

Robert Browning: *My Last Duchess*

At the opening of the poem we are introduced to the Duke of Ferrara. He has a portrait of his deceased wife, painted by Fr Pandolf, of which he is obviously very proud as he enjoys showing it off.

During the course of the poem we learn a great deal about both the duke and his "last Duchess". It would appear from her husband's description of her that she was not always fully attentive or dedicated to him. Although the duke would like to suggest that she was unfaithful, there is no evidence of real immodesty on the duchess's part. She took pleasure in many different things and people, which was something that provoked the anger of the duke who, we start to realise, was a proud and possessive man.

Soon his obsession with what appeared to be her lack of respect for him and his heritage became more than he could bear. He gave certain commands, and she stopped smiling altogether. From this we assume that he gave instructions for her murder.

Having talked about his previous wife, the duke now turns to the person to whom he has been speaking, the messenger from an unnamed count whose daughter the duke is hoping to marry - for herself and not for her money, he assures the messenger.

As they leave, the duke alerts the messenger's attention to a piece of statuary depicting Neptune taming a sea-horse, this time cast in bronze by Claus of Innsbruck.

The poem is structured as a **dramatic monologue**, ie a poem in which the speaker addresses himself to one or more persons (including the reader-as-audience) who are present but do not reply. In this poem the listener is the messenger from a certain count whose daughter the duke is obviously hoping to marry. During the course of the poem we learn much about the duke's character, as well as the sort of person to whom he was married - his "last Duchess".

Although you might not notice it at first reading, the poem is in fact written in **rhyming couplets**. The artistry of the poet is his ability to overcome this strict rhyme scheme. In part, this is on account of the way in which Browning allows lines to run on without punctuating the end of each line (enjambment), as well as his creative use of **punctuation**.

You might also like to look at the use of **direct speech** used within the monologue when the duke refers to his own words or those of Fr Pandolf. This contributes to the authenticity of what we are hearing, adding a note of present reality to the speech.

Overall, the poem is presented in a **conversational style**, in keeping with the idea of the duke addressing the count's messenger who is present but does not comment or enter into dialogue with the aristocratic speaker.

Although the poem runs as one continuous whole, for the sake of convenience we will divide the narrative into three sections.

The poem opens with the duke pointing out a **painting** of his deceased wife, so vividly caught by the poet that she looks "as if she were alive". It is for this reason that he calls "That piece a wonder". We presume that the duke is an art collector, especially when he notes so specifically that this piece was done by **Fr Pandolf**, a monk and artist of some standing it would seem, since the duke mentions the painter "by design" lest the viewer fail to appreciate its significance. Of course, there might have been another and more sinister motive too. Perhaps the duke has chosen a man of the church in order to allay some of the jealousy he felt when his wife was in the company of other men. It is worth noting at this stage that Browning refers to two artists in the poem: Fr Pandolf and Claus of Innsbruck. Both are imaginary. Do you agree that they add to the obvious pride the duke feels in collecting fine things - including his former wife?

Notice how the listener is drawn into the conversation: "Will't please you sit and look at her?" We learn that the duke is **possessive** of this particular piece of work. He does not allow everyone access to it: "since none puts by / The curtain I have drawn for you, but I". Even in death, the duke remains **jealous** and **controlling**. However, there is a further indication of the duke's attitude to his late wife. He tells the listener of the "depth and passion of its earnest glance", so well captured

in the painting. Later we will see that it is this very "passion" that infuriated the duke. As owner of the painting, the duke assumes that the listener will want to know, "How such a glance came there".

Now the duke begins in earnest to tell of his wife as she appeared to him. We immediately sense the **jealousy** as he notes that, "Sir, 'twas not / Her husband's presence only, called that spot / Of joy into the Duchess' cheek". At this moment in the monologue we are not yet sure of the **fidelity** of the duchess - could she truly have been unfaithful to her husband? However, there is a sense of (unintentional) softness in the use of the word "spot" to indicate the shy blush of the duchess, almost a **modesty** that comes to the fore in the face of compliments. Notice that it was Fr Pandolf's chance remarks that brought about the blush, and again we are reminded that even the monk's casual observations did not escape the duke's **obsessive possessiveness**. Remember too, that Fr Pandolf is, after all, the artist. Therefore his remarks about his subject are surely part of the man's trade. Do you notice a furtive sexual implication as the duke quotes the friar's innocent words: "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"? Without realising it, the duke makes clear that it was in all innocence that she reacted by blushing: "& such stuff / Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough / For calling up that spot of joy". Of course, his intention is to point out the duchess' untoward behaviour towards men in general. Instead, he highlights the **gentle modesty** and **unassuming qualities** that characterised the woman. In a poem filled with **innuendos**, the duke is revealing a possessive and jealous disposition.

