**My Last Duchess**

BY [ROBERT BROWNING](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/robert-browning)

Study Material by

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*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!

## Historical background[[edit](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=My_Last_Duchess&action=edit&section=1" \o "Edit section: Historical background)]

The poem is preceded by "*Ferrara:*", indicating that the speaker is most likely [Alfonso II d'Este](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfonso_II_d%27Este), the fifth Duke of [Ferrara](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ferrara) (1533–1598), who, at the age of 25, married [Lucrezia di Cosimo de' Medici](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lucrezia_di_Cosimo_de%27_Medici" \o "Lucrezia di Cosimo de' Medici), the 14-year-old daughter of [Cosimo I de' Medici](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cosimo_I_de%27_Medici" \o "Cosimo I de' Medici), Grand Duke of [Tuscany](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tuscany), and [Eleonora di Toledo](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eleonora_di_Toledo" \o "Eleonora di Toledo).

Lucrezia was not well educated, and the Medicis could be considered "[nouveau riche](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nouveau_riche)" in comparison to the venerable and distinguished [Este](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/House_of_Este) family (Alfonso II d'Este's remark regarding his gift of a "nine-hundred-years-old name" clearly indicates that he considered his bride beneath him socially). She came with a sizeable [dowry](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dowry), and the couple married in 1558. He then abandoned her for two years before she died on 21 April 1561, at age 17. Although there was a strong suspicion of poisoning, it is more likely that the cause of her death was tuberculosis. [[2]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/My_Last_Duchess#cite_note-2). It is speculated that the rumor of poisoning was started by enemies of Alfonso II.[[3]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/My_Last_Duchess#cite_note-3)

The Duke then sought the hand of [Barbara](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barbara_of_Austria), eighth daughter of [the Holy Roman Emperor Ferdinand I](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ferdinand_I,_Holy_Roman_Emperor) and [Anna of Bohemia and Hungary](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anna_of_Bohemia_and_Hungary) and the sister of the Count of [Tyrol](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/County_of_Tyrol), Ferdinand II.[[4]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/My_Last_Duchess#cite_note-4) The count was in charge of arranging the marriage; the chief of his entourage, Nikolaus Madruz, a native of [Innsbruck](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Innsbruck), was his courier. Madruz is presumably the listener in the poem.

The other characters named in the poem – painter Frà Pandolf and sculptor, Claus of Innsbruck – are fictional.

The poem is a representation of male and female relationships and their contrasting powers or lack thereof. Women in the past and even in some cultures today are considered pieces of property. Within many religions and cultures, the male bestows a position of dominance and control over women, which constricts their right of free will. During the mid 1800s, a daughter was married off to gain more power, land, allies, and even to gain access to prestigious bloodlines. The duke in this poem uses his power to control a woman, his duchess, by using her as currency

**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.

### Summary

This poem is loosely based on historical events involving Alfonso, the Duke of Ferrara, who lived in the 16th century. The Duke is the speaker of the poem, and tells us he is entertaining an emissary who has come to negotiate the Duke’s marriage (he has recently been widowed) to the daughter of another powerful family. As he shows the visitor through his palace, he stops before a portrait of the late Duchess, apparently a young and lovely girl. The Duke begins reminiscing about the portrait sessions, then about the Duchess herself. His musings give way to a diatribe on her disgraceful behavior: he claims she flirted with everyone and did not appreciate his “gift of a nine-hundred-years- old name.” As his monologue continues, the reader realizes with ever-more chilling certainty that the Duke in fact caused the Duchess’s early demise: when her behavior escalated, “[he] gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together.” Having made this disclosure, the Duke returns to the business at hand: arranging for another marriage, with another young girl. As the Duke and the emissary walk leave the painting behind, the Duke points out other notable artworks in his collection.

### Form

“My Last Duchess” comprises rhyming pentameter lines. The lines do not employ end-stops; rather, they use *enjambment*—gthat is, sentences and other grammatical units do not necessarily conclude at the end of lines. Consequently, the rhymes do not create a sense of closure when they come, but rather remain a subtle driving force behind the Duke’s compulsive revelations. The Duke is quite a performer: he mimics others’ voices, creates hypothetical situations, and uses the force of his personality to make horrifying information seem merely colorful. Indeed, the poem provides a classic example of a dramatic monologue: the speaker is clearly distinct from the poet; an audience is suggested but never appears in the poem; and the revelation of the Duke’s character is the poem’s primary aim.

### Commentary

But Browning has more in mind than simply creating a colorful character and placing him in a picturesque historical scene. Rather, the specific historical setting of the poem harbors much significance: the Italian Renaissance held a particular fascination for Browning and his contemporaries, for it represented the flowering of the aesthetic and the human alongside, or in some cases in the place of, the religious and the moral. Thus the temporal setting allows Browning to again explore sex, violence, and aesthetics as all entangled, complicating and confusing each other: the lushness of the language belies the fact that the Duchess was punished for her natural sexuality. The Duke’s ravings suggest that most of the supposed transgressions took place only in his mind. Like some of Browning’s fellow Victorians, the Duke sees sin lurking in every corner. The reason the speaker here gives for killing the Duchess ostensibly differs from that given by the speaker of “Porphyria’s Lover” for murder Porphyria; however, both women are nevertheless victims of a male desire to inscribe and fix female sexuality. The desperate need to do this mirrors the efforts of Victorian society to mold the behavior—gsexual and otherwise—gof individuals. For people confronted with an increasingly complex and anonymous modern world, this impulse comes naturally: to control would seem to be to conserve and stabilize. The Renaissance was a time when morally dissolute men like the Duke exercised absolute power, and as such it is a fascinating study for the Victorians: works like this imply that, surely, a time that produced magnificent art like the Duchess’s portrait couldn’t have been entirely evil in its allocation of societal control—geven though it put men like the Duke in power.

A poem like “My Last Duchess” calculatedly engages its readers on a psychological level. Because we hear only the Duke’s musings, we must piece the story together ourselves. Browning forces his reader to become involved in the poem in order to understand it, and this adds to the fun of reading his work. It also forces the reader to question his or her own response to the subject portrayed and the method of its portrayal. We are forced to consider, Which aspect of the poem dominates: the horror of the Duchess’s fate, or the beauty of the language and the powerful dramatic development? Thus by posing this question the poem firstly tests the Victorian reader’s response to the modern world—git asks, Has everyday life made you numb yet?—gand secondly asks a question that must be asked of all art—git queries, Does art have a moral component, or is it merely an aesthetic exercise? In these latter considerations Browning prefigures writers like Charles Baudelaire and Oscar Wilde