fact that the duke had the duchess killed.

Interestingly, this passage is also characterized by an excessive use of sibilance, not only because the word "smile" is repeated, but also because of words like "sir," "same," "stopped," "she," "stands," and even words such as "passed," "commands," "this," and "as." The sibilance creates a hissing effect, which could be read in several ways: because hissing sounds are associated with disapproval and sneakiness, it could show how much the duke disapproved of the duchess, or it could show how slippery and evasive the duke is about what he actually had done to his former wife.

LINES 47-53

> *Will't please you rise? We'll meet*
> *The company below, then. I repeat,*
> *The Count your master's known munificence*
> *Is ample warrant that no just pretense*
> *Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;*
> *Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed*
> *At starting, is my object.*

The duke's motives for telling the emissary about the duchess become clear: money. The duke tells his guest that they now must leave the painting and go downstairs to meet the rest of the group, where they will collectively debate the bride's dowry, or the money the duke will be given in exchange for the marriage. The duke, ever the master manipulator, even tells the emissary that he expects that any amount of money he requests will be granted because the Count (the prospective father-in-law) is so famously generous. And, since, as he has previously stated through the story, the duke never "stoops" to debate with people—he just resorts to possible assassination when they do not sufficiently value his name and rank—the emissary and bride's family are facing a subtle death threat if they do not acquiesce to his commands.

The duke pretends to be less financially motivated when he claims that the bride to be has been his "object," or goal, from the start, but, given all that the emissary has heard recently, such a claim is unlikely to set his mind at rest. The entire poem details the duke's investment in having not a flesh-and-blood wife, but a painting of one, which he can entirely control: objectification of women turned chillingly literal. The duke's claim that the new bride is his "object" is likewise distressingly literal: with the dowry, she is literally an object, a good, about to exchange hands with an associated price, and she will most likely suffer the same fate as the previous wife from his collection.

In this section, Browning again uses caesuras to split up iambs. In line 48—

> The com- | pany | be- low, | then. I | repeat,

—the period after "then" splits up the unstressed syllable "then" and the stressed syllable "I."

Likewise, in line 53—

> At start- | ing, is | my ob|ject,

—the comma splits up the unstressed "ing" of "starting" and the stressed word "is." It's significant that these caesuras continue at the end of the poem even when the duke is no longer discussing the duchess, even though previously they had been used to show the division between the couple. Perhaps Browning has them continue to appear when describing the impending marriage between the duke and the new duchess as another way of suggesting that she will suffer the same unpleasant future as the last duchess.

LINES 53-56

> *Nay, we'll go*
> *Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though,*
> *Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,*
> *Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!*

The duke makes one final threat through art when he points out the statue of the Roman god Neptune taming a seahorse. As with the painting, the duke directs the emissary's attention towards the statue and has choreographed the scene. In both cases, he boasts about its creator (this time, Claus of Innsbruck) and emphasizes the work that went into the art—which, in turn, shows off his own wealth and influence. And, as with the painting, which the duke used as a warning that he would harm anyone who threatened his authority or did not praise him sufficiently, this statue, too, has a similar message: the duke sees himself as an all-powerful God, like Neptune, who will tame and quash anyone and everyone who crosses his path,

from seahorses to brides to emissaries. It is no coincidence that the final word of the poem is "me," the only person the duke truly cares for.

One interesting difference between the depictions of the two works of art, however, is that with the painting, the duke asked the emissary to sit, whereas here, he commands the emissary to go downstairs together with him, as though he emissary tried to run on ahead and warn the rest of the family. With this difference in language, Browning shows us that the duke has already begun taming the emissary and the family, as he did the duchess, and that there is perhaps as little hope for them as there was for Neptune's seahorses.

This taming in action is further reflected in the meter and caesuras of the final lines. Although the poem is predominantly iambic, the word "Taming" in the line

> Taming | a sea- | horse, thought | a rar- | ity

is a trochee. By starting a line with a trochee, Browning breaks the established metrical pattern, in the same way that the duke himself hopes to break and tame the in-laws and his future wife. Browning also unsettles the metrical pattern of this section by using caesuras to split up iambs, this time, including it three times in three lines:

> At start- | ing, is | my ob | ject. Nay, | we'll go
> Toge- | ther down, |sir. No- |tice Nep- | tune, though,
> Taming |a sea- | horse, thought | a rar- | ity.

