

# My last duchess



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My last Duchess essay ' My last Duchess' is a dramatic monologue written by Robert Browning in 1842. The poem itself is based in the 16th century and is narrated by Ferrara, the fifth Duke. Throughout the poem, many aspects of the Duke's personality are brought to attention such as his need to possess and control in order to maintain his reputation.

All of this shows a strong contrast between the Duke and the Duchess; between his sour jealousy and her ever present smile and easily pleased personality, ultimately causing the reader to lose trust within the Duke and have sympathy towards the sweet happiness of the innocent Duchess. This contrast is a manifestation of the Duke's frustration with his inability to control the Duchess and her nonchalant but near-total control over him. This is displayed a number of times throughout the poem.

The Duchess is first introduced as a painting hanging in the Duke's gallery. It is here that Browning presents the reader with the essence of the poem: the very fact that she is a mere painting capturing her beauty, which is the only thing that the Duke ever saw in her and he calls upon others to admire his object but only upon his request " That's my last Duchess painted on the Wall" This is a good example of the Duke's attitude to his wife: If Ferrara were to say that's my duchess it would almost indicate a sense of pride.

However, the use of the word ' last' gives the reader the sense that she is something old, broken and without use- but his use of the two words together cancels out any emotional feeling and creates a whole new meaning to the poem. The use of ' my last duchess' shows the Duke's true nature as a possessive man shaped by his materialistic views. This is further

shown as he mentions the Artist: ' Fra Pandolf's hands' and " Fra Pandolf' by design' Here he mentions the artists name like a brand or label as his name is well known and famous amongst the aristocratic circle whereas there is no name for the Duchess.

This emphasizes just how little she meant to him and how insignificant she was in his eyes. The Duke also demonstrates increasingly obvious jealousy throughout the poem as he feels the Duchess' happiness and - what he says to be - flirtatious behaviour poses a threat to his reputation and others recognise this: ' Sir, 'twas not Her husband's presence only, called that spot Of joy into the Duchess' cheek' This is the first hint that the Duke is offended that the Duchess would take pleasure in anything other than him.

He takes disgust in this. Although the blush is involuntary and an innocent sign of pleasure, the Duke seems to believe that the Duchess chooses to blush or react to compliments and gifts. He describes her as " calling up" her blushes, instead of experiencing them as an involuntary reaction. He describes this as ' a spot of joy' and sees it as a stain or taint, when in fact the Duchess would not have blushed intentionally and the Duke's jealousy is illogical.

The Duke's desire for control is also made evident throughout the poem. He wishes to control his wife, but more specifically, he wishes to control how much his wife respects others and what she appreciates. However his appreciation of art reveals that he values things that he can control and is this contrasts with the images of nature that surround the duchess. The "

daylight in the West... the bough of cherries," and " the white mule, " are all natural objects that are associated with the duchess' happiness.

The Duke's lust for control is displayed further within his appreciation of art which reveals the control he has over the artists that produce his works of art; the portrait of his last duchess and the statue of Neptune. Although the duke was unable to control the duchess when she was alive, after her death he is in complete control of her. The duke says : " none puts by the curtain I have drawn for you, but I," revealing that now he is able to control both the duchess' countenance and who views the portrait by a curtain covering the portrait. These images of nature are a sharp contrast to the artificial objects the Duke values.

His unhappiness over the duchess' association with nature is revealed in the line ' Somehow - I know not how - as if she ranked My gift of nine-hundred-years-old name With anybody's gift. ' It is clear that the duke believes that his name, something artificial, is of greater value than the natural objects that cause the duchess joy. the following quote shows that he wishes for her to smile and be happy within his presence but he didn't want her to show the same amount of happiness towards anyone else but himself ' Oh sir, she smiled, no doubt, Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without Much the same smile? But the Duchess continued to be pleasant to others as well as her husband and he took action; ' This grew; I gave commands; Then all smiles stopped together. ' These sinister five words carry so many hidden thoughts. Although it doesn't specifically say that the Duke killed the Duchess, the reader can assume such horrors from the blunt delivery and

how this would be the ultimate control for the Duke and one would find it easy to accept that he would do anything to quench his thirst for control.

In the end it is the duke's loss of control that causes him to kill her. His inability to control the live duchess herself, resulted in her death, and now all that remains is another valued object, which he is in complete control of. After having looked back to his accomplishment in a sense of joy and pride he admires the painting and what it means to him ' There she stands As if alive. ' She is now under his control, she smiles only at him whenever he wants he to... ' Will't please you rise?

The Duke snaps back out of his memory almost as quick as his decision to make it a reality and continues to discuss his next wife, his next possession again referring to another piece of art; Neptune taming a sea-horse cast in bronze by Claus of Innsbruck. Again, artists names are mentioned but no name for his future wife, the sculpture itself also represents the control and possession he wishes to hold over his next wife. Essentially, his next marriage will be no different to his last Duchess.

In conclusion, The poem shows that the Duke is a very arrogant, egotistical man who is paranoid about his position of power within the aristocratic circle and his own marriage. However, the Duchess has something within her that people like about her which the Duke feels he can only control by killing her but even in death, people miss her and this is something the Duke cannot change. Essentially it is the Duchess who holds all the power and the Duke is overpowered by her happiness.