

My last duchess, how
do i love thee and a
woman to her lover



As a part of my English lessons, I have been doing a lot of work on pre-1914 (in 1914, World War I began, causing a big change in literature) poetry.

There were three poems I have been focusing on, each written by a different author: firstly, the poem My Last Duchess, written in 1842 by Robert Browning (1819-1889); secondly, A Woman to Her Lover by Christina Walsh, whose life is little known and it is only sure that she'd lived and wrote the poem in 1800s; and finally poem written by Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861) in 1846, called How Do I Love Thee, affected by author's relationship with Robert Browning. In this piece of coursework I am going to use the knowledge of the poems I gained through working with them and compare them with regard to how the theme of love is expressed and what type of love is shown in each of them. I will also take into consideration how the poems' aspects affect the reader (where I speak about how something is supposed to make the poems sound/seem like something, I refer to the impact on the reader as it is the reader who recognizes this) and my personal feelings.

The first thing I want to compare is the content of each poem; that means what the poem is actually about. In contrast to My Last Duchess, the poems How Do I Love Thee and A Woman to Her Lover express a real love as we would imagine it; a love of two lovers. Both of these two poems talk about the strong feelings associated with love and its place in life; however, there is one point in which they show distinction. Each of the four stanzas of A Woman To Her Lover focus on a different topic; the first one talks about men ruling over women in marriage ("...

o make of me a bondslave / to bear you children, wearing out my life”), the second one is about men loving and “worshipping” women as beautiful things they own, for how they represent the perfect being (“a wingless angel who can do no wrong”), and the third one is about men understanding women as means of sexual pleasure (“... my body supple only for your sense delight”). All of these topics are expressed as negative in the poem, unlike the last stanza’s topic; true love in an equal relationship where the partners share everything (“

.. o live and work, to love and die with you”). Consequently, the theme of strong feelings is only to be found at the end; the poem *How Do I Love Thee*, on the other hand, doesn’t talk about anything else other than how much the speaker loves the one to whom the poem is addressed. It starts with the question “How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.” and there are 8 answers of diverse lengths in the poem, each (except the last one) beginning with “I love thee”, such as “I love thee to the level of everyday’s”.

The content of the last poem, *My Last Duchess*, undoubtedly shows a great distinction to contents of both poems just examined. It is the only one in which a male expresses his feelings, where the main character is not identified with the author, where there is a real story and finally where there isn’t any sign of the actual true love. It tells us the story of a priggish Duke, who had a young wife that was kind and easy to impress; “She had a heart... oo soon made glad, Too easily impressed.

”. As the Duke was very jealous and thought that she had to love only him, also because of the noble title he gave her through marriage, saying “as if

she ranked My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name With anybody's gift", he felt really annoyed by her being impressed by other things than him, as he expresses in " Sir, 'twas not Her husband's presence only, called that spot Of joy into the Duchess' cheek". He, however, thought that telling her that he is feeling bad about something she does would be " stooping", and he " choose Never to stoop"; thus, he decided that the only solution is to get her murdered; we know this as he tells us that he " gave commands; Then all smiles stopped together. ". In addition, the whole story is narrated to a man who works as a messenger for a wealthy Count when the Duke shows him his house and they come to a painting of the Duchess, as noted in " That's my last Duchess painted on the wall", which is in fact hidden behind a curtain so that no-one else than him could look at it - " none puts by The curtain I have drawn for you, but I", and the messenger is in the house, because the Duke wants to arrange a marriage with his lord's young daughter, who he of course understands just as a way to expand his wealth, which he shows by saying " no just pretence Of mine for dowry will be disallowed; though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed At starting, is my object"; he is sure that he will get a huge dowry as the Count, her father, is very " munificent".

An important aspect of each poem is its structure, as the characters are expressed in it (even more so in case of the Duke, because the whole poem is his own speech written down, and therefore it is wholly representative of him), and as it plays a significant role in making the desired effect on the reader; how the phrases are put together changes the way we look at them and therefore our feelings about the poem. My Last Duchess has a structure

of a dramatic monologue and – consequently – is the longest poem out of the three. A dramatic monologue is one long piece of epic poetry that is not split into stanzas, and that has only one character speaking and expressing themselves (Speaker), one character who is spoken to (Listener) and something the speech focuses on (Theme) through the whole text. It also maintains straight forms; rhyming scheme (there are rhyming couplets in My Last Duchess adhering to the scheme a a b b c c – as we can see at the end of each row, like in " Or there exceed the mark' – and if she let / Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set"; let-set – but if the poem is read, they are not to be heard for the sentences continue unstopped over the ends of the lines) and equally long lines (every line in My Last Duchess has 10 syllables).