The three caesuras—the period in "Object. Nay" and in "sir. Notice" and the comma in "horse, thought"—continue a pattern from earlier in the poem. By using the pattern associated with dominance and controlling the duchess in a section about meeting the in-laws, Browning implies that the duke will continue to tame and break down his potential new family's objections.

SYMBOLS

THE PAINTING

The painting of the former duchess is more than just a work of art. At first, it appears to be a symbol of the duke's status, since he displays it like a work in an art gallery. He has placed a chair in front of it so that people can sit and admire it, and he brags about the fame and skill of the man who painted it (Fra Pandolf). But once the duke tells his guest more about the former duchess, it becomes clear that the painting is also a symbol of the objectification of women. Although the duke despised the duchess as a wife because she smiled too much at others for his liking, he loves the *painting* of her. Unlike his human being, the painting is something he can control. Indeed, he's placed a curtain in front of the canvas so that now he gets to decide whom the painting smiles upon, and he has placed a chair in front of it so he can control the movements of the people who look at her. The painting, then, is essentially the objectified version of his former wife—a relic that aggrandizes the duke while reminding him of his dominance over others.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-13:** "That's my last Duchess painted on the wall, / Looking as if she were alive. I call / That piece a wonder, now; Fra Pandolf's hands / Worked busily a day, and there she stands. / Will't please you sit and look at her? I said / "Fra Pandolf" by design, for never read / Strangers like you that pictured countenance, / The depth and passion of its earnest glance, / But to myself they turned (since none puts by / The curtain I have drawn for you, but I) / And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst, / How such a glance came there; so, not the first / Are you to turn and ask thus."
- **Lines 13-19:** "Sir, 'twas not / Her husband's presence only, called that spot / Of joy into the Duchess' cheek; perhaps / Fra Pandolf chanced to say, "Her mantle laps / Over my lady's wrist too much," or "Paint / Must never hope to reproduce the faint / Half-flush that dies along her throat." "
- **Lines 46-47:** "There she stands / As if alive. "

THE STATUE OF NEPTUNE

At the end of the poem, the duke directs his guest's attention toward this bronze statue by the famous Claus of Innsbruck. Neptune is the Roman god of the sea, and the statue represents dominance. As such, the statue perfectly reflects the duke's opinion of himself: he sees himself as an all-powerful god who tames and subdues everything around him, whether wives or prospective in-laws. What's more, the statue is "a rarity," further implying how special and powerful the duke must be in order to be in possession of it.

The language the duke uses when describing the statue suggests how he plans to dominate and control his prospective fiancée and in-laws (including the Count and his daughter). For instance, the duke commands the emissary to wait for him (the duke) to go downstairs with the words "Nay, we'll go / Together down, sir," and has therefore moved from asking ("Will't please you rise?" in line 47) to dictating and controlling others' movements. The duke issues another command in line 54 with the phrase "Notice Neptune," and the alliteration of those words emphasizes that refusing isn't a possibility.

Finally, the line "Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity" has several metrical oddities in keeping with its symbolic representation of dominance. The word "taming" is a trochee instead of an iamb, and therefore breaks the poem's metrical

pattern as dramatically as Neptune broke the sea horses. Meanwhile, the caesura between "sea-horse" and "thought" breaks the iamb in the same way the duke hopes to break the in-laws.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 54-56:** "Notice Neptune, though, / Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity, / Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!"

POETIC DEVICES

ENJAMBMENT

Browning's use of enjambment makes the poem sound conversational. It tends to obscure where one line ends and another begins, which subtly deemphasizes the meter, rhyme scheme, and number of feet in the line.

This poem uses predominantly enjambed lines throughout in part to reflect the fact that it is a dramatic monologue, and therefore is understood as being *spoken* to a listener. Again, the free-flowing lines suggest a conversational tone. They also suggest that the duke likes to hear himself talk, as his speech spills over from one line to the next offering no chance for his guest to voice any interruptions. Enjambment thus allows the duke to control the conversation and reflects his need to dominate and manipulate those around him.

