

### 13. "My Last Duchess" by Robert Browning

#### POET

Robert Browning (1812-1889)

Browning is an English poet who is famous for writing poems in the dramatic monologue form.

He was born in Surrey. His father was a well-paid administrator at the Bank of England and his grandfather was a wealthy slave owner in the West Indies. His father was an avid collector of books who encouraged his children to pursue the arts. His mother was a devout non-conformist. By the age of 12, Browning had written his first collection of poems. He studied Greek at University College, London. He devoted his life to writing poetry, remaining at home with his parents until he was 34, when he married the poet Elizabeth Barrett. Her father disapproved of her marrying anyone, and so the couple moved to Italy where they had a son and lived out the rest of their lives.

#### BACKGROUND

The poem is based on real characters from history. The speaker is Duke Alfonso II who ruled northern Italy, Ferrara, from 1559-97. His title was the Duke of Ferrara. His first wife was Lucrezia de Medici. She was fifteen years old when she married him, and she died two years later in 1561. There were suspicions that she had been poisoned. The poem is set in 1564, three years after her death. A negotiator has arrived from the Count of Tyrol to arrange for the Duke to marry his daughter. The Duke married three times during his life time. The artist who painted Lucrezia's picture is also an historical figure, Fra Pandolf, who was a celebrated portrait painter.

#### SUMMARY

The poem is spoken by the character of the Duke of Ferrara. He is showing a man who has arrived to organise his marriage to a new woman, a portrait of his dead first wife. While the Duke describes his first wife, the reader begins to suspect that something dreadful may have happened to her.

#### ANALYSIS

The poem is written in the form of a dramatic monologue. A monologue is a speech given by one character. Here the character is the Duke of Ferrara. We do not hear any other voices. The poem is entirely his voice telling a gentleman about his wife. The reason the monologue is called dramatic is because it is like a scene from a play or film. It captures a dramatic moment which takes place in a specific time and place which we are allowed to watch, like an audience in a theatre. The Duke is speaking to an ambassador or negotiator who has come to arrange his marriage to the daughter of his boss. The entire poem takes place with the Duke standing in front of a portrait of his first wife, describing it to the ambassador. The dramatic monologue form is used to create convincing characters in poetry. These characters then reveal their identities through what they say. The form encourages the reader to read between the lines of what the character says to find the truth.

The poem is one long verse. This can make it difficult to read, but if you break it into sentences, it becomes easier. It is written in iambic pentameter with every two lines rhyming

– rhyming couplets. There is lots of enjambment, or poetry lines which run the sentences on. This is all done to give the effect of real speech patterns.

The title of the poem “My Last Duchess” is significant. It tells us the speaker is using a possessive pronoun “My” to show he owns the woman. The word “Last” informs us that she is his previous wife. It suggests that there will be more wives. This immediately hints to the reader that the speaker is quite callous about his relationships with women. The subheading “Ferrara” tells us the poem takes place in northern Italy and makes clear that this is based on the historical character of Duke Alfonso II.

The first line throws us into the middle of a conversation. The Duke is pointing out a picture of his first wife, “That’s my last Duchess”. The picture is a painting which captures the woman “Looking as if she were alive”. The phrase “as if” tells us that the woman is no longer alive; she is dead. Instead of speaking sadly about his deceased wife, the Duke goes on to describe the painter who made the picture. He says the artist was “Fra Pandolf”. Immediately, we see the Duke likes to boast that he has great pieces of art made by famous artists. The Duke invites the ambassador to “sit and look at her”. This places the negotiator in the position of the reader, patiently watching the Duke explain the picture to us.

The Duke explains that “none puts by The curtain I have drawn for you, but I”. This tells us that the picture is concealed behind a curtain which the Duke has opened for the ambassador to view the painting. The curtain is symbolic here. It tells the reader that the Duke does not like sharing his possessions with others. He covers up a picture so only he can see it. It also suggests he enjoys being in control. Only he can open the curtain, therefore he likes having power over others. This begins to ring alarm bells for the reader. The Duke is not making a good impression; he sounds controlling and selfish.