The duke continues to reveal what he assumed to be a **flirtatious nature**. In his opinion, his wife was all too easily pleased, and was also indiscriminate: "She had / A heart - how shall I say? - too soon made glad, / Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er / She looked on, and her looks went everywhere". Notice the pause in the duke's sentence - almost as though he needed a moment to find the correct words. The **irony** lies in the fact that while he is trying to implicate his wife, he is in fact revealing his own need to possess his wife. By listing the sort of things that brought joy to the duchess he hopes to show how **indiscriminate** she really was. However, what he is really telling us is that the duchess was **easily pleased, not susceptible to flattery** but rather **unassuming** and **easily moved** by nature and the kindness of others.

The duke seems to lose control at this moment. His **arrogance** and **self-importance** is marked by his inability to speak fluently. Instead, his sentence is broken by **interruptions** and **asides**. In part, he is trying to convince the listener of the truth of his judgement; in part he finds it difficult even now to control his jealousy: "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". We cannot fail to notice the arrogance of the duke who feels his priceless gift of a **heritage of nobility** passed on to the duchess was ranked with all the other small things that brought her pleasure. Rather than emerging as frivolous and shallow, the duchess comes across as **friendly, gentle** and **unassuming** - the very opposite of what he would have us think.

Allusions to **"stooping"** appear three times in what follows. It is a word that clearly alludes to the pride of the duke and his inability to be anything other than arrogant. To stoop to accepting the innocent behaviour of his wife would be below his stature: "Who'd stoop to blame / This sort of trifling?" Passing off his increasing passionate reaction as an **inability to communicate effectively** in the lines "Even had you skill / In speech - (which I have not) -", the Duke uses his own words to emphasise his supposed predicament.

However, the duchess would not allow herself to be "lessoned" so. Notice how the noun is used as a verb here, no doubt to emphasise the harshness of his need to **"educate"** the duchess, to **bend her will** to his. The truth of the matter is that the duke refused to compromise as this would mean "stooping", and as he so clearly makes the point, "& I choose / Never to stoop". The picture that is emerging is that of an **arrogant, ruthless and possessive husband**, intent on making sure that his wife attends to his commands.

There is a **hardening of the tone and mood** as the duke moves towards the climax of his story: "Oh sir, she smiled, no doubt, / When'er I passed her; but who passed without / Much the same smile?" The duke can no longer hide his intense jealousy.

Now the duke finally reaches his point. Notice the **cold attitude** and **harsh tone** in his short statement, "This grew; I gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together". This is something of a cryptic statement. In a poem filled with double meaning and innuendo, we interpret this as meaning that the duke had her **murdered**. Now the duchess belongs totally and completely to her husband for, "There she stands / As if alive". It is on this triumphant note of almost **gloating assurance** that this main section of the monologue ends. Again we are reminded that there is a listener present as the duke, returning to reality after his tirade against his "last Duchess", now politely asks, "Will't please you rise?" What follows consolidates what we have learnt of the duke during the course of his story of his previous wife. He is about to take **another wife**. However, he assures the **messenger** of the count that it is not for the sake of money only, although we have a strong feeling this might just be his prime motivation. Listen to how he expresses himself in this regard, stressing the generosity and benevolence of the count: "I repeat, / The Count your master's known munificence / Is ample warrant that no just pretence / Of mine for dowry will be disallowed". Although he continues by stressing that it is for "his fair daughter's self" that he courts her as his spouse, we feel decidedly uncomfortable, knowing he had no interest in the feelings and sensitivities of his previous wife.

The poem closes on a note of **irony** that reveals the pretence and arrogance of the Duke of Ferrara. In passing a piece of sculpture, the duke again draws attention to it and its worth, cast in bronze for him by Claus of Innsbruck. Ironically, the piece depicts "Neptune & Taming a sea horse". Any doubts that we might have had as to the sincerity of the duke's intentions to take another wife - or his attitude to his last duchess - is destroyed by this subtle reference to his **need to control** ("tame") **and own**, a need that would include his wives. For the duke, works of art, attained at great financial cost no doubt, are more important than human relationships. These are at least passive and obedient. They do not need to be trained or tamed in any way to obey the arrogant, selfish and autocratic needs of their owner, the duke.

It is on this ironic and **accusatory note** that the poem ends, leaving the reader in no doubt as to the true circumstances that led up to the painting of the portrait of the duke's last duchess. Now the innuendo in the pun contained in the **title** becomes clear. This is a portrait of his "last" wife, a reference to his previous, most recent spouse, but certainly not his last. Another is soon to follow, possibly to meet a similar fate as the lady in the painting. It is with this thought that the reader is left to ponder the issues raised: **power, corruption** and **the need to own others**.