One of the most striking examples of enjambment occurs towards the end of the poem, in lines 31-39:

> She thanked men—good! but thanked
> Somehow—I know not how—as if she ranked
> My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name
> With anybody's gift. Who'd stoop to blame
> This sort of trifling? Even had you skill
> In speech—which I have not—to make your will
> Quite clear to such an one, and say, "Just this
> Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,
> Or there exceed the mark"

Because of the seven consecutive enjambed lines, it is nearly impossible to tell where one line ends and another begins when the passage is read out loud. The words topple over the boundaries of the line, as though the duke is so horrified by the duchess's actions and by the idea of confronting her that he can no longer make clear, linear sentences. It might seem as though the duke truly does lack the "skill / In speech" to reprimand her.

However, the duke had mentioned earlier that he has spoken to others about his wife's behavior before, so this conversation with the emissary is not the first on the subject, and his love of controlling conversations with props (like the painting, chair, and curtains) further suggests that he plans out all details, no matter how small.

As a result, the enjambment that seems to show the duke losing control over the conversation is arguably evidence that even his loss of control is all an act, and that he has scripted even his supposedly unscripted moments. Essentially, then, Browning uses enjambment to show the duke's obsession with controlling how others view him and to show that the duke is fundamentally untrustworthy.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** " I call "
- **Line 3:** "hands"
- **Line 5:** "said"
- **Line 6:** "read"
- **Line 9:** "by"
- **Line 12:** "first"
- **Line 13:** "not"
- **Line 14:** "spot"
- **Line 15:** "perhaps"
- **Line 16:** "laps"
- **Line 17:** "Paint"
- **Line 18:** "faint"
- **Line 19:** "stuff"
- **Line 20:** "enough"
- **Line 21:** "had"
- **Line 23:** "whate'er"
- **Line 27:** "fool"
- **Line 28:** "mule"
- **Line 29:** "each"
- **Line 31:** "thanked"
- **Line 32:** "ranked"
- **Line 33:** "name"
- **Line 34:** "blame"
- **Line 35:** "skill"
- **Line 36:** "will"
- **Line 37:** "this"
- **Line 39:** "let"
- **Line 40:** "set"
- **Line 42:** "choose"
- **Line 44:** "without"
- **Line 46:** "stands"
- **Line 47:** "meet"
- **Line 49:** "munificence"
- **Line 50:** "pretense"
- **Line 52:** "avowed"
- **Line 53:** "go"

CAESURA

Browning uses caesuras extensively throughout the poem. On the one hand, this adds to the poem's conversational quality, subtly emphasizing the pauses inherent to typical speech

patterns.

The use of caesura also is often used to emphasize dominance or death. Browning first displays this technique in the second line of the poem: he ends the first sentence mid-line when discussing the painting of the duchess, "Looking as if she were alive." By stopping the sentence before the end of the line—with a dramatically final period, no less—Browning hints that the duchess's life was likewise definitively cut short.

This happens again later in the poem in line 46, after the duke implies that he had his wife killed for her excessive friendliness: the duke claims that he issued commands, at which point "all smiles stopped together." Line 46 continues after that sentence ends, but the punctuation in the middle again subtly suggests the finality of death—that the duchess's life was abruptly cut short. In the line immediately after this one, the duke again describes the duchess in the painting as looking "As if alive" and, for a second time, ends the sentence with a caesura after the word "alive." Clearly, then, Browning uses caesuras to hint at death and at life being cut short.

However, caesuras also have a second purpose in the poem: Browning uses them to dramatize the duke's assertion of dominance. For example, line 13:

> Are you | to turn | and ask | thus. Sir, | 'twas not

use a period as a caesura to introduce the idea that the duchess did not cater exclusively to "her husband's presence." This caesura not only divides the sentence into two separate parts—echoing the husband and wife who are feuding—it also divides the iamb in half: the caesura splits the unstressed "thus" from the stressed "Sir," and creates a definitive pause before the duke addresses his guest directly with "Sir." Again the duke seems to be carefully and methodically controlling the flow of the conversation.