The Duke reveals that the face in the picture has an “earnest glance”. The word “earnest” means both serious and sincere. Browning wants the reader to picture the scene and imagine the painting itself. We imagine the face of a young girl with a serious expression. The word “glance” not only describes someone’s look, it also suggests that she only looks up briefly. Again, this is creating a picture of the Duchess as a lovely, diffident and serious girl. The Duke goes on to say that “Strangers”, like the ambassador, always ask “How such a glance came there” when they see the portrait. Therefore the Duchess’s anxious look has prompted others to ask what caused her to look so serious. This makes the reader wonder how her husband treated the Duchess to make her look so solemn at such a young age.

The Duke says that the Duchess was not made happy only by her “husband’s presence”. This is an odd thing to say. Only a very controlling person, would expect their wife to be made happy only when they are around. It tells us that the Duke expected his wife only to enjoy his company and have no other pleasures. This implies that the Duke treated his Duchess as an object that he owned and controlled.

The Duke goes on to give examples of some things which made the Duchess look pleased. He says “perhaps” compliments from the painter called up that “spot of joy”. The word “perhaps” implies that the Duke actually does not have any facts about this matter; he is speculating because this is what he believes. This strikes the reader as paranoid and unfair. The phrase “spot of joy” is an interesting one. The metaphor describes a look of pleasure as a “spot”. A spot is something small, but it is also something which marks or taints. It is

something which should not naturally be there. This tells us that the Duke does not like his wife looking or being happy. This does not bode well for their marriage. The implication here is that the Duke believes his wife has committed adultery.

The Duke explains his wife had a heart “too soon made glad, Too easily impressed”. Both these emotions are positive, but the word “too” which introduces them shows that the Duke thinks his wife is excessively happy and admiring of others. He is turning her good qualities against her. He continues to describe her character as someone who “liked whate’er She looked on”. This implies she was a happy and positive person who always saw the best in things. However, the Duke says “her looks went everywhere”. He is implying that he wanted to control what she was able to see. The theme of sight recurs throughout the poem. This is unsurprising in a piece about looking at a picture, but the theme is developed in interesting ways. There are lots of instances of perception and misperception to show that things might not be the way they initially appear. This is to encourage the reader to look below the surface and judge the Duke’s behaviour.

The Duke explains “’twas all one”. This means that everything his wife saw was treated with equal respect and appreciation. Again, this would be a positive quality for most people, but for the Duke it is a sign that she is unable to appreciate his superiority. He continues with examples of the things his wife enjoyed such as “The dropping of the daylight in the West, The bough of cherries” and the “white mule she rode”. These are all natural things which she takes pleasure in. She loves the sunset, delicious fruit, and pretty animals. Clearly, the Duchess does not value expensive things; she likes the ordinary pleasures of the world. The fact this annoys her husband suggests that he is much more materialistic and elitist. He only wants her to like things which involve him and which are considered valuable by others.

The Duke explains “She thanked men...as if she ranked My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name With anybody’s gift”. This highlights the way the Duke believes his wife should be grateful to him for marrying her, for giving her his name. The idea of a wife being given her husband’s name upon marriage as a valuable gift is telling. The changing of a woman’s name underlines that she has been taken into the possession or property of her husband. The Duke thinks his wife should appreciate his name as not only a sign she belongs to him, but also a privilege because it is an ancient title which has been passed down for almost a millennium. The Duke thinks she only values his status as much as her mule and he dislikes this.

The Duke’s rhetorical question highlights how much he is irritated by his wife’s lack of materialism. He asks “Who’d stoop to blame This sort of trifling?” The word “trifling” means treating him as though he is unimportant. The Duke thinks his wife does not show him enough respect. He wonders what sort of person would “stoop” or diminish themselves “to blame” or to tell off someone for this behaviour. Therefore the Duke is too proud to lower himself to his wife’s level and tell her he does not like her happy attitude to life.