The poem which does not maintain such forms is A Woman to Her Lover; it is structured as a free verse and as such it has unequal numbers of (unequally long) lines in its four stanzas, each of which focuses on different part of the poem's thought, and no rhyming scheme. This is supposed to make the verse seem easy and fetter-less. To me it seems even more unstructured in comparison to the last poem, How Do I Love Thee, which has probably the most complicated and strict form, or at least rhyming scheme. As an Italian sonnet, it has 14 lines, first 8 of which, called " octave", have a different structure than the remaining 6, called " sestet", although these two parts are not split into two different stanzas; the octave use the rhyming scheme of a b b a a b b a and the sestet the scheme of c d c d c d. At the point where the rhyming scheme changes, the language and mood of a poem changes as well, and thus the change of structure is here to support the contrast between these two parts that make the poem sound interesting. Although it

had been said that A Woman to Her Lover is quite unstructured, there is one big thing that falls within the category "structure" in it; rhetorical devices that are actually often used in powerful speeches.

The purpose of these devices is to support the arguments of the speech – or, in this case, poem – and make it sound reliable and strong. To give an example: direct address makes the receiver feel involved in what the speech is saying, and in A Woman to Her Lover we can find this e. g. in "If that be what you ask, oh lover I refuse you."; a list of three similar things (such as feelings or terms) that are of similar nature should make something positive or negative sound stronger, and in A Woman to Her Lover good examples of it are to be found: "Oh shame, and pity and abasement", "..

. your comrade, friend and mate" or "of passion, and of joy and sorrow"; contrast, as seen in A Woman to Her Lover fragments "O lover I refuse you... – ... I am yours forever" or "

.. shame, and pity and abasement..

. – ...urity and height" is supposed to make the negative part of contrasting phrases even more negative and the positive one even more positive; and emotive words arouse emotion in the receiver that encourages her/him to assume the speech's opinions, and there are many of them in the poem, just few of which are "drudgery", "refuse", "doll", "feeble", "fool", "clamorous", "wakened", "forever", "laugh" or "heart".

Another aspect of a structure of a poem is the way the punctuation is used.

In poetry, strong punctuation (periods, exclamation ; question marks, <https://assignbuster.com/my-last-duchess-how-do-i-love-thee-and-a-woman-to-her-lover/>

semicolons, colons and dashes) are normally put at the end of each line to divide it from the following one, as it forces the reader to stop reading for a moment. But moreover it can be used in the middle of a line, whilst the actual sentence may be (but doesn't have to be) pulled over the end of the line and continue on the next one. This is called caesura, and pulling the sentence over the end of a line is called enjambment. Both force the reader to continue reading even though the line ends, or, on the other hand, stop reading in the middle of a line; this makes the poem sound original.

My Last Duchess uses this in practically every line, but the remaining two poems never continue a sentence where the line ends and although both of them few times contain dashes or commas at some point inside the line (A Woman to Her Lover for example in " go! – I am no doll to dress and sit for feeble worship /" and How Do I Love Thee in " Smiles, tears, of all my life – and, if God choose /"), it never stops the reader in the way that is to be found in My Last Duchess. That is also the only poem that uses brackets and dashes to put comments inside the speech, e. g. ashes in " Somehow – I know not how – as if she ranked", brackets in " But to myself they turned (since none puts by The curtain I have drawn for you, but I) And seemed" or both at once in " In speech – (which I have not) – to make your will", that not only make it sound quite special, but interestingly also reinforce the image of Duke trying to speak sophisticatedly.

Furthermore, as it is the longest one, My Last Duchess leads in the number of exclamation and question marks contained, which also express the Duke's character; he is not able to control his feelings and therefore shouts, and also asks questions and then doesn't wait for the answer and continue to <https://assignbuster.com/my-last-duchess-how-do-i-love-thee-and-a-woman-to-her-lover/>

speak (as we can see in "Who'd stoop to blame This sort of trifling? Even had you skill...'), which makes him seem very arrogant. The language of My Last Duchess is in my opinion the simplest, although it is still quite intriguing. It is important to remember that a dramatic monologue is a speech of one character – here the Duke – and hence the language that is used doesn't only show how the author thinks, but also something about the character, as it is supposed to be she/he who uses it.

