

AQA English GCSE

Poetry: Power and Conflict

My Last Duchess - *Robert Browning*



MY LAST DUCHESS

Robert Browning

Brief Summary

The poem is about an Italian Duke, who has supposedly killed his first wife and is now planning another wedding to another woman. He displays a painting done of his dead life in his house, and reveals it to a visitor, who is made to sit and admire it.

Synopsis

- Duke is showing a painting of his dead wife to a visitor
- Has it hidden behind a curtain – makes the visitor sit down to admire it
- Praises the artist who painted it
- Points out duchess' blush – suggests she was flirting and being complimented
- Laments over wife being "too easily pleased" – criticises her for appearing to favour other men
- Claims he was not eloquent enough to tell her to stop
- So he had orders for her to be killed
- Then discusses with the visitor arrangements for his next marriage
- Points out statue upon leaving

Summary

Context – Victorian view of women // domestic only // Browning lived most life in Italy (loved it) // based on Duke of Ferrara (Alfonzo II)

Structure – single stanza // enjambment (undermine power) // caesura

Form – Dramatic monologue // tight iambic pentameter (tradition) and rhyming couplets

Language – possessive pronouns // symbolism of painting/curtain and Neptune statue (possession) // Frá = monk – stoop (women inferior)

Key idea – the dukes power is undermined by his paranoia and fear of female sexuality // control others to compensate for lack of control over himself

Context

Robert Browning (1812 - 1889)

Browning was born in London, but spent most of life in Italy, and eventually died in Venice. He disliked school so was homeschooled, but was also fluent in many languages and started writing poetry when he was a child. In 1845 he married Elizabeth Barret against her father's permission, keeping the wedding secret from her domineering father. He had visited Italy shortly before writing the poem "My Last Duchess".

Italian Renaissance and the Duke of Ferrara

My Last Duchess was set in another era and country, but contains a **political message** and a **criticism of society**. Changing the setting of the poem helped to disguise the criticism and makes the readers more open to accepting the message. This makes his subverted message more convincing and displays the cyclic way history finds itself repeating. This would have arguably protected Browning from the repercussions of criticising contemporary society, and ensures he'll still maintain a good readership upon publication.



Duke of Ferrara - was also known as Alfonso II and served as the fifth duke of Ferraro. He is widely considered to be the inspiration for the poem as the poem set in Ferrara and Browning was fascinated and obsessed with the story of his life. Alfonso II's first wife died under suspicious circumstances, and the duke was believed to have been a murderer. He went on to have other wives later.

Industrial Revolution and Victorian Britain

The poem was written during the **Industrial Revolution**, when society was starting to see **social mobility in terms of class** as well as gender, as women starting to demand equality and saw the beginning of the suffrage movement.

- Beforehand, views of women were very backwards and women would become property of their husbands upon marriage, losing right to all property and possessions.
- They also had no legal rights / no access to divorce, and would be married off by brothers and fathers as they were seen as financial burden and as incapable of 'rational thought'.
- These **patriarchal views** are shown in the poem in the line **"I choose never to stoop"**, which suggests the speaker thinks there is no point arguing with a woman because they won't ever come to understand. The woman's role was firmly situated in the domestic sphere.

There was also a very high focus on **morality, manners and modesty** in the Victorian era, especially seeing as a large majority of society identified as Christians.

- Sex was taboo, especially female sexuality, and the only way for a woman to gain status/influence was through her husband.
- This is also shown in the poem through the line **"my gift of a nine-hundred year old name"**, which suggests the Duchess only attains status through his family name, and relates to the idea that marriage is a transition to ownership.

My Last Duchess

The poem is set in a time and a place (the **Italian renaissance**) when art was heavily valued within society. Browning was interested in this time period and results in the focus of the poem being the Duke's artwork; specifically the portrait he had made of his, now dead, first wife.

The conflict within the poem is subtle but displays itself in the power the Duke has over the Duchess' life. There is also a conflict between how the Duke presents himself to the outside world versus his Duke's true character.

Conflict arose when the Duke realised he couldn't control his wife, and he retaliated by killing her, which is an abuse of his power and control.