Browning uses this technique several times in the poem, particularly when the duke is objecting to the things that made the duchess happy. Note the caesuras that divide the unstressed and stressed syllables in line 53, when the duke directs the emissary to go downstairs, discuss the dowry, and examine a statue:

> At start- | ing, is | my ob- | ject. Nay, | we'll go
> Toge- | ther down, | sir. No- | tice Nep- | tune, though,
> Taming | a sea- | horse, thought | a rar- | ity

The period in "Object. Nay" and in "sir. Notice," and the comma in "horse, thought" are all caesuras that split up iambs. Since caesuras like these were earlier associated with the duke's attempt to control the duchess, their presence here could suggest that the duke will continue to tame the emissary, the prospective in-laws, and the new duchess.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** ".."
- **Line 3:** ",," ";"
- **Line 4:** ", "
- **Line 5:** "?"
- **Line 6:** ",,"
- **Line 9:** "("
- **Line 10:** ",,"
- **Line 11:** ",,"
- **Line 12:** ";," ",,"
- **Line 13:** "., ",,"
- **Line 14:** ",,"
- **Line 15:** ";"
- **Line 16:** ",,"
- **Line 17:** ",,"
- **Line 19:** ".."
- **Line 20:** ", " ",,"
- **Line 21:** ".."
- **Line 22:** "—" "?—"
- **Line 23:** ";"
- **Line 24:** ",,"
- **Line 25:** "! "
- **Line 28:** ",,"
- **Line 29:** "—"
- **Line 31:** ",, " . ," "—"
- **Line 32:** "—" "—"
- **Line 34:** ".."
- **Line 35:** "?"
- **Line 36:** "—" "—"
- **Line 37:** ",, ",,"
- **Line 38:** "; "
- **Line 39:** "—"
- **Line 40:** ",,"
- **Line 41:** ",,"
- **Line 42:** ";"
- **Line 43:** ".."
- **Line 44:** ";"
- **Line 45:** "?," "; "
- **Line 46:** ".."
- **Line 47:** "., " "?"
- **Line 48:** ",, ".."
- **Line 52:** ",,"
- **Line 53:** ",, ",,"
- **Line 54:** ".."
- **Line 55:** ", "

SIBILANCE

The duke uses sibilance throughout the poem, but it's especially strong when he is complaining about the former duchess's frequent smiling and explaining how he silenced her in lines 43-47:

> Oh, sir, she smiled, no doubt,
> Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without
> Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;
> Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands
> As if alive.

When read aloud, the sibilance in this passage creates an incessant hissing effect. Since people sometimes express displeasure or disapproval with hissing, Browning could be using the sibilance in this passage to show how much the duke disapproved of the duchess. This could also be the case with lines 37-39, especially given the presence of the word "disgusts":

> Quite clear to such an one, and say, "Just this
> Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,
> Or there exceed the mark"—

Or, since hissing is also linked to snakes, and thereby dishonesty and sneakiness, the sibilance could show how slippery and evasive the duke is about what he actually had done to his former wife. Indeed, the sibilance throughout the poem subtly hints at the duke's dishonesty—creating a sense of craftiness and manipulation slipping through his carefully controlled conversation.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "s," "s," "ss "
- **Line 4:** "sh," "s," "s"
- **Line 5:** "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 8:** "ss," "s," "c"
- **Line 13:** "s," "s," "S," "s"
- **Line 14:** "s," "s," "s," "c," "s"
- **Line 15:** "ss," "s"
- **Line 16:** "c," "s," "s"
- **Line 17:** "s," "s"
- **Line 19:** "S," "s"
- **Line 20:** "s," "s," "sh"
- **Line 22:** "sh," "s," "s"
- **Line 37:** "s "
- **Line 38:** "s," "s," "ss"
- **Line 39:** "c," "sh"
- **Line 40:** "s," "ss," "s," "s"
- **Line 41:** "s," "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 42:** "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 43:** "s," "s," "sh," "s"
- **Line 44:** "ss," "ss"
- **Line 45:** "s," "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 46:** "s," "s," "s," "sh," "s," "s"
- **Line 47:** "s"
- **Line 52:** "s," "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 53:** "s," "s"
- **Line 54:** "s," "c"
- **Line 55:** "s," "s"
- **Line 56:** "s," "s," "s," "z"

METAPHOR

Towards the beginning of the poem, in lines 17-19, the duke uses a metaphor as an example of the type of flirtatious comment the painter Fra Pandolf might have said to the former duchess:

> "Paint
> Must never hope to reproduce the faint
> Half-flush that dies along her throat."