I believe that the wide range of interesting words and similes to be found in the poem, as well as mentioned comments he insets to his speech, is there to show that the Duke is doing his best to look very sophisticated, for he – in the poem – lives in the renaissance period. A good example of this is how the words 'countenance', 'earnest' and 'glance' are used in "Strangers like you that pictured countenance, The depth and passion of its earnest glance" as well as – considering similes – the events he picks out as an example of something that has annoyed him, e. g. what Fri?? Pandolf could say that impressed the Duchess instead of his presence: "...

perhaps Fri?? 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". That he is able to come out with interesting stories like this – again – shows he's (or at least is trying to be) sophisticated. Another part of the poem's language that doesn't show the Duke's sophistication, but rather his emotions, is how its tone changes through the poem together with the content. At the beginning, he is talking softly and easily to the messenger; the tone starts to be sharper once he gets to the point of the origin of the "spot of joy into the Duchess cheek"
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and the sharpness continue to rise as he is talking more and more about what annoyed him, then, I think, frosts somewhere in the middle (where there are for example most exclamation marks) and continues in the same, sharp spirit until he gets to the point of murder. Then the tone breaks and starts to speak quite easily again.

However, as I have already commented, the language of the remaining two poems is far more complicated. I believe this is caused by the fact that they are lyrical (whilst My Last Duchess is an epic poem) so the language is of larger significance in them; yet, the first aspect of A Woman to Her Lover's is also to be found in My Last Duchess. Those are interesting, emotional words, but I have, however, already listed them and talked about them when analysing the rhetorical devices of the poem. Hence I would like to now concentrate on another language aspect found in both A Woman to Her Lover and How Do I Love Thee; metaphors. Christina Walsh uses firstly metaphors of war, slavery and service to express how men force women to marry and work for them, saying " Do you come to bend me to your will As conqueror to vanquished to make of me a bondslave(?)" and " No servant will I be", and then supernatural terms when expressing how men worship women as perfect beings, as a trophy they can brag of, or how happy will her an her lover's life be once their love is equal: ".

.. ou think to wed with one from heaven sent Whose very deed and word and wish is golden A wingless angel" or " our co-equal love will make the stars to laugh with joy And we shall have the music of the spheres for bridal march".

Likewise, there are many metaphors in How Do I Love Thee; this is actually quite inferable, because the whole poem is about expressing feelings, and <https://assignbuster.com/my-last-duchess-how-do-i-love-thee-and-a-woman-to-her-lover/>

metaphors therefore have to be used, because otherwise perhaps anything that could be said is " I love thee very much". To summarise, she firstly uses the metaphor of measuring, saying " I love thee with the depth and breadth and height", secondly metaphors of everyday life, for instance " I love thee with the breath, Smiles, tears, of all my life! ", then religious metaphors like " I love thee.

.. ith my lost saints" and finally other miscellaneous metaphors; let's pick " I love thee freely, as man strive for Right" and " I love thee with the love I seemed to lose. " The theme of love is used in all of the three poems examined, even though in My Last Duchess it is not a love as we would imagine it.

But that is actually acceptable; each of the three poems portrays love differently. If I was asked to give three adjectives to describe love that is shown in My Last Duchess, I would list " unequal", " jealous" and " sick". Unlike in the remaining two, love in this poem is a love of a male to a female, not vice-versa. The Duke surely loves, or - at the time his speech takes place - loved, his wife, the Duchess. But he loved her more than she did, or at least thought he did (" Oh sir, she smiled, no doubt, Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without Much the same smile. ") and was confident that she had to only love and be impressed by him, not others.

He loved her; but not with a real love, so that he would want only the best for her, but as an acquisition, as a nice thing that belongs to him. If his love was healthy, would it let him give commands to get her murdered and feel no guilt for it? His love seems even poorer in comparison to a love that is

expressed in *How Do I Love Thee*; a sincere, strong love that comes through the whole person of the one who loves (" I love thee...

In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith") and that is a symbol of something required (" Most quiet need"), right (" I love the freely, as man strive for Right"), holy (" I love the purely, as they turn form Praise") and unlimited (" For ends of Being and ideal great"), that can under no circumstances be taken of (" and, if God choose, I shall but love thee better after death"). Elizabeth Barrett Browning portrays the love as a invincible feeling that knows no border and that is, in its essence, good. The portrait of love as given in *A Woman to Her Lover* is the most comprehensive one, but still (and perhaps actually consequently) the hardest to define. Christina Walsh uses similar love as E. B. Browning, but tries to explain that it isn't the only love to be seen and that it only can be complete if both lovers share it.