The character of the Duke is further revealed when he digresses. He says “Even had you skill In speech – (which I have not)”. The phrase in brackets or parentheses, shows that he claims not to be able to speak well, but this is clearly not true. He has just bent the ambassador’s ear without pausing; the Duke clearly likes the sound of his own voice very much.

The Duke says that he thought about telling his wife “Just this or that in you disgusts me; here you miss or there exceed the mark”. This rehearsal of lines he thought about delivering to his wife discloses the personality of the Duke who uses very strong language to describe his wife’s attitude. If you find something disgusting then it is repulsive, and if you do not meet the mark then you fail to live up to a pre-set standard. The Duke clearly judges his wife very harshly as though she were a servant rather than a partner.

However, the Duke explains that he does not want to teach his wife or help her to “be lessoned”. He believes “E’en then would be some stooping; and I choose Never to stoop.” The Duke repeats the word “stoop” to emphasize his belief that speaking to his wife would involve him losing his superior status or bowing down to her, and he is not prepared to do this.

The Duke explains that as his wife smiles at everyone with “Much the same smile” he does not like it. He wants her to smile at him differently because he is so much more important than anyone else. Therefore “I gave commands”. Instead of speaking to his wife, the Duke orders her. The word “commands” means he treats her like a servant or slave. She is his possession to punish and order about. After this, “all smiles stopped”. His wife is clearly upset.

At this point in the poem, the Duke changes his subject and asks the ambassador to stand, “Will’t please you rise?” This is a caesura or break in the poetry line which suggests an abrupt change of direction. This denotes the moment when the Duchess’s smiles stopped, happiness died, and, presumably, her life ended. The fact he does not tell us how she died makes us even more suspicious. A man as controlling and powerful as the Duke could easily have his wife murdered because she ceased to please him. “all smiles stopped” could hint that the Duke had his wife killed because he was jealous of the way she smiled at other men.

The Duke moves on to the business he has with the ambassador. He says the Count, the ambassador’s “master” will give him a “dowry” with his “fair daughter”. A “dowry” is a sum of money and goods which the father of a daughter paid to her husband in appreciation of him taking her off his hands. It is a formal arrangement which comes from the time when women were thought of as male possessions. In the modern world, this tradition is observed in weddings by the bride’s father paying for the wedding and walking her down the aisle to be given away.

Frighteningly, the Duke says the Count’s daughter “is my object”. This makes obvious that he thinks of women as belongings – they are objectified and dehumanised. The reader is anxious about what might happen to this new wife if she does not please her husband. The Duke ends by pointing out another one of his valuable belongings, it is a sculpture. This demonstrates that the Duke is a collector of beautiful objects which he can control; his wives are just another one of these collections.

The Duke directs the ambassador to “Notice Neptune, though, Taming a sea-horse”. It is another art work. Neptune is the god of the sea. He is a powerful male figure, just like the Duke. In the sculpture he is controlling a “sea-horse”. These are delicate, beautiful creatures, like the Duchess. The sculpture symbolises the relationship between the Duke and women; he wants to overpower them, and make them serve him.

Because status is so important to the Duke he tells the ambassador that it was made by a famous sculptor, Claus of Innsbruck. The appearance of having the very best is so important to the Duke that he has to boast about it. He concludes by saying that the statue was “cast in bronze for me!” The poem ends with a metal, bronze, which is hard and cold, like the Duke. The exclamatory phrase “for me!” shows that the Duke only likes things which are made especially to please him. Ownership is vital to him.

#### POEMS WITH LOTS OF POTENTIAL COMPARISONS WITH THIS ONE

“Sonnet 116” - provides interesting comparisons as it is about a very different ideal of love.

“La Belle Dame Sans Merci” – provides excellent comparisons as it reverses the gender relationship with the man falling victim to a powerful woman.