

Lecture: How to Read “My Last Duchess” by Robert Browning

Pretend for a moment that you are in Ferrara, Italy in 1564, a time of great political intrigue. You are a messenger from the wealthy Medici family sent to visit Alfonso d’Este, Duke of Ferrara, on an important mission. As you enter the palazzo, the Duke escorts you to a room in an upper chamber and shows you a special painting kept hidden behind a velvet curtain. He speaks to you.

Read lines 1-4.

You pause in the salon, gazing at the portrait of a beautiful young woman. The Duke has just told you in glowing terms that the subject is his last wife, the Duchess, mentioning how hard the artist, Fra Pandolf, worked to create the wonderful image.

Read lines 5-13.

The Duke invites you now to sit and enjoy the beauty of the painting. He comments that everyone to whom he shows the portrait—and it is only he who has access to the painting—notices the “depth and passion” of the woman’s glance. The Duke further remarks to you that every viewer, like yourself, seems to have the same question about this glance: What is the cause of it? How did such a glance come to play on the Duchess’ face?

Read lines 13-21.

The Duke goes on to say that it was not he himself who “called that spot of joy into the Duchess’ cheek.” He suggests that maybe the blush came from a remark made by the painter as he adjusted her clothing slightly or complimented the exquisite coloring of her skin. The Duke also suggests that the young Duchess may have mistaken the behavior of the painter as mere politeness or courtesy.

Read lines 21-31.

Here the Duke lets you know that his young wife was easily impressed by the world around her. She liked everything she looked on “and her looks went everywhere.” To her, all things were equally wonderful. The Duke’s attentions to her, the sunset, the sprig of cherries some admirer gave to her, even the “white mule she rode with round the terrace” all made her happy to the same degree.

Read lines 31-42

Here, the Duke tells you how his young wife thanked men for their compliments and favors, which was good and proper. However, she had the same the gratitude for their little attentions that she had for the much more important gift he had bestowed on her—the prestige of his family’s nine-hundred-years-old name. He

then tells you that he might have chastised her about this, but that would be stooping to her level. Even if she could have understood the correction, which he seems to doubt, his efforts would still have required stooping to her level, and he chooses "*Never to stoop.*"

Read lines 43-48

The Duke concedes to you that his young wife did favor him with smiles when he walked by. But everyone who passed by her received "much the same smile." Her behavior grew worse. He tried to correct her. He gave commands. "Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands —as if alive."

Read lines 48-53

The Duke now invites you to arise and join the other guests downstairs. He assures you that he has heard of your master's great generosity and knows that he will gladly pay any amount of money for his daughter's marriage dowry. However, he assures you, the Count's courier, that it is not money that he cares about, but rather the lovely "daughter's self."

Read 53-56

As you head downstairs with the Duke, he pauses to point out another piece in his collection of beautiful things, a statue of Neptune taming a seahorse—interesting subject, don't you think: the taming of a lovely, free creature?—which has been cast in bronze just for him.

I'd like to add a few brief notes before we draw the curtain on this mysterious and sinister poem. "My Last Duchess" is an example of what is called a "dramatic" poem. Dramatic poems take the form of a monologue, and express the voice of one speaker. Here we listen to the uninterrupted patter of the Duke of Ferrara as he unwittingly reveals far too much about himself to a messenger sent to arrange a marriage between the Duke and the daughter of the messenger's master. Poetic monologues like this are scattered through The plays of Shakespeare. You may be familiar, for example, with the "To be or Not to Be" monologue in Hamlet or Mark Anthony's funeral speech in the play *Julius Caesar*, which begins famously: "Friends, Romans and countrymen, lend me your ear."

"My Last Duchess" is written in iambic pentameter and is composed entirely of couplets, which are pairs of rhyming lines. However, much of the rhyming is not heard when the poem is read aloud because of the frequent use of *enjambment*. Enjambment occurs when the end of a line runs into the following line without punctuation or pause.

You may also have recognized the Browning name. Yes, Robert Browning was the cherished husband of the poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the subject of her Italian sonnet “How Do I Love Thee,” which we read last week.

Elizabeth’s overweening father forbade her to marry Robert, so in 1846 the couple eloped and fled from England to Italy, where they continued to pursue their writing careers and had a son together.

They lived in harmony for 15 years and on June 19th, 1861 in Florence, Italy, Elizabeth died in the arms of her beloved husband Robert.

This is the first of three Comment Slides on which you may record a response of at least one minute in length. You may respond to this slide or to one of the two others that follow. Your recording will be graded.

In your comments, please address the following questions: What information do you glean from this passage about the Duchess? How old might she be? What is she like? What words of the Duke lead you to this opinion? Also, do you notice any change in the attitude of the Duke as he prattles on? Does he reveal anything which he may not be aware he is revealing?

Comment Slide: This is the second of the three Comment Slides: If you choose to comment on this slide, please record a one-minute long response, addressing the following questions: What do we learn about the Duke from this passage? How does he regard his young wife in comparison to himself? Do his remarks seem appropriate to express to a messenger—someone he has never met before? What words in this passage lead you to this opinion?

Comment Slide. This is the final comment slide. If you choose to respond to this slide, please record a comment of at least one minute in length, answering the following questions: What does the Duke reveal in this passage? What has the young wife done to displease him and how has he tried to deal with this? What words of the Duke lead you to this opinion? What does he mean when he says that “all smiles stopped together?” Do you find anything odd in this Duke’s revelation of these details to the messenger?

*“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!"*