She refuses love that understands the loved one as an object, similarly to the love Duke has to the Duchess, whatever type of object it is; a machine that can be ordered, a beautiful thing that one can be proud of or a provider of sexual pleasure that one can have whenever he wants (but that doesn't mean she would refuse sexuality at all; she uses the word " mate", which refers to engendering, and E. B. Browning, feeling likewise, says " I love thee with the passion put to use"). According the her, the true love is that in which the people involved share anything trough it and support each other, thinking not about their own good, but about good of the other one, or, more precisely, the pair. Although many aspects of what the poems are about have been examined, there is still the question of what lies beneath these poems.

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Do they refer to the era in which they were written? Do they reflect the lives of their authors? Even these questions are relevant. Robert Browning lived between the years 1819 and 1889; his father loved literature and hence he has written his first poem aged 6. He is said to be a good and talented student, who, however, couldn't go to the Oxford or Cambridge university as both were opened just for members of the Church of England that he wasn't. He soon met Elizabeth Barrett Browning, with whom he fell in love, and they, secretly because of his father's disagreement, married and fled. At some point before their meeting *My Last Duchess* has been written. Later on they lived happily together in Italy, until Elizabeth died in 1861; he lived another 28 years and was an important figure of Victorian literature and was a famous poet even in his own era.

More relevant than Browning's own life, however, is that he is said to have based the main character of the poem on the Italian Duke Alfonso II of Ferrara (*My Last Duchess* starts with the word " Ferrara"), who lived between the years 1533 and 1598. He married three times, and his first wife, Lucrezia di Cosimo de' Medici, who became his wife aged 14 and died three years later, according to rumours and suspicions being poisoned, is said to be the Duchess. It is probable that R. Browning had based his characters on their lives.

For example, the poem is set in the renaissance period, when Duke Alfonso II. lived; the Duke is trying to speak and seem sophisticated and with a good taste for art (as seen for example in " Notice Neptune, though, Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity, Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me! "). It is undoubtedly harder to find any references in *A Woman to Her Lover* as <https://assignbuster.com/my-last-duchess-how-do-i-love-thee-and-a-woman-to-her-lover/>

very little is known about the author and the origin of the poem. Yet, it is actually enough to know that the poem was written in the Victorian era, what the poem is about and that the author was a woman; we can then see that what the poem is talking about is not conforming to typical beliefs about the status of women in society at the time it was written. Victorian women were banned from universities and for most of their lives belonged to a man; father, carer, brother, husband.

Anything a woman earned or had was his property and they were supposed to work for his well-being and obey him; moreover, a husband had a right to force his wife to sex or childbirth and he was the only one who could help his wife if she had problems with law. A woman could only get an independence if she was from a wealthy family and had no brothers, so she would inherit property for herself, as women were not allowed to take professional, well-paid jobs. The poem *A Woman to Her Lover*, however, surprisingly directly disagrees with such understanding of women's status - and more precisely such understanding of marriage. It makes it clear that obeying husbands or being forced to sex isn't acceptable and that "any wakened woman of our time" should oppose such things! That is an extremely revolutionary opinion, reinforced by the strength and explicitness with which it is expressed, and the poet probably wanted this.

In comparison to both remaining poems, *How Do I Love Thee* is probably most influenced by the author's life, or it is at least possible to find something we can assume is based on personal experience. Firstly, the poem itself had been written for Robert Browning (or at least refers to author's growing relationship with him) and is the 43rd out of 44 similar sonnets, called <https://assignbuster.com/my-last-duchess-how-do-i-love-thee-and-a-woman-to-her-lover/>

Sonnets from the Portuguese. Then, there are already listed references to sorrow, childhood and life in the poem, which are possibly connected to the fact that Elizabeth Robert Browning (1806-1861) not only suffered a serious respiratory problems she developed aged 15, but also had a horse-riding accident that caused her a spinal hurt and thus disabled her so that she had to sit for most of her life, to the fact that her mother died when she was 20-years-old, her beloved brother when 32-years-old and that her father never spoke to her again after she married and ran away from his house. She was also always interested in literature (they met with Robert Browning because she wrote to him about his poems), philosophy (which is maybe reflected in "For the ends of Being an ideal Grace"), religion (that she was strongly religious is implied by some of the metaphors already noted) and ethics – she had for example refused to help with the business on Jamaica's plantations, which had brought her family wealth, as she opposed slavery and black slaves have been working there; a struggle for human rights is reflected in "I love thee freely, as men strive for Right". In conclusion I would like to say that I have applied all my knowledge of each of the poems, from comparing how love is portrayed in each poem to talking about the relevance of structure and language.

Interestingly, my analysis of the poems didn't change positively nor negatively my opinion on them as I have made it once I have attentively read them for the first time; that they're quite good.