MY LAST DUCHESS

By Robert Browning

Table of Contents

FULL POEM

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
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.
Sir, 'twas all one! My favor 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 make 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,
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!

HOW TO FIGURE OUT A POEM

If you want to figure out a poem you have to figure out how the speaker is seeing the world

- If you want to figure out how the speaker is seeing the world you have to look at the symbolic language the speaker is using
    - There are many kinds of symbolic languages but one of the most important is metaphor
        - Metaphor is a counter-logical use of language but makes all the sense in the world on a higher level
            - This is how you know you are dealing with a metaphor
            - It makes no sense on the literal level
                - But it makes sense on a 'higher' level
        - We use metaphorical language everyday
            - 'the Whitehouse announced today that…'
            - 'she is a flower, the glory of the day'
                - the beauty, fragility, freshness, fragrance etc are all appropriate to the description of the woman
- when the features of the thing which the speaker is comparing the subject to become so overwhelming that they have stopped seeing the differences, then we can see how the speaker sees the world

OVERVIEW: THE DUKE'S CONTROL AND SELF-IMPORTANCE

My Last Duchess is set in the Italian Renaissance and focuses on a possibly insane Duke, who has full control.

- He is possessive
- A monster of hubris
    - Extremely proud of his '900 years old name'
- Self-obsessed
- Controlling
- And possibly disingenuous
    - The Duke already treats his intended wife as an object to be possessed
        - References to…
            - Munificence
            - Dowry
            - And object
                - …set the monetary context despite the fact that words like 'fair' and 'avowed' could be used in a quite different tone to convey emotion

His personal arrogance can be seen in his false sense of self-importance and in his sense of superiority

- 'I choose / Never to stoop'
    - He values such things as wealth, possessions and titles rather than life

- To underpin this, Browning juxtaposes:
    - the Duke's 'favour' with 'The bough of cherries .../Broke in the orchard'
    - The Duke's 'gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name' with 'anybody's gift'
    - And the smile 'Whene'er [he] passed her' with 'Much the same smile' given to any passer-by
        - The antithetical pattern undermines the confident self-assertion of his tone, leaving the reader to recognise the disequilibrium between what he wishes he listener to believe and what his words actually reveal

OVERVIEW: THE DUKE'S PRIDE AND TONE

His name is so precious to him that he does not think anyone else, especially his last duchess, is worthy of it

- '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?'
    - So if anyone disrespects the name in anyway, or *if he perceives* that anyone would disrespect his name in any way, he will have them executed
        - The brevity of the simple sentences marks the matter-of-fact tone with which he talks of the murder of his wife, clearly conveying his lack of feeling

CONTEXT: ROMANTICISM

the poem was written in the Romantic literary movement (1798 -1870)

- As a reaction to the changes in Britain through the Industrial Revolution, many Romantics glorified nature
    - When reading literature from this period, there are often idyllic descriptions of mountains, nature and the countryside
        - We see the Romantic influence of the Duchess being pleased with the gift of a 'bough of cherries' and her appreciation of the 'dropping of the daylight'

CONTEXT: WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Attitudes to women were changing

- In 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft (mother of Mary Shelley, author of *Frankenstein*) published *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*,
    - which argued that women should receive the same education as men.

My Last Duchess was published in 1842

- in 1854, Coventry Patmore wrote a poem about his wife entitled *The Angel in the House*,
    - in which she was described as a model for all women
        - gracious,
        - submissive
        - and self-sacrificing
            - This poem became very popular and influential because the whole point of her existence was to serve and entertain her husband.
                - Although the idea of the woman's role as the *The Angel in the House* emerged after the publication of *My Last Duchess*, it reflects contemporary attitudes to women against a backdrop of controversy about women's education and rights.

Here are a few brief notes about the treatment of English women in the 1800s:

- When a woman married, she became the legal property of her husband • Women could not testify in court
- Women could not vote
- It was believed that women were incapable of rational thought
- Many female writers published their works anonymously or under male pseudonyms to boost book sales and to be taken seriously.
    - Jane Austen, the Brontë sisters and Mary Ann Evans, better known as George Eliot, published their novels in this way
        - This theme of attitudes to women seems to be a major contextual factor in the poem
            - the whole poem explores attitudes towards the duchess
                - Could it be that Browning uses the poem to explore his opinion on this topic?
                    - It is possible to see the poem as a criticism of Victorian attitudes to women and the effort of men to suppress femininity

It can be argued that the duke's obsession with controlling the behaviour of his wife links to Victorian society's obsession with the idea of a perfect woman

- A feminist interpretation of the poem might suggest that Victorian men were weakened by their dependency on the power they had over women
    - The way in which Victorian men might have been obsessed with their power over women certainly links with the poem
        - Men in Victorian England saw their wives as a reflection of themselves.

FORM - BROWING'S PURPOSE

Browning wished to make us feel the complex and unstable nature of an individual person

- In the preface to *Sordello*, he writes:
    - 'My stress lay on the incidents in the development of a soul. Little else is worth study'
        - Accordingly Browning pays the least possible attention to outward nature.

