

Pre-1914,  
Browning

## My Last Duchess

VIOLENCE/POWER/JEALOUSY/MALE AND FEMALE

### SITUATION:

An Italian Duke is talking to a messenger from a wealthy Count. The messenger has come to bring an offer of marriage between the Count's daughter and the Duke. The Duke spends most of the Dramatic Monologue bragging about his wealth and aristocratic ancestry.

More disturbingly, he calmly relates how his previous wife ("my last Duchess") was **disposed of** because, basically, she had offended his vanity.

### LANGUAGE/POETIC TECHNIQUES:

The poem is a fine example of how a Dramatic Monologue can reveal attitude and character – not only through **what** is said but through **the way** it has been spoken because it allows us to focus solely on the speaker.

His last Duchess is never referred to by name, signifying the way she was a mere possession for him. Also, the word "last" could just mean "previous" but it could imply "last" in a **long line** of previous wives! This is ironic given that the conversation is about arranging for a new wife!

He is clearly materialistic as he is more attached to his **painting** of his wife than to her memory and he uses the painting as an excuse to brag about his power, "since none puts by/The curtain I have drawn for you, but I" – with the emphasis on his favourite word – "I". He also brags about the name of a famous painter who was employed by him. He does the same later in the poem, bragging about his

**rare** bronze statue cast by “Claus of Innsbruck”. His name-dropping is a feature of his aristocratic snobbery.

He refers to his wife as the painting with the words, “**That’s**...” and “**There** she stands...” (repeated twice in the poem) – both signifying his emotional coldness and distance from her.

It is quite clear that the Duke is about to re-marry for money – the dowry paid by the father of the bride. The duke vows that he is primarily interested in the Count’s “fair daughter” – but this is only **after** mentioning the need to receive a generous dowry from the Count! He asserts that it is the daughter who is his “object” – a revealing word because he collects **objects** and he treated his previous wife as a material possession – in fact he has turned her into a possession hung on the wall which only he can view! His desire to control people is perhaps symbolised by his choice of bronze: “**N**otice **N**eptune, though,/Taming a sea-horse”.

He is callous and we know his wife has died (“As if alive”) and we suspect that he has had her killed. He reveals his cold and calculating nature in the almost monosyllabic utterance: “This grew; I gave commands;/Then all smiles stopped together”. The **simplicity** and lack of emotion in these words and the syntax is what is frightening because he is (most probably) describing murdering his wife.

His motive for murder is also quite disturbing. There is a **hint** of sexual jealousy – but no more than that: “She thanked men, - good!” The exclamation mark signifies his sarcasm and his bitterness – a rare sign of emotion from beneath his **mask**.

However, the main reason for his killing of the Duchess stems from his own arrogance that anything else in the world should give her pleasure apart from *him*.

His extreme egotism pervades the poem. He is angry that she speaks to ordinary people in a civilised way and does not treat them as inferior beings to him! He comments that “she let/Herself be *lessoned* so”, referring to her ability to take criticism and *learn* from it. But he is punning on the word “*lessoned*” (“*lessened*”), here, because he believes that accepting criticism *belittles* (lessens) a person.

Similarly, the assonance in, “I choose/Never to stoop” emphasises the Duke’s sense of superiority over the rest of the world. So, her common politeness – “stooping” to curtsy – was her real crime, in his eyes.

He arrogantly describes his previous marriage as “my gift (to his wife) of a nine hundred-years-old name”, emphasising that his aristocratic title and heritage makes him superior.

The constant repetition of “I”, “me”, “my”, “mine” throughout the poem emphasises his egocentric nature.

### **STRUCTURE:**

Ostensibly, the Duke is polite, sophisticated and controlled in his speech and this makes it even more chilling when we discover the darkness below the surface.

Both the language and the structure work together to help us gain an insight into his persona.

The elevated language is the Duke showing off his educated side: “that pictured **countenance**” (face) and, “your master’s known **munificence**” (generosity). These are two examples of his over-wordy, pompous speech.

Structurally, the fact that there are no stanza breaks and that the Count speaks uninterrupted for 56 lines points to a man who likes the sound of his own voice and is full of his own importance.

The use of heroic couplets gives the poem a **controlled** structure which suits the dominating personality of the Duke. There is plenty of enjambement to allow the speech some fluency to mimic natural speech.