My Last Duchess

The reader's interest invoked from "My Last Duchess", because it raises questions such as: why is it his "last Duchess? Is she dead? If so, how has she died? The speaker of the Duke establishes control from the very start, from the possessive pronoun "my".

The Duke is emphasising and boasting about his wealth, with reference the famous artists that painted for him – "Fra Pandolf" / "Claus of Innsbruck" to demonstrate his influence and wealth

*Unreasonable to expect her to only gain joy from her husband
He expects to be her entire life and purpose in life. Her life has the aim of pleasing and being pleased by him.
Complete domination of her life. Also presents him as paranoid*

Ferrara That's **my last Duchess** painted on the wall,

Looking as **if she were alive**. I call

That piece a wonder, now: Frà Pandolf's hands

Worked busily a day, and there she stands.

Will't please you sit and look at her? I said

'Frà 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

Frà 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

This line is ominous as it suggests the Duke viewing the subject of his dead wife as a piece of art rather than sentimentally as his wife, immediately suggesting she was only ever a possession to him.

The Duke forces his visitor to sit down with the rhetorical question, which implied that the Duke is in sole control of who sees her. The opening immediately sets up a sinister tone for the piece, as the phrase "as if she were alive" shows that the Duchess has died.

Shows he has power over others and people are scared of him, so as a consequence wouldn't dare ask him about the painting.

Fra is the prefix for a monk - this shows how much envy has corrupted the duke, as he believes it is possible his wife would flirt with a monk.



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,

Shows he holds status and power within society, boasting about this but also a reflection about how the woman is now owned by her husband, as she has to take his name and then loses all legal rights.

Euphemism for her murder. Shows the power he has – can just kill her without consequence, but also shows such an overreaction – murder is a sign of lack of control.

He wants his wealth and status to be more important. Shows his materialism – doesn't value natural beauty and natural pleasures of the earth. Sees her liking other things as a criticism of himself. Presents him as insecure. Expects her to reserve her joy and smiles for him alone Hurts his pride if he is not unique. Reliant on controlling women to make himself feel powerful and desirable. Sense of underlying vulnerability.

This line shows the Duke's male entitled pride: he won't lower himself to talk to his wife and confront her about what he fears, as it would show him as paranoid and weak. It also suggests there's no point arguing with a woman as she is so far below him, and incapable of rational thinking, AND he shouldn't have to explain it to her – she should be meek and obedient and submissive

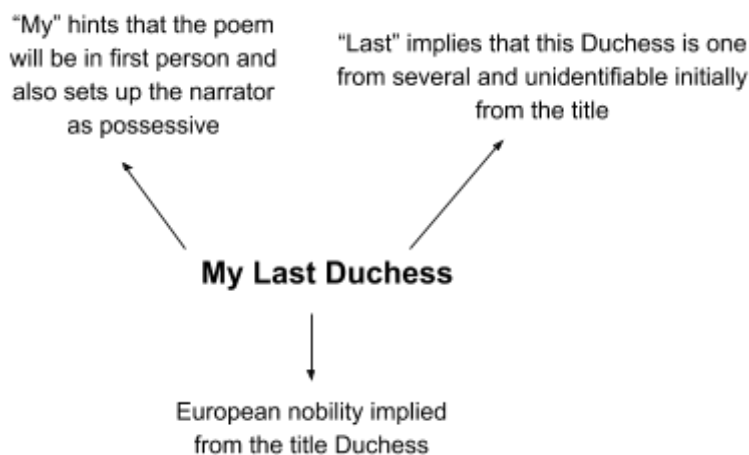


By ending the poem with the phrase “for me”, the impression he leaves the envoy and audience is that the Duke feels everything **MUST** be for him and him alone and he desires the feeling of exclusive ownership

The Count your master’s known munificence
Is ample warrant that no just pretence
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!**

The metaphor of Neptune suggests he sees himself as god-like – men are gods that must tame their wives show the excessive hubris and pride of the duke. Shows that the Duke is extremely materialistic, as he condemns her finding nature beautiful but places a lot of value, in a statue “thought a rarity”. Clearly, he believes his status and wealth should be seen as more valuable than anything available to the common man!