Browning uses the form, tone and language of the dramatic monologue to make reader aware of the ambiguity of truth

- The Duke's language is reasonable,
- His tone matter-of-fact
    - Yet beneath the surface, readers should be aware of the distortions in the version of life he presents
        - Taken at face value, it is possible to miss the implicit reference to the Duchess's death, but readers of Browning must be prepared to doubt the voice of objective truth just as the Victorians were forced to doubt religious, social and cultural truths

'DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE' FORM DEVELOPMENT

The form of a poem can highlight the kind of relationship the poet desires to create with the reader

- During the Romantic period, many poets adopted a first person, confessional style, creating intimacy with the reader through direct address
    - William Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (begun in 1799, but revised many times) is an autobiographical account of the poet's journey to artistic maturity
        - Browning and Tennyson's innovation, however, was to write in the voice of a fictional personae
- Developed during the early to mid-nineteenth century
- The dramatic monologue may be the most distinctive structure of the Victorian period
    - Robert Browning used this form often and has been credited, together with Tennyson, for its creation

'DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE' GENERAL FEATURES

Dramatic monologues tend to focus on interiority rather than action

- It gives us an interior view of the workings of the speaker's mind
    - Browning wished to make us feel the complex and unstable nature of an individual person
        - In the preface to *Sordello*, he writes:
            - 'My stress lay on the incidents in the development of a soul. Little else is worth study'
                - Accordingly Browning pays the least possible attention to outward nature.
- It is a poetic form in which there is one imaginary speaker addressing an imaginary audience
    - The speaker ('I') cannot be identified with the poet
    - Speaker addresses an audience within the poem
- The dramatic monologue represents someone presenting a case to an auditor
    - 'Porphyria's Lover' is slightly unusual in this respect
        - there doesn't seem to be an auditor in the poem
        - the woman in the poem may be the auditor but this is debatable
- *My Last Duchess* is a poem in which there is one imaginary speaker addressing an imaginary audience
    - The presence of an audience differentiates the dramatic monologue from interior monologues or, perhaps, soliloquies because the speaker cannot be completely open in their speech
        - They maintain a sense of reservation about who they really are and what they really mean

- She had
  A heart how shall I say?
- Even had you skill
  In speech which I have not
    - The audience and the readers must work hard to reveal the truth within the Duke's mind
        - This effect helps to maintain tension as we go on a journey through the Duke's warped mind as we assess his version of reality and truth
            - This poem, therefore can also be seen as a comment on language itself and the power of rhetoric to hide, expose and twist reality and truth
  - In *My Last Duchess* the speaker appears to confess to the murder of the wife he is hoping to replace
      - This self-revelation is a hallmark of Browning's monologues
- Characters in dramatic monologues often teeter on the verge of madness or delusion
  - Elsewhere they may represent themselves directly to the reader, perhaps pleading for understanding or anticipating judgment for their actions
      - *Porphyria's Lover*
- In most dramatic monologues, some attempt is made to imitate natural speech
    - Use of enjambment
    - Iambic pentameter
    - Careful use of linguistic techniques
- It represents the distillation of a crucial moment of human experience, focusing on a particular occasion that becomes a revelation of an almost religious nature as the speaker tries to transcend the finite

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DRAMA

The dramatic monologue form allows the poet to dramatise the human condition

- It works as a piece of drama
  - The form makes it possible to combine rhyme, rhythm and metre with narrative
      - Browning's monologues are concerned with situations, episodes of lives that are still in the process of developing
          - They focus on examples of self-occupied men and women as they attempt to overcome the limitations of their physical lives
              - In this case, it may be that the Duke's sense of jealousy is his limitation as he is unable to set himself free of it
                  - So he orders the murder of the Duchess in order to preserve an eternal sense of control
      - His limitation may also be his enormous sense of pride regarding his '900 year old name'
          - His name is so precious to him that he does not think anyone else, especially his last duchess is worthy of it
              - '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?'

- So if anyone disrespects the name in anyway, or if he perceives that anyone would disrespect his name in any way, he will have them executed
  - But the dramatic monologue form means that this perception is extremely subjective
    - Particularly for someone on the verge of madness or delusion

- In nineteenth-century examples, dramatic monologues are often presented within dramatic scenarios, as if talking to or interacting with others
  - *My Last Duchess* begins with 'that's my last Duchess'
    - Emphasizing the relative pronoun illustrates that this conversation has been going on for some time
      - This is an example of 'in media res'
        - The duke is referring back to something he said earlier and we are catching up with him
        - The adjective 'last' is ambiguous
          - On one hand, it could show how there has been a succession of them
          - This may also hint that perhaps he has killed more than one
        - The possessive first person pronoun 'my' may indicate that he sees his wife as a possession, therefore perhaps he sees all of his Duchesses as possessions, not as fully rounded human beings **(see 'CONTEXT: WOMEN'S RIGHTS' p.3)**
          - But it is also part of natural human speech
- The dramatic quality of the verse derives from the speaker's appeal, the disjunction between their understanding of the world and the listeners' and, perhaps, their own growing appreciation for the reality of the situation

FORM – A 'PERCEIVED' RATHER THAN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL VIEWPOINT

The form of a poem can highlight the kind of relationship the poet desires to create with the reader. For example, the lyric is often based on autobiographical material and is written from a personal point of view, thus allowing the poet to forge a link between the reader and herself; however, the dramatic monologue creates a different kind of relationship between poet, subject matter and reader

- It gives us an interior view of the workings of the speaker's mind
- The poet and 'I' are separate entities; imagination replaces experience; and the viewpoint is 'perceived' rather than personal
  - In the 1970s and 80s, women poets used real, fictional, mythical and historical personae as an alternative means of exploring what it meant to be a woman – or at times, a man.
  - They often used this technique to challenge gender, racial, social and religious expectations through the characters they create
- Dramatic monologues are also seen as a method for inviting sympathy for the speaker
  - We judge them but we are also sympathetic towards them

FORM - THE ROLE OF THE SILENT INTERLOCUTOR

It is the role of the silent interlocutor, more than anything else that gives the Victorian monologue its innovatory distinctiveness, though this is less true of Tennyson than of Browning.