The poem is full of controlled asides and deliberate digressions in mid-sentence which effectively captures the pattern of natural speech but which also gives us a picture of the Duke as a calm and reasoning person. This logical reasoning does not include any positive emotions – like, love for another. His reasoning nature makes him an even more dangerous psychopath!

The repeated use of pauses created by the dashes, the use of brackets (parenthesis), the rhetorical questions and the Duke’s quoting of others’ words gives us a picture of a highly logical, calculating mind e.g. “A heart – how shall I say – too soon made glad” and “but thanked – /Somehow – I know not how – as if she ranked”.

Similarly very long and multi-clausal sentences and deliberately unusual word order (e.g. “I know not how”) reflect the Duke’s education and arrogance. So, lines 5-13, 13-21 and 48-53 are each single sentences. Unusual word order, “So, not the first/Are you to turn and ask thus”.

This all makes the Duke sound like a pompous and conceited snob – which he is! His comment that he has no skill in speaking is clearly **false** modesty on his part: “Even had you skill/In speech – ( which I have not) – ”. This controlled section of his speech itself, ironically, demonstrates clearly that he **does** have such skill!

The sophistication of the Duke’s syntax and the elevated diction (vocabulary) reflect the Duke’s feelings of superiority. This calm and reasoned style contrasts with the psychopathic tendencies lurking beneath the surface and the irrationality of killing his wife on the basis of her having “a heart too soon made glad” by anything (e.g. the white mule) other than him. He really kills her because of her cheerful nature towards others people – and other things – which is really quite insane!

The use of cheerful rhyming couplets contrasts ironically with the subject matter of murder and the politeness and **gentility** of the Duke’s language is very ironic, given his dark actions: “sir” (repeated four times in the poem), “Will’t please you sit...” and “Will’t please you rise?” add to the ironically polite tone.

Pre-1914,  
Shakespeare

## Sonnet 130

UNUSUAL LOVE/ROMANCE/SONNET/MALES AND  
FEMALES/BASED ON OTHER TEXTS

### SITUATION:

Shakespeare talks/writes about his true love but in a very unconventional and ironic way.

He is **mocking** the over-romantic **blazons** written at that time (the 1500s). These were love poems (often sonnets) which over-exaggerated the physical beauty of a woman.

### LANGUAGE/POETIC TECHNIQUES:

The poet uses many romantic clichés and turns them on their head to humorously insult his lover. So, the opening line comes as a shock to the reader: “My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun”.

Similarly the alliterative, “I **g**rant I never saw a **g**oddess **g**o” mocks the traditional, romantic idea of the woman as a goddess and takes a more realistic view of his lover as an **earthly** woman who, “treads on the ground”.

In line 4, Shakespeare takes the traditional metaphor of the woman’s hair being **golden threads** and turns that into the uglier “black wires grow on her head”!

The poet tells us that perfume smells more fragrant than his mistress’ breath, which “reeks” from her mouth. This most probably just meant “flows” in Elizabethan English – but the word “reeks” is far more negative for the modern reader.

Similarly, the traditional comparison of a lover’s voice to sweet music is contradicted by, “music hath a far more pleasing sound”.

**STRUCTURE:**

A sonnet: 14, ten syllable lines, rhyme pattern: a, b, a, b, c, d, c, d, (the octet) and e, f, e, f, g, g (the sestet).

The use of monosyllabic words (sometimes whole lines) helps to symbolise how **plain** his mistress is and adds to the humour (in contrast to the flowery words of the **blazons**). So, “If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun” and, “If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head”.

The octet deals with the physical side of his mistress: eyes, lips, breasts, hair, cheeks and breath, mocking an over-romantic view of these things.

The sestet then becomes a little more positive – or else we might begin to think that he actually **dislikes** this woman! So, “I love to hear her speak” – although this is still toned down through the negative comparison with music.

The final rhyming couplet works **ironically** to turn the whole poem on its head. “By heaven” suggests a more serious, less jocular tone from the poet. The poet then reveals that he **cannot** compare his mistress as she is so “rare” and individual that she is beyond “false” compare!! So, it **is** a romantic poem after all – but in a very unconventional way.

Conversely, the things from nature such as the sun, coral and the snow are beautiful in **their** own right and they would be “belied” (not done justice to) if they were just seen as beautiful by being compared to a woman – they are beautiful in their own right.

The final rhyming couplet neatly encapsulates the central conceit (idea) of the poem.