The title “My Last Duchess”



Perspective

The poem is an example of a **persona poem**. In this case the speaker taking on the persona of the Duke of Ferrara. Through taking on a persona Browning can use the character to give the reader a message about the wider context of the time.



The **first person, present tense narrative** gives the speaker a great deal of power over the text as he can control what he tells the reader. This reflects the power the Duke holds over women and his subjects, and this could be extended to the readers too. The first person narration also means the content could be biased, exaggerated or untrue.

Dramatic Monologue

The choice of this perspective shows the **domineering** presence of the Duke, who dominates a conversation and won't let anyone else talk because he tends to take control of everything. The **dramatic monologue** means readers are exclusively exposed to his perspective. Thus the reader begins to understand the need to decipher what is and isn't true for themselves. Here, dramatic monologue provides the reader with a biased account of the narrative which means the reader is immediately aware of need to read between the lines.



There is no female side to the story, and this mirrors how there was no female side to the narrative of Victorian society either. Women had no right to vote or hold power outside of the home so were politically silenced. Browning's criticism of the Duke's abuse of power is thus a criticism of the inequality in who holds power.

The Opening

The reader's interest is invoked from the title and initial phrase in the first lines, "My Last Duchess", because it raises questions such as: why is it his **"last Duchess"**? Is she dead? If so, how has she died?.

Ferrara That's **my last Duchess** painted on the wall,
 Looking **as if she were alive**. I call
That piece a wonder, now: Frà Pandolf's hands
 Worked busily a day, and there she stands.

The line **"I call that piece a wonder"** is **ominous** as it suggests the Duke viewing the subject of his dead wife as a piece of art rather than sentimentally as his wife. This immediately suggests she was only ever a possession to him. The speaker of the Duke establishes control from the very start, from the **possessive pronoun "my"**.

The Duke forces his visitor to sit down with the **rhetorical question "will't please you sit and look at her?"**, which implies that the Duke is in sole control of who sees her. The opening immediately sets up a **sinister tone** for the piece, as the phrase **"as if she were alive"** shows that the Duchess has died.



Structure

Iambic Pentameter

Browning uses the very traditional **meter** of **Iambic Pentameter**, which is a classic **of English poetry**.

IAMBIC PENTAMETER | Technique where the poet uses ten syllables in each line, with pairs of sounds going da-DA with the emphasis on the second syllable.

The **meter** reflects how the Duke holds **traditional and conservative views of women**, especially seeing as the poem is set in the past. It also demonstrates the Duke's sense of pride and superiority, because the meter has a very tight control of rhythm and rhyme.

Iambic Pentameter was used by Shakespeare to show nobility, and it was thought to be the most natural meter for English language. Thus the speaker or characters are able to maintain a **conversational** tone whilst still keeping a **dramatic** element.

Single Verse / No Stanzas

The use of only **one single verse** to structure the poem makes it feel **overwhelming and tiring**. This structure mirrors the Duke's power, suggesting his presence is overwhelming as he dominates the room and the poem.

- This power relates to how there is no importance placed on needing to cover up his mistreatment of past wife as he is so powerful it won't impact him.
- It makes it very obvious that it is only his view that is ever given in any situation or decision, and that the woman is given no say or chance to defend herself.
- This dominating relates to the context of the poem as both set and written in a patriarchal society, by a man so women are only being viewed through the eyes and perspective of men.

The no-stanza structure of the piece also gives it a sense of being like a **stream of consciousness** of the Duke's unadulterated thoughts and feelings. The stream of consciousness suggests the speaker lacks censorship, thus demonstrating a lack of control over himself. This lack of control implies the Duke has control over others but not over himself and is trying to compensate for this.

Enjambment

ENJAMBMENT | Sentence which runs over multiple lines.

Browning's use of **enjambment** allows the poem to flow and seem more like a natural conversation. This natural narration is reinforced by the fact that the **rhyming couplets** aren't obvious. The enjambment also presents him as weak and unbalanced, as he is getting carried away and rambling.



There is a lack of control over what he says and he keeps getting sidetracked. This is shown by **parentheses** and **dashes** such as in the line “– *how shall I say?* –”. This punctuation choice works to make the poem conversational and demonstrates his lack of “*skill in speech*”. It could also imply that he is overcome by emotion and anger and this is why he lacks control over his speech and actions. Therefore, **he has control/power over himself but not over others**.