- With few exceptions – *The Holy Grail* being the most important – Tennyson represents the speaker addressing a not very closely defined audience.
- By contrast, Browning's silent interlocutor is always a specific personage, whose role and reactions are inferred from the speaker's words
    - The outstanding example is *My Last Duchess*, in which an Italian Renaissance duke, addressing an envoy of a prospective father-in-law appears to confess to the murder of the wife he is hoping to replace. This sort of self-revelation is a hallmark of the Browning monologue
    - In certain other poems of Browning's, the speaker is not himself the object of interest, but either addresses in imagination the character who is, or describes the character to an unnamed person

SPEAKER IN MY LAST DUCHESS

Italian nobleman of ancient lineage

- a man of enormous wealth and power
- the time he is speaking is in the early Italian Renaissance
- he is speaking to an audience who is internal to the poem
    - knowing who the audience is very important
    - how we read the audience is very important as well
- he is a monster of pride

SETTING

Inside a Renaissance villa

- in a specific place in that villa
- it has certain fixtures that have to be understood

THE FRESCO PAINTING

'Worked busily a day'

- This line is formidably important in understanding what has gone wrong in the story of the poem
    - Why did Fra Pandolf paint the picture in only one day?
        - Fresco paintings were done on fresh plaster
        - Some of the most famous paintings from the Renaissance were painted on fresco
            - For example, Michelangelo's Cistine ceiling paintings
                - These were painted in a day
            - They last a long time
                - Some Roman frescos still look fresh after 2000 years
        - The painting needs to be finished before the plaster dries and then it will last a long time
            - Such a complex painting had to be painted only by those who are extremely skilled in this particular form of art and the fact that they are designed to last centuries, if not millennia, symbolises his pride and status
- It shows that there was no chance of an affair
    - The painting was completed in a day and then the friar packed up and left
        - The function of Frar Pandolf is to emphasise the state of delusion the Duke is in regarding his wife's perceived infidelity
            - The religious circumstances of the friar as well as the nature of the fresco painting all but negates any possibility of the duke's imagination reflecting reality
                - He is the perfect contrast to the duke's imagination

HOW BROWNING COMBINES THE SUBJECTIVE AND THE OBJECTIVE

Browning's dramatic monologues combine both the subjective and the objective

- They explore the 'truth broken into prismic hues' – that is, 'truth' as it is seen by particular individuals, broken down into its component parts
    - Browning presents the Duke as morally corrupted by power and money, to the point that he has a completely different view of truth to the rest of society
        - But he appears to be able to explain it in a rational way

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.

- 'so, not the first
  Are you to turn and ask thus'
    - The duke's words are strange here because nobody has asked any questions
        - He is living out his own psycho-drama that nobody else knows about

THE DIRECTION OF THE POEM

A well-plotted dramatic monologue has a compelling sense of direction to it

- *My Last Duchess* is a downward spiral into the warped mind, psyche and soul of one the most evil characters in English poetry

- The duke is fairly complicated in his evilness
  - But he is untouchable because he has wealth, power and ancestory
    - There is an abrupt surprise at the end
- The duke is deliberately misleading in the beginning of the poem

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STRUCTURE: ENJAMAMBMENT

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enjambment is where lines continue onto the next

- they dont make sense on their own; you have to read the next part of the line to make sense of it
  - they also focus our attention on the words at the end of the line and at the beginning of the next line
    - We can also look at it as meaning which is continued across line boundaries.
      - This approach was common in 16th and 17th century poetry but was used far less frequently by eighteenth century poets
      - In the 19th century the Romantic poets were reacting against the restrictive rules governing 18th century verse
        - They aimed to use everyday language and the rhythms of speech;
          - run-on lines were a natural extension of this principle
            - therefore, they represent natural speech,
              - an essential part of our human nature and this poem is about the nature of a madman
                - if the couplets stopped at the end of each line, this would sound mechanical and not like real dialogue

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STRUCTURE: EFFECTS OF ENJAMBMENT

In a way the enjambment (run-on lines) remove the pleasure that comes with the correspondence of line and thought neatly concluding at the end of the line

- Enjambment can also produce a kind of pleasure where emotion and intellect compels us forward in order to obtain that pleasure of meaning.
  - Here, it adds to the sense of drama of the poem and compels us forward as we experience the downward psychological spiral of the duke's mind
    - Enjambment can also reflect the erratic nature of thought, as well as environment, which is appropriate here because Browning's dramatic monologue is focusing on the interior aspects of the Duke's mind
      - In this sense, the run-on lines create a sense of surprise which reflects Browning's use of 'in media res' at the beginning, where he thrusts us straight into the middle of a convesation

- Throughout the poem, Browning is trying to convey a sense of surprise, shock and horror
  - Enjambment can also create a kind of dramatic pause
    - In this poem, enjambment reflects the disjointed nature of the Duke's mind
      - If reflects his lack of self-control which juxtaposes his obsessive control over his (now dead) wife
        - Although he does everything he can to control others (reflected in the tightly controlled rhyming couplets and iambic pentameter), the enjambment shows the reader that he cannot control himself
        - The image created is one of a crazy man who cannot control his outbursts.

