



[My Last Duchess](#), by Robert Browning

In A Nutshell

Robert Browning published "My Last Duchess" in 1842 in a book of poems titled *Dramatic Lyrics*. As the title suggests, in these poems Browning experiments with form, combining some aspects of stage plays and some aspects of Romantic verse to create a new type of poetry for his own Victorian age. The Victorians are the poor unfortunates who come between the Romantics and the Modernists. In other words, authors in this period got sandwiched between two great movements that majorly influenced Western Culture, and so readers sometimes forget about the Victorian age writers.

It's important to notice that "My Last Duchess" is one of the poems that falls into this somewhat problematic in-between age. (For reference, you can think of the Victorian era as stretching from 1837-1901. At least, those are the years when Victoria was Queen of England. Keep in mind that literary movements only correspond roughly with her reign.)

For the most part, poetry didn't do so well in the Victorian period – it was the age of the novel, and everyone was reading Charles Dickens, George Eliot, or "penny dreadfuls," which were the Victorian version of the sensationalist paperbacks sold in your local grocery store today. Most Victorian poets were highly experimental and, with the exception of Alfred, Lord Tennyson, not so highly popular; people kept reading the now-classic Romantic poets, like William Wordsworth and Lord Byron, instead of tuning in to the new developments in poetry.

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Robert Browning alarmed his Victorian readers with psychological – and sometimes psychopathic – realism, wild formal experiments, and harsh-sounding language. These qualities, however, are what make poems like "My Last Duchess" so attractive to today's readers, who value the raw power of Browning's writing more than some of the feel-good flowery Romantic poems.

Browning's inspiration for "My Last Duchess" was the history of a Renaissance duke, Alfonso II of Ferrara, whose young wife Lucrezia died in suspicious circumstances in 1561. Lucrezia was a Medici – part of a family that was becoming one of the most powerful and wealthy in Europe at the time. During Lucrezia's lifetime, however, the Medici were just beginning to build their power base and were still considered upstarts by the other nobility. Lucrezia herself never got to enjoy riches and status; she was married at 14 and dead by 17. After her death, Alfonso courted (and eventually married) the niece of the Count of Tyrol.

Robert Browning takes this brief anecdote out of the history books and turns it into an opportunity for readers to peek inside the head of a psychopath. Although Browning hints at the real-life Renaissance back-story by putting the word "Ferrara" under the title of the poem as an epigraph, he removes the situation from most of its historical details. It's important to notice that the Duke, his previous wife, and the woman he's courting aren't named in the poem at all. Even though there were historical events that inspired the poem, the text itself has a more generalized, universal, nameless feel.

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Big Picture Study Questions

- 1 Would you be willing to marry the Duke of Ferrara?
- 2 What else do you think the Duke might have in his gallery, besides the portrait of the Duchess and the bronze statue of Neptune taming a seahorse?
- 3 Is it significant that the portrait of the Duchess is painted on the wall, instead of on a canvas? Why might a painter work directly on the surface of the wall, instead of on a surface that could be moved?

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