In this metaphor, the duchess's blush (the "faint / Half-flush") is the tenor, or the thing the metaphor describes, and the vehicle, or the thing to which the tenor is compared, is a separate, living entity from her that lives and "dies."

Ostensibly, this sentence highlights the duchess's beauty and lets the duke boast that a famous painter thought his wife more beautiful than any painting. However, because the metaphor focuses on the fading, or "dying," blush, it also functions as a type of foreshadowing for the duchess's own fate: the duke later lets slip that he was so angry at the duchess for her kindness to others that he "gave commands" and "all smiles stopped together," which, given that he's now shopping for a new wife, might mean that he had her killed. A blush does not literally "die," and this metaphor, then, which initially seems merely to praise her beauty, might actually hint at her bitter end. The imagery of the blush dying on her "throat" goes so far as to suggest the form of her death: she might have been strangled.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 17-19:** "Paint / Must never hope to reproduce the faint / Half-flush that dies along her throat."

POLYPTOTON

The duke uses polyptoton in lines 23-24 to imply that his former duchess was unfaithful: "she liked whate'er / She looked on, and her looks went everywhere." The repetition of the root word "look" (in "looked" and "looks") emphasizes that the duke believed his wife possessed a rather insatiable desire to have her eyes roam over others.

The meaning of "look" also changes between repetitions: the first "look" appears to merely suggest that everything she saw made her happy, but the second "look" sounds like a euphemism, as though she were doing far more than just looking. In the first instance, the duke is angry that things other than himself made his former wife happy. In the second, her

"looks" going "everywhere" means that she was looking at too many things or people—in other words, she failed to focus her eyes solely on her husband. The "looks" here is subtly sexual in nature—a suggestion that she is looking upon other men with sensual desire—but there's no evidence that the duchess was ever actually unfaithful in any way. Instead, she seems to have been simply a kind and happy soul, generous with her smiles.

The duke, meanwhile, is again revealed to be domineering and controlling, insisting that only *he* be allowed to make the duchess happy and that she refuse to even look at anyone else. Rather than serve as a critique of the duchess, this line about "looks" just emphasizes the ridiculous possessiveness of the duke.

Where Polyptoton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 23-24:** "she liked whate'er / She looked on, and her looks went everywhere. "

PERSONIFICATION

The duke personifies the painting of the duchess throughout the poem. He refers to the painting as "she," speaks of its hanging up as "stand[ing]," and asks his guest to "sit and look at her" instead of "it." The duke personifies the painting not because he misses the former duchess or wishes she was still around (or, more likely, still alive), but because the painting is essentially his ideal wife: it is beautiful yet passive, something he can show off yet which is totally under his control.

As an impressive work of art by a famous painter, the painting serves to boost the duke's own status, a sign of how rich and influential he is. At the same time, the painting is entirely controlled by him, since only he can open or close the curtains that cover it and thereby dictate who sees "her" smiles.

The rest of the poem reveals how domineering the duke is, and how angry it made him that his former wife deigned to "look" at anyone other than her husband. Essentially, then, he personifies the painting because he wants an inanimate object to show off rather than a flesh and blood woman who can disagree with or disobey him.

The personification of the painting is thus in keeping with the poem's broader theme about the ways in which the objectification of women dehumanizes them, robbing them of any agency or autonomy. Here, the duchess has been reduced to a silent object for the duke's collection—which is likely exactly what will happen to his potential new wife if she is too generous with her looks and smiles.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "That's my last Duchess painted on the wall, / Looking as if she were alive."
- **Lines 4-5:** " and there she stands. / Will't please you sit and look at her?"
- **Lines 46-47:** "There she stands / As if alive. "

VOCABULARY

Fra Pandolf (Line 3, Line 6, Line 16) - Fra Pandolf is not a real painter, but rather an invention of the poem. "Fra" is the title given to a monk or friar, meaning it's pretty unlikely that he and the duchess were flirting as the duke implies.