STRUCTURE: REPETITION OF 'MY' – POSSESSIVENESS AND OBJECTIFICATION

The pronoun 'my' is repeated throughout the poem, showing how possessive the duke is. It also highlights how he objectifies women **(see 'CONTEXT: WOMEN'S RIGHTS' p.3)**.

- That's my last duchess painted on the wall,
- My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name
- 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.

STRUCTURE: REPETITION OF 'I' – SELF-OBSESSIVENESS

The duke is self-obsessed, seen through the repetition of the first person singular pronouns 'I' and 'me'

- I call / That piece a wonder, now:
- I said / 'Frà Pandolf' by design, for never read
- 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
- A heart -- how shall I say? -- too soon made glad,
- She thanked men, -- good! but thanked / Somehow -- I know not how -- as if she ranked / My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name

STRUCTURE: IAMBIC PENTAMETER AND RHYME SCHEME – CONTROL

The poem is written entirely in iambic pentameter

- ten syllables per line and every other syllable being stressed
    - this creates a tight sense of control

The rhyme scheme is also tightly controlled

- the whole poem consists of rhyming couplets
    - That's my last duchess painted on the wall, A
      Looking as if she were alive. I call A
      That piece a wonder, now: Frà Pandolf's hands B
      Worked busily a day, and there she stands. B
        - This tightly controlled form and structure reflects the tight control of the speaker over his wife and his subjects.
            - Control is also reflected in the duke repeated instruction 'will't please you sit?'
        - The tight control can also be seen as an indication of the Duke's intelligence

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STRUCTURE: VERSE – ERRATIC THOUGHT

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the poem is constructed in one long, sprawling verse

- Firstly, the structure could suggest that the duke does not stop to think about what he is saying
    - He cares not for his listener, but spouts out his thoughts in a stream of consciousness
- However, a more plausible interpretation is that he is intentionally controlling the conversation
    - He needs the emissary from the count to understand his terms for the marriage
        - If his new wife does not 'worship' his name, he will likely have her killed
            - What is particularly frightening about this, is the possibility of the count accepting this condition
                - Because the prospect of these two families unifying to tie up control of land, power and wealth, may be alluring enough to tolerate this seemingly immoral marital condition
                    - This perspective also throws light on the position of the woman, who is seen as a kind of bargaining chip in a patriarchal obsession with wealth and power
                        - If the marriage goes sour, or worse yet, if the duke simply imagines her disrespecting his name, she will be used as collateral, for an offense she may not have even committed.
            - This is Browning's illustration of subjective reality (**see HOW BROWNING COMBINES THE SUBJECTIVE AND THE OBJECTIVE, p7**)

Secondly, we should consider the effect on the reader

- When we read the whole poem aloud with no major breaks or pauses
    - we are overwhelmed by the immensity of the poem
        - This overwhelming aspect reflects how the duke himself is an overwhelming character
            - He is out of control but his power and status make him untouchable

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STRUCTURE: IN MEDIA RES

'That's my last duchess painted on the wall,'

- This is in media res
    - In medias res, (Latin: "in the midst of things") the practice of beginning an epic or other narrative by plunging into a crucial situation that is part of a related chain of events;
        - the situation is an extension of previous events and will be developed in later action
            - The narrative then goes directly forward, and exposition of earlier events is supplied by flashbacks.
                - '... I call
                  That piece a wonder, now: Frà Pandolf's hands
                  Worked busily a day, and there she stands.'
                    - In media res allows the author to shuttle back and forth in time between interrelated events
                        - It is effective in controlling reader focus and heightening the sense of drama

In his Ars poetica, the Latin poet and critic Horace pointed out the immediate interest created by this opening in contrast to beginning the story ab ovo ("from the egg")—i.e., from the birth of Achilles, which is the story's earliest chronological point.

