

My Last Duchess

Ferrara

My Last Duchess is a dramatic poem, a poetic form used to narrate and dramatize Victorian concerns. It is written by Robert Browning and it is set in Ferrara. It is based on incidents in the life of Alfonso II d'Este, Duke of Ferrara.

Right from the title the reader might expect that "last", which refers to "duchess", means that the duke will never have another wife, while the word "my" underlines possession. The subtitle "Ferrara" is a reference to space.

The text begins with "that" a deictic. There is a speaking voice different from the poet, to make the text alive. He is showing a fresco to somebody and the fresco is about his last duchess. The woman is dead, but she looks as she was alive in the painting. The Duke considers the fresco a wonderful piece. Frà Pandolf painted the fresco in one day and invited his interlocutor to sit in front of it and to contemplate the painting. The Duke addresses the observer