Caesura

Browning's use of caesura shows his speech as poorly planned or formed as he keeps interrupting himself. The caesura makes the poem seem rambling and breaks up rhythm, so that it is not pleasant to listen to.

CAESURA | A pause between words, for example across lines, with the use of a comma or full stop.

The reader gets fed up of his voice and narrative, which negatively shows his power and control, and it can be seen as a sign of too much pride and self-obsession. Arguably, it also makes speech appear to be like stuttering, and this interpretation would suggest that the Duke lacks natural confidence so has to make up for it with the artificial, authoritarian control he directs towards women.

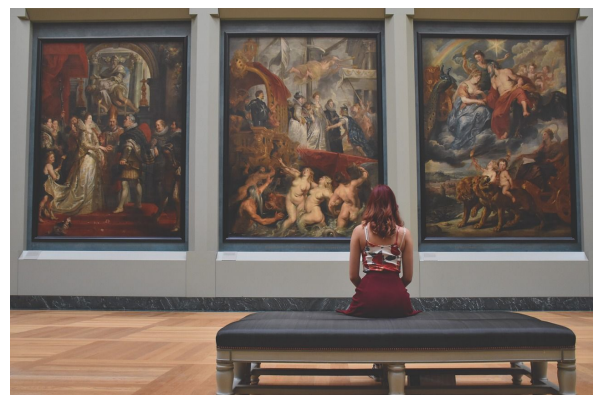
Possessive pronouns

The speaker makes use of **possessive pronouns** such as “*my*” to show that he has ownership of the Duchess, and shows that she is a possession not an individual. She has no autonomy and is just like all the other things he can buy, such as statues and art, simply existing for his enjoyment.

The speaker refers to her as “*my duchess*”, not “*my wife*”, which shows a lack of affection or emotion. This furthers the image that she is an accessory not a partner, as well as showing his complete power over her. It also shows his jealousy, and suggests he feels a wife should be seen and enjoyed only by her husband.

Simplistic Language

The language used in the poem is simple, demonstrated through the lines “*skill in speech*” and “*(which I have not)*”. This works to make it seem like a normal conversation, not decorated or rich in imagery. The Duke is wanting to give a clear message about not challenging his power. Browning also chooses to employ only a few literary devices, which both makes the piece realistic as a conversation or event, and also draws more emphasis to the places in which he does decide to use them.



Symbolism

Duchess as a painting

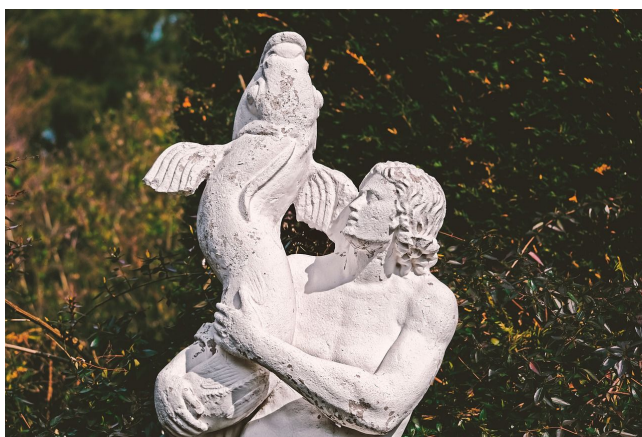
By portraying the character as a painting Browning is displaying the Duchess' complete **objectification**; she is something to be admired and looked at as well as something to control.

His control over the painting is an extension of his control over her, demonstrated through the line **"none puts by the curtain I have drawn for you but I"**. This may suggest he is threatened by other men enjoying her presence and beauty which highlights the absolute control he had over her, not just over her life, but over her death and memory after death too.

Statue of Neptune

The speaker moves seamlessly from discussing his last wife to his new wife which suggests she wasn't special to him and was disposable, furthered by how he moves seamlessly from wife's painting to a new statue.

["notice Neptune though taming a sea-horse"]



The statue of Neptune also creates parallels to the Duke who has attempted to use his domestic power to **"tame"** a wife that was **"too easily impressed"**. He transformed her from a **"sea-horse"** with free will into a painting that is controlled by him and a possession equal in status to other statues.