LANGUAGE: IRONY

When the duke explains that 'her looks went everywhere', the reader is left wondering if he is implying that his wife was promiscuous

- However, the doubts he has about the artist should help the reader to decide that this was not the case
    - It is clear that the duke was disgusted with his previous wife, the duchess.
        - However, it is ironic to note that the duchess's faults were actually to exhibit qualities such as humility and gratitude
            - It seems the duchess was pleased by the simple things in life such as 'the dropping of the daylight'
                - In fact, she seems to have a childlike innocence to her, but this is not as positive as it may seem
                    - The 19th-century feminist writer Mary Wollstonecraft once wrote that while 'children...should be innocent...when the epithet is applied to men, or women, it is but a civil term for weakness'
                        - In other words, the wife is presented by the duke as weak and undeserving of such an amazing husband
                            - Probably because if his 'gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name'

- No, it seems that the duke had no valid reason to dislike his last wife, and so we must examine his character further to discover just what kind of man he is

The ultimate dark irony of the poem lies in the realisation that the listener is an envoy for The Count, coming to talk about the details of the Duke's proposed marriage to the Count's daughter

- The Duke already treats his intended wife as an object to be possessed
    - References to...
        - Munificence
        - Dowry
        - And object
            - ...set the monetary context despite the fact that words like 'fair' and 'avowed' could be used in a quite different tone to convey emotion

Browning uses the form, tone and language of the dramatic monologue to make reader aware of the ambiguity of truth

- The Duke's language is reasonable,
- His tone matter-of-fact
    - Yet beneath the surface, readers should be aware of the distortions in the version of life he presents
        - Taken at face value, it is possible to miss the implicit reference to the Duchess's death, but readers of Browning must be prepared to doubt the voice of objective truth just as the Victorians were forced to doubt religious, social and cultural truths

LANGUAGE: EUPHAMISM

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?

- By using the emphatic adverbial 'Then' in the initial position, Browning draws attention to the incident as though it were no more than a time marker, a point of change in his life
    - The euphemistic reference to 'all smiles stopped together' reinforces this
        - It attempts to remove the reality of the act by focusing on something (her smile) that has become no more than a symbol for her life
            - The Duchess is no more than a piece of wonder hanging on the wall alongside statues life that of 'Neptune .../Taming a sea-horse'

LANGUAGE: AMBIGUITY

ambiguity exists where more than one interpretation is possible

Ambiguity is principally achieved in three ways:

1) semantic ambiguity (polysemy)
    a) nearly all words in English are polysemous, meaning they have more than one meaning, therefore many sentences in English have semantic ambiguity
2) syntactic ambiguity
    a) structuring phrases and sentences so they can be read in more than one way
3) narrative ambiguity
    a) the plotline could mean several things

'I gave commands.'

- The reader infers that the duke commanded the death of his wife,
    - but it is an example of syntactic ambiguity,
        - we cannot be sure.
            - However, Browning did give an interview in which he explained 'Yes, I meant that the commands were that she be put to death'
                - More ambiguity is found in the speaker's description of the painting looking 'as if she were alive'
                    - This could simply mean that the painting is life-like, or it could suggest that she is no longer alive
                        - When the duke explains that 'her looks went everywhere', the reader is left wondering if he is implying that his wife was promiscuous.

Browning uses the form, tone and language of the dramatic monologue to make reader aware of the ambiguity of truth

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LANGUAGE: EFFECT OF AMBIGUITY

A well-written narrative often leaves us reflecting, contemplating and discussing its ideas long after we have put the book down

- Ambiguity is seen as a highly effective quality in cultivating the reader's interests
    - When used well, it can convey an intellectual pleasure of gratified curiosity; a unique kind of pleasure and satisfaction that we acquire via the exploration of curiosities and ideas (both those in our own minds as well as in the author's)

Ambiguity is particularly effective in piquing the reader's moral and emotional interests concerning the literal, philosophical, psychological, intellectual and metaphorical contents of stories and how these elements interact with each other in the fictional and real worlds

- 'I gave commands.'
    - The concept of gratified curiosity may appear paradoxical given that we often assume that satisfaction is derived by solving the story's mystery;
        - however, we must also accept that not all mysteries are designed to be solved;
            - much of the pleasure of reading comes from simply being given the room as well as the tools to delve into the mysteries of the human mind, conscience, emotions and behaviours
                - For example, in William Golding's *Lord of The Flies*, the answer to the question as to whether or not evil eminates from within the boys and therefore all human beings, or whether or not their depraved behavior is simply learned from society (particularly adults), is probably not as important as the psychological satisfaction we get from being given multiple avenues with which to evaluate Golding's ideas about the origins of evil (and other issues in the text)
                    - In this way, ambiguity can give us insight into the thoughts and interpretations of the author while allowing us to overlay personal meaning on top of them;
                        - ambiguity is an important tool for stimulating our cognitive understanding and interpretive abilities.

LANGUAGE: AMBIGUITY AND THE HUMAN CONDITION

Ambiguity also reflects the reality of the human condition precisely because life itself is so ambiguous

- some questions in life, such as the origins of our species, or the origins of evil (as William Golding questions in Lord of The Flies) may never truly be answered
    - yet the pursuit of knowledge about these subjects has driven man for as long as we have existed.
        - The ambiguous use of language in this poem reflects the ambiguous relationship between the Duke's subjective view of his wife and what the reader may see as objective reality that the duke, himself admits to in the sprawling confusion of his thoughts

Additionally by refusing to allow easy categorization and interpretation, authors can generate huge interest and debate about their works;

- sometimes, if we really value the literature, we may even revisit it, either psychologically or literally.