Countenance (Line 7) - A "countenance" is someone's facial expression. In the poem, the duke is referring to the expression on the duchess's painting, and using it as a way to begin his diatribe against her.

Durst (Line 11) - Durst means "if he had the boldness to try" and is an archaic way to say "dared."

Bough (Line 27) - A bough is a branch of a tree. The duke is objecting to the fact that a branch with fruit could be as valuable to his former wife as a present from him or as his name itself.

Officious (Line 27) - Officious means "annoyingly helpful" or intruding with help where help isn't wanted. Browning uses it to show that the duke objected to anyone who was nice to the former duchess.

Trifling (Line 35) - Something unimportant. The duke is saying that to call out his wife on her supposedly bad behavior would have been a trivial thing that was beneath him.

Forsooth (Line 41) - Forsooth means "indeed" or "in truth." Browning might be using this archaic word to remind readers that this poem is set in the Renaissance rather than in his own time.

Munificence (Line 49) - Munificence means "extreme generosity." Browning has the duke emphasize the Count's generosity as part of the duke's ploy to get a higher dowry.

Dowry (Line 51) - A dowry is property, money, or other goods a woman's family gives to the prospective husband upon marriage. Browning has the duke mention the dowry to imply the duke's financial motivations in the marriage

Object (Line 53) - "Object" here means goal, but it is also a pun on the fact that the duke plans to objectify his bride-to-be as much as he did the previous duchess.

Neptune (Line 54) - The Roman god of the sea ("Poseidon" in ancient Greece).

Innsbruck (Line 56) - While Claus of Innsbruck was not a real sculptor, Innsbruck is a real city in Austria. During the Renaissance, when the poem takes place, Innsbruck was a culturally and politically important city in Europe. In mentioning a foreign artist, the duke is once again trying to bolster his own status by asserting the reach of his money and influence.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

Browning's "My Last Duchess" is a dramatic monologue, a form that was particularly prevalent during the Victorian period (1837-1901). This form enabled Browning to explore the inner workings of the mind of a narcissistic, power-obsessed tyrant from the past much as a novelist might. The speakers of dramatic monologues are often biased and decidedly unreliable, presenting only partial or warped perspectives on events. That certainly seems to be the case with the duke: he repeatedly explains that his former wife was unfaithful and deserved punishment, but a careful examination of the poem reveals that she was only guilty of being kind to others and smiling too much. Yet because only the duke is talking, he controls the narrative.

The poem doesn't have clear breaks or stanzas, and instead consists of one long stream of couplets, 28 in all (we've highlighted just the first two here, since the pattern continues unbroken throughout the poem). The lack of distinct stanzas subtly reflects the duke's clear love of hearing his own voice and refusal to cede the floor; he talks so much that there isn't room for a stanza break, much like there isn't room for any interjections from the person to whom he is speaking.

Finally, the poem contains both open couplets (rhymed enjambed lines) and closed, or heroic couplets (rhymed end-stopped lines). We've highlighted an example of each. Heroic couplets were particularly popular in England in the 18th century, and because of their regularity, were considered an ideal form for literature of high seriousness, such as translations of ancient Greek epics. Open couplets, because of the lack of punctuation at the end of a line, are more flexible and subtly deemphasize their final rhymes. Browning's poem uses both types of couplets, but the couplets are more often open than closed. Perhaps Browning is suggesting that the duke is not as heroic as he imagines himself to be, and that the duke's cruelty, like the poem's rhymes, are hiding in plain sight, and waiting for someone to notice the disturbing pattern.

METER

Browning's "My Last Duchess" is written in iambic pentameter throughout, although some lines make that easier to detect than others. The poem's final line is one of the simplest to scan, since the entire line is one complete phrase and with proper names to show the stresses:

> Which Claus | of Inns- | bruck cast | in bronze | for me!

Iambic pentameter tends to mimic the sound of regular speech, meaning its use here makes the poem sound more conversational—like the duke is just chatting with a friend rather than artfully choosing his words. Of course, this is likely the duke's intent—to seem like he's speaking off the cuff, when in reality he's following a strict script that allows him to dominate and manipulate his listeners. The meter, too, seems conversational, but follows a pretty strict pattern—for the most part.