The statue is the last thing he shows the envoy, and this could be seen as a warning that he expects his next wife to be tamed, seeing as he was successful in taming his last Duchess.

Power

POWER	LACK OF POWER
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Duke expected the Duchess to find him to be her entire life, with her life having the aim of pleasing and being pleased by him, and he ends up gaining a complete domination of her life. The poem presents him as paranoid, reading affairs into everything even when it is completely unreasonable As a painting he can control who gets to see and enjoy her. The Duke 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Duchess is presented as innocent, for example description of a "spot of joy", resembling (likely) a blush. This suggests she is embarrassed by compliments and "courtesy", but pleased by all of nature's beauty, would never ask for anything, is easily pleased, and polite to everyone "who passed without much the same smile". Overall, this works to present her as innocent and naïve, and not materialistic but appreciative of



believes and now no knows no other man will ever make her happy apart from him.

- The Duke criticises every flaw he found in her, such as being too flirtatious and enjoying the compliments of other men too much **["her mantle laps over my lady's wrist too much"]**
- The Duke uses an obvious euphemism for her murder **["I gave commands then all smiles stopped together"]** which shows the power he has, as he can just kill her without consequence.
- He wants his wealth and status to be more important, which shows his materialism – doesn't value natural beauty and natural pleasures of the earth. Sees her liking other things as a criticism of himself, which presents him as insecure.

everything and modest. This shows that the flaw lies with the Duke, not her.

- There is a very strong case for her innocence: **"Fra' Pandolf"** – Fra is the title for a friar/monk, and it is very unlikely she was flirting with a monk.
- He is scared of female sexuality and of confronting his fears **["I choose never to stoop"]**.
- He is disgusted by the idea of her liking other men, which was probably perpetrated by Victorian culture, which prided the idea that women should be submissive and modest.
- He wants the envoy to know that he expects his new duchess to be obedient and submissive from the start. He doesn't expect to have to tell her what he wants, and he places importance on the high value of virginity **["his fair daughter"]**. This is because men want to be the only **"user"** of a woman – monopoly on their control and to be the only person they care for.

Comparisons

My Last Duchess	Tissue
Extended metaphor for sexism and oppression in Victorian society	Metaphor for life and for power
Works to critique power more specifically (the abuse of power by the duke)	Works to critique power in general (fragile, transient, wrongly invested)

My Last Duchess & Ozymandias

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Both poems suggest overarchingly that humanity's pride / power is unfounded. For example, in Ozymandias the poet shows a loss of power over time and in competition with nature, as the characters are surrounded by desert which is a symbol of nature and time. Similarly, MLD shows the Duke's power constantly undermined by the enjambment, caesura and single stanza. • In both poems, the origin of pride is love for oneself and one's power. This is expressed in Ozymandias through the form of the Sonnet, as it is a love poem to show the king's love for himself. In MLD, the Duke loves his "nine hundred year old name" and feels entitled to authority and control because of it
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Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Whilst both poets overarchingly suggest that pride and power leads to oppression, the subjects of the oppression are different in each poem. For MLD, the Duchess is shown as the symbol of oppression - "then all smiles stopped" - whereas in Ozymandias the statue is used as a symbol for all institutes or figures of power - "cold command" = cruel and harsh oppression.
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My Last Duchess & Checking Out Me History

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Both poets utilize a first-person narrative, but have different defining structural choices which provide textual depth: in COMH, Agard uses phonetic spelling, and in MLD Browning uses rhyming couplets. In both cases, these help to show that both texts are very much products of the time and society they were written in and also about. It also suggests that in COMH, the speaker feels he has no power in the society he is living in, whereas in MLD, the speaker feels he has an abundance of power.
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> They both choose to use allusionary language, but to contrasting effect. In COMH, metaphors such such "bandage up me eye with my own history" serve to highlight how Agard had a lack of power as a child, which meant he wasn't able to learn about his culture. On the other hand, the allusions the Duke makes to having killed his wife, such as "I gave commands. Then all smiles stopped together", show how his status and wealth has afforded him an excess of power which he is now free to abuse without consequence.