In conclusion, ambiguity can be effective in conveying humour and be used to disguise a character's true intentions,

- or to mislead the reader for the purpose of mystery;
    - it can drive readers, listeners, or observers toward a deeper, more personal meaning than might be conveyed by the inclusion of more explanatory words and phrases

- Ambiguity is also an effective tool for forcing the reader to ponder the true meaning of a story or an element of the story such as character or the meaning of the title well before they have started or even long after they have finished reading the book or watching the play
    - Take Marta Acosta's title, *Dark Companion* (2012), for example;
        - dark can mean 'devoid of light',
        - 'wholly or partially black', '
        - 'showing evil traits or desires',
        - 'relating to grim or depressing circumstances'
        - and many others;
            - companion can also have multiple meanings, but the point here is that the title forces us to consider if the book is about interracial relationships,
                - or perhaps a physical or supernatural evil friend
                - is it about all these things or none of these things?
                    - Another prime example of this is J.B. Priestley's An Inspector Calls' main character, Inspector Goole;
                        - is he a ghost?
                        - Does he have supernatural powers?
                        - Can he see into the future
                        - or is he simply a master of manipulation?

LANGUAGE: SIMILE

'She looks as if she were alive'

- This simile comes across as an ironic joke
    - He may be thinking about the very moment he had her killed
        - There is a subtle indication here that he may have been present
    - In art, he has been able to preserve her in a way that suits him much more deeply than the pleasure he got from her when he was alive.

LANGUAGE: ANGER AND MIRACULOUSNESS

'I call that piece a wonder, now;'

- The adverb, 'now' could indicate anger
    - In the past he was clearly unhappy with this painting
        - But 'now' he realizes it is a true masterpiece, because it captures her as though she were alive, but at the time it was created, it made him deeply unhappy
            - This is because he thinks that Fra Pandolf has somehow caused his wife to be unfaithful with him, even though that would have been almost impossible while painting an al fresco
- 'wonder' implies miraculousness

- it's miraculous how good the painter was

CHARACTERISATION: FRA PANDOLF

'Fra Pandolf's hands'

- 'Fra' means 'friar'
  - friars are part of a religious order
    - like monks and priests
  - if you enter this type of religious order, you have to take three vows
    - chastity, poverty and obedience
      - obedience doesn't mean you have to turn into a robot but it is about removing pride
        - it is the anchor of the three vows
        - to do what you have been told, in a spirit of humility
      - poverty means no ownership, of anything
        - even the clothes they wore belonged to the order
      - chastity means no physical relationship at all
        - to live in a perpetual state of purity for the greater glory of God
          - however, some friars and monks broke these vows
            - but we assume that all of them took the vows seriously
- Despite his jealousy at the artist, he still feels the need to make sure the reader knows his (the artist's) name
  - This is because he is a famous artist, therefore the work of art itself is not quite as important as the name of the artist, which is why he names the artist and not the painting
    - In other words, art here is just a commodity
    - It's something to show his wealth, rather than his appreciation of life or the beauty of life
- He focuses on the artist's 'hands' and the enjambment forces us to do the same before we find out what the hands were actually doing
  - Notice how the poetic structure (enjambment) here coaxes us to ponder what it is that those 'hands' were up to
    - This is important because in the duke's mind, he is thinking about these 'hands' being placed upon the flesh of his wife
      - we are sucked into the world as held in the consciousness of the speaker
      - For a moment, we adopt the Duke's sense of insecurity, that perhaps 'Fra Pandolf' was placing his hands upon the flesh of his wife
        - But on the next line, the Duke eases our anxieties by bringing a more objective perspective on the reality contained within the poem
          - He informs us that 'he worked busily a day'
- However, the next line corrects our thoughts
  - He's 'worked busily a day'
    - These words reveal to us that the duke must know that the artist had no time for any kind of physical relationships with his wife
      - But despite knowing that, his suspicions are still there because his mind is unbalanced by jealousy

- Browning may be suggesting that him having so much wealth and power may be the cause of his jealousy and psychological imbalance is actually caused by having too much money and power
- Money and power have corrupted him to such an extent that it even affects the way he thinks

'Worked busily a day'

- This line is formidably important in understanding what has gone wrong in the story of the poem
    - Why did Fra Pandolf paint the picture in only one day?
        - Fresco paintings were done on fresh plaster
        - Some of the most famous paintings from the Renaissance were painted on fresco
            - For example, Michelangelo's Cistine ceiling paintings
                - These were painted in a day
            - They last a long time
                - Some Roman frescos still look fresh after 2000 years
        - The painting needs to be finished before the plaster dries and then it will last a long time
- It shows that there was no chance of an affair
    - The painting was completed in a day and then the friar packed up and left
        - The function of Frar Pandolf is to emphasise the state of delusion the Duke is in regarding his wife's perceived infidelity
            - The religious circumstances of the friar as well as the nature of the fresco painting all but negates any possibility of the duke's imagination reflecting reality
                - He is the perfect contrast to the duke's imagination

INSTRUCTIONS AND CONTROL

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

- 'you' here refers to a representative of the count who wants his daughter to marry the duke because of his status and position
    - the offer / instruction to 'sit' here is to do with the construction of the villa
        - the painting would have been behind a curtain on a viewing wall and beside the wall, there would have been a viewing bench
            - the offer / instruction is also another example of the Duke's controlling nature
- and the duke is very keen to have a new 'duchess', provided she pleases him much more than the last
- the word 'sit' may also indicate that he wont let the count representative near the painting
    - but he still allows the man to 'look at her'
        - this is ironic because it is the looking at her by men, that drove him to such jealousy, as well as the fact that he is referring to 'her' as if she were still alive; this shows how he is satisfied with having preserved her in a piece of art
        - additionally, now he can control his jealousy by controlling how much other men 'enjoy' his wife, having killed her and preserved her in an 'al fresco'