The poem does break from this pattern at times, though, as the first two lines demonstrate:

> That's my | last Duch- | ess pain- | ted on | the wall,
> Looking | as if | she were | alive. | I call

The word "Looking" is a trochee, and by putting it at the beginning of the second line of the poem, Browning subtly destabilizes the meter of the opening. At this moment, this irregularity makes the poem sound more conversational—these metrical substitutions are like brief interruptions to keep it from becoming *too* carefully controlled.

Other moments that break with the established meter have a different effect. Note, for example, another trochee starting line 43:

> Never | to stoop. | Oh, sir, | she smiled, | no doubt,

and line 55:

> Taming | a sea- | horse, thought | a rar | ity,

In both lines, the trochees add a sense a forcefulness that mimics the lines' content. The duke chooses *never* to stoop; and Neptune (a figure in whom the duke surely sees himself) is bolding taming the sea-horse. Meter, here, reflects the duke's desire for dominance and control. (Note that the meter of the final foot and a half of line 55 could reasonably be seen as being rar | ity without changing the meaning of the line in a significant way).

Thematically, then, while the poem seems to resemble normal speech in terms of its meter, Browning controls the pace as much as the duke controls the flow of his conversation with the emissary.

RHYME SCHEME

"My Last Duchess" is written in rhyming couplets. The rhymes are all perfect rhymes, and the scheme of the poem is consistent throughout. It follows this pattern:

> AABBCCDD

And so forth right unit the end of the poem.

The rhyme scheme is subtly deemphasized, however, by the poem's lack of end-stopped lines: because all the lines are

enjambed, freely flowing from one to the next without definitive ends, the rhymes seem nearly hidden when read out loud. The ends of sentences don't always align with the end of the actual lines of poetry, and this gives the poem a more conversational quality. The opening lines of the poem demonstrate this:

> That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
> Looking as if she were alive. I call
> That piece a wonder, now: Fra Pandolf's hands

"Wall" and "call" rhyme, but because the sentence with "call" is enjambed, the rhyme almost disappears; the line flows swiftly on to the next line in order to complete its sentence, rather than lingering on the rhyme sound of "call" itself. In other words, there's no real pause between "call" and the next line, which makes it easy to almost gloss right over the rhyme, to fail to notice it, when the poem is read aloud (and as a dramatic monologue it's understood that the duke is indeed meant to be *speaking* these words).

The same can be said of many spots throughout the poem. Take lines 13-16:

> Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, 'twas not
> Her husband's presence only, called that spot
> Of joy into the Duchess' cheek; perhaps
> Fra Pandolf chanced to say, "Her mantle laps

While it's easy to visually spot the rhymes when looking at the poem on the page, if you speak these lines out loud and respect the enjambment, you'll see how the rhymes are actually quite subtle and natural sounding. There's not any especially prevalent emphasis on the rhymes within these sentences, though they clearly appear in a very regular pattern.

Thematically, this relates to the fact that duke controls things while pretending to be talking off the cuff: the poem seems to resemble normal speech in terms of its rhyme scheme, but Browning controls the sounds as tightly as the Duke controls the conversation.

SPEAKER

The speaker of this dramatic monologue is the Duke of Ferrara, who is addressing the emissary of a Count before dowry negotiations for the Count's daughter. Although the speaker claims to merely want to show the emissary of his prospective bride around his estate and to show off the artwork, he actually wants to complain about the unsuitability of his first wife, to brag about his power and wealth, and to manipulate the emissary and the Count into giving him a higher dowry for the daughter. Since this is a dramatic monologue, everything is told from the speaker's perspective, and readers never hear the emissary speak nor learn how the duke's words are received. Throughout the poem, the speaker unintentionally reveals himself to be a tyrant, an expert manipulator, and, likely, a murderer.

SETTING

The setting is the Duke of Ferrara's estate in 16th-century Italy. Although the poem does not include many detailed descriptions of the estate itself, it does describe the duke's extensive art collection, including the painting of the Duke's former wife (the duchess) and a statue of the god Neptune taming a seahorse. Both works of art are produced by famous (fictional) artists, making them markers of the duke's wealth. It's safe to assume that this estate is large and impressive, given the duke's emphasis on his social status and clout.