'Fra Pandolf by design'

- ‘by design’ means on purpose
    - he has a purpose in this art history lesson that we are about to hear

‘for never read
Strangers like you that pictured countenance,
The depth and passion of its earnest glance,’

- ‘countenance’ is facial expression
    - when we read facial expressions, we are seeing through the flesh and muscles of the face and into the state of mind of the person to try to read their thoughts
        - states of mind are highly ambiguous and in this case is a source of anger for the duke

‘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’

- ‘turn and ask thus’ indicates that a question is being asked
    - but nobody has asked any questions
        - the questions are only in the speaker’s head
        - he is in a psycho drama of his own construction
        - he is playing out a script that nobody knows except him
- ‘puts by’ means to pull the curtain across

‘sir’

- we find out that the internal audience is a single male
    - he is of a social status that the duke has to respect

‘spot of joy’

- blush of pleasure
    - she was just a shy young girl
    - she blushed when she was complemented
    - she was painted having just blushed

‘twas not her husband’s presence only’

- she didn't blush for her husband
- he thinks that it is only his presence that should ‘call forth that spot of joy’

‘such stuff
Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough
For calling up that spot of joy’

- ‘courtesy’ has a technical meaning here
    - it is the behavior of courtiers; men to women in the Renaissance
        - there was an elaborate code of behavior for both men and women

PRAETERITIO: DISINGENUITY

'She had
A heart - how shall I say? - too soon made glad,
Too easily impressed'

- why does he say 'how shall I say?'
    - he's been speaking in blank verse iambic pentameter for 20-something lines so he's clearly articulate
    - he's trying to make a point by seemingly disregarding it (praeteritio)
        - this is a formal rhetoric technique of saying you will not mention something that you will then go on to mention
            - this forces the audience to imagine the worst and compounds the effect of the thing mentioned
                - it also makes the Duke appear disingenuous

'Sir, 'twas all one! My favor at her breast,'

- everything was the same to her
    - she gave everything the same importance to everything
- 'favour' in the Renaissance indicates a love gift from a man to woman
    - 'my favour at her breast' indicates a silk handkerchief, as a gift, for example, which she then tucked down the front of her blouse as an act of modesty
        - at the time of Queen Elizabeth, a pound of silk was worth much more than a pound of gold

'Sir, 'twas all one! My favor at her breast,
The dropping of the daylight in the West,'

- 'the dropping of the daylight in the West' emphasizes the extent of his jealousy; he is even jealous her appreciation of the sunset

'The bough of cherries some officious fool
Broke in the orchard for her,'

- 'officious' – too forward in offering one's services
    - a neighbouring nobleman or someone of equal social rank would have come to visit the family and breaks off a branch of flowers from the blooming cherries to take to the hostess as a complement; a perfectly acceptable gesture of the time
        - however, the duke hates this
        - this gesture is still practiced in Germany and it goes back the custom of the Renaissance period
            - the duke considers this to be the behavior of a fool, therefore he hates anyone who does this
                - and he hates anyone who brings his wife flowers

'perhaps
Frà Pandolf chanced to say "Her mantle laps
"Over my lady's wrist too much,"'

- the word 'perhaps' indicates that he was not in the room when Frar Pandolf was painting her

- the duke imagines his wife to have had an affair with the painter but there are 3 strong reasons why this was an extremely unlikely scenario
    1. Frar Pandolf was on holy orders and he took a vow of celibacy
        - It is unlikely he was trying to form an affair with the duke's wife or anyone
    2. He is painting very fast which was the technique for fresco paintings
    3. The painting has to be completed between sunrise and sunset making it virtually impossible for a heavy romance to be constructed in that time even if the painter was not a friar on religious orders
        - Browning uses the setting of the poem to expose the duke as someone who is living in his own psycho drama

'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.'

- The 'white mule' speaks volumes of the duke's relationship with the duchess
    - A mule is the offspring between a male donkey and a female horse
    - A white mule could be an albino or specially-bred mule
        - They are very expensive
            - But the duke bought one for his wife to ride around the terrace
        - It belongs to an ancient language of courtesy and goes back to Arthurian romance (myths, tragedies, love stories etc based on the legend of king Arthur)
- The word 'with' indicates the mule is pulling a cart
- When associated with a woman it is always a sign of her purity and chastity
    - Chastity here can mean faithfulness to her husband
        - The white mule is an expensive gift from husband to wife as a symbol of her chastity and purity
            - But now he is jealous of his own gift

'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.'

- 'she ranked
  My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name
  With anybody's gift.' – this tells us how he saw her and why he is angry, why he was driven to distraction by this woman's behavior
    - he calls his name a 'gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name'
        - he believes she was extremely fortunate to be married to him
        - 900 years means 900 years of patrilineal succession
            - 9 centuries of an unbroken line of succession of father to son
        - this would have been an extreme case of pride of ancestry
        - a massively important social fact that would have outweighed practically every other fact
    - the pride he has towards his name reveals how low he views her
        - he sees her as a nobody
            - as if he plucked her out of the gutter

‘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 make excuse,
E'en then would be some stooping; and I choose
Never to stoop.’