More specifically, the poem takes place in front of a large painting of the duke's wife, who is presumably now deceased. The painting has not been placed haphazardly placed in the estate, either: it has curtains around it and a seat in front of it. This arrangement allows the duke to manipulate his guests into listening to his spiel about it.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Robert Browning, along with Alfred Tennyson and Augusta Webster, was one of the great Victorian innovators of the dramatic monologue. Such monologues often reveal deep (and troubling) insight into their speakers, typically without said speaker even realizing it. This is certainly the case with the duke of this poem, whose complaints about his wife instead reveal his own deep character flaws. Browning repeatedly turned to the form to explore the psychology of his characters, whether they were psychopaths and murders ("Porphyria's Lover") or artists ("Andrea del Sarto").

"My Last Duchess" was first published in *Dramatic Lyrics* (1842), which was the first of Browning's several volumes of dramatic monologues. Like several of his dramatic monologues and longer narrative poems, Browning set "My Last Duchess" in Renaissance Italy, and although his speaker, the Duke of Ferrara is not an artist himself (as are the speakers of "A Toccata of Galuppi's" or *Sordello*), he is a *patron* of the arts.

Although it did not become famous when it was originally published, the poem is now regularly printed in anthologies and upheld as a prime example of the dramatic monologue. It has reappeared in countless contemporary literary works, from the Margaret Atwood's story of the same title to Richard Howard's poem "Nikolaus Mardruz to his Master Ferdinand, Count of Tyrol, 1565."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Browning wrote this poem during the Victorian Era, which encompassed the second half of the 19th century during the reign of Queen Victoria in England. The Victorians were fascinated with the Italian Renaissance, including its poetic forms, music, architecture, and culture. The Renaissance, which extended from roughly the 14th to the early 17th century, placed an emphasis on humanism, individualism, the arts, and science—all of which particularly appealed to a Victorian society that was making scientific and artistic advances of its own.

The Renaissance also was a time when some elite and wealthy families served as patrons of artists, supporting their favorites' artistic endeavors. In a way, the poem critiques such patrons as perhaps being more concerned with the social clout conferred by being associated with certain artists than they were with the actual artwork itself. In other words, it suggests that some patrons just wanted to seem cool and influential by supporting artists, but didn't actually appreciate their art.

This poem focuses on a real historical patron of the arts—the Duke of Ferrara. Also known as Alfonso II d'Este, the Duke of Ferrara was an actual historical figure who lived in Italy in the late 1500s. Like the speaker, Alfonso II had multiple wives, the first of which died very young and after only a few years of marriage.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Robert Browning's Answers to Some Questions, 1914 — In March of 1914, Cornhill Magazine interviewed Robert Browning about some of his poems, including "My Last Duchess." He briefly explains his thoughts on the duchess. (https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=coo.31924066186044;view=1up;seq=328)
- Chris de Burgh, "The Painter" (1976) — Chris de Burgh (a Northern Irish singer-songwriter, best known for "Lady in Red") wrote a song from the perspective of the Duke of Ferrara about his former wife, in which the duchess was having an affair with Fra Pandolf. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=azLxJiYpsT0)
- My Last Duchess Glass Window — The Armstrong Browning Library and Museum at Baylor University has a stained glass window inspired by "My Last Duchess." (https://www.baylor.edu/browninglibrary/index.php?id=942813)
- Julian Glover performs "My Last Duchess" — Actor Julian Glover performs "My Last Duchess" with a suitably dramatic tone of voice. Note how he emphasizes the conversational quality of the poem. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i5AoZY6a_kE)
- Nikolaus Mardruz to his Master Ferdinand, Count of Tyrol, 1565 by Richard Howard, 1929 — This poem by American poet Richard Howard provides the Ferrara's guest's perspective on the meeting between himself and the duke. (https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/nikolaus-mardruz-his-master-ferdinand-count-tyrol-1565)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ROBERT BROWNING POEMS

- Meeting at Night
- Porphyria's Lover

HOW TO CITE

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