- ‘trifling’ – foolish or frivolous behavior or waste of time
- ‘(which I have not)’ – the third case of praetiritio
    - he is trying to emphasise his point by saying that he does not have the language to say it
    - the effect is that you have to imagine the rest
        - he is pointing out that since he is so powerful he does not need skills of speech
            - aristocrats did not have to be articulate or eloquent
                - they hired people to do that for them
                - in fact they could afford to hire people to do everything for them
                - like hiring a very good lawyer to engage with the language of a courtroom
                - most aristocrats in the middle ages couldn't read or write and they were proud of that fact
            - he is asserting aristocratic pride and using praetiritio to create a double resonance

‘"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 make excuse,
E'en then would be some stooping; and I choose
Never to stoop.’

- ‘here you miss,
  "Or there exceed the mark’ – this is metaphor indicating that he wanted full and accurate control over her
    - for example, he would have preferred her to slightly less appreciative of other men’s remarks and manners
        - if only she had adjusted her behavior slightly, he would not be so angry
- ‘if she let
  Herself be lessoned’ – if only she would sit still and let herself be instructed so that she could adjust her behavior into the duke’s idea of acceptable parameters
- ‘E'en then would be some stooping; and I choose
  Never to stoop.’ – we are now well into the head of the duke
    - in his mind, if he has to order her to change her behavior, it is equivalent to pleading with her and this, to him, is to ‘stoop’, to degrade himself, particularly when we consider the importance of his name
        - he feels he shouldn't have to do that
            - this brings us back to the question of why he wasn't in the room when Frar Pandolf was painting her

- even to watch over his wife while the friar painted her would be, to him, to stoop
- his jealousy is simply about his monstrous pride over his 900-years-old name
  - anything that may degrade his name, even in the slightest make him angry because he chooses 'never to stoop'
  - the statement 'I choose never to stoop' is vainglorious
    - I don't have to stoop because I have everything in the world

'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?'

- 'this' refers to the entire range of behavior described in the previous lines
- 'grew' is personification meaning it got worse
  - however, it is unlikely that she was getting worse, rather he was simply getting more and more obsessed about
    - remember that this is a dramatic monologue so we are seeing things from his point of view
  - it was growing in his mind
    - it was taking over his entire psyche
  - there is no evidence in the poem that her behavior worsened, rather he became more and more focused on it
- 'I gave commands;
  Then all smiles stopped together' – there are many ways that the smiles could cease
  - but he probably had her killed
    - although it is not clear how; perhaps by drowning, poisoning etc – it is up to the reader to imagine this
  - the word 'last' at the beginning of the poem implies the 'next'
    - he didn't kill her himself because he doesn't 'stoop'

'There she stands
As if alive. Will't please you rise? We'll meet'

- now he is speaking, for the first time, directly to the internal audience
  - here, we find out everything about the poem, everything about where this person has been with the duke, what they have been doing and what they are there for
- 'Will't please you rise?' is said with suddent abruptness because the emissary has been shocked and understands the message; the art lesson is over

'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!'

- 'dowry' – the money or property the wife brings her husband; the portion given with the wife

- this reveals that they have been making negotiations about the marriage to his next duchess
    - this also explains why the poem begins in the middle of the conversation
    - aristocratic marriages were like the joining of two countries
        - there were millions of legal details that had to be settled
            - details of inheritance, details of who got what land, what happened if the wife died before the husband and vice versa etc
                - that's what they've been doing; talking about the dowry arrangements
    - the duke is speaking to the messenger because he deals with all the legal issues
        - he was called a bailiff or steward who would manage an estate for a wealthy man
            - eg rents, tenancies etc
    - also aristocrats don't talk about money because that is to 'stoop' and he chooses 'never to stoop'
        - in fact, until recently in western countries, it was considered improper to talk about money in front of other people but now it seems as though that culture has changed and it has become acceptable for younger generations to talk about money
            - but in those days, money was unmentionable

'I repeat,
The Count your master's known munificence
Is ample warrant that no just pretense
Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;'

- 'munificence' means great generosity
    - the statement means 'your count is so generous that any reasonable request I make for dowry will be accepted'

'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 duke has come full circle in his art appreciation lesson and Neptune, the Roman god of the sea, symbolizes the duke's own sense of superiority, taming a seahorse in relation to any wife he is going to marry
- 'Claus of Innsbruck' is an imaginary sculptor just as Frar Pandolf is an imaginary painter; they live in this poem and are constructed to expose the duke monstrous pride and twisted sense of reality
- 'Nay we'll go
  Together down, sir.' – the last interaction between the speaker and the internal audience and it tells us everything about what has been accomplished
    - the emissary steps back to let the duke go down first but the duke insists that they go together because the duke understands that the emissary understands his message

'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)'

- 'Strangers like you' this is not the first time he has been in search of a new wife
    - why does he keep this up?
        - Because he needs the emissary to explain to the count exactly what he wants
            - She needs to treat him like he is the sun of the universe
                - She needs to maintain his pride in every way he wants and if she cant do it, he'll kill her

- And that is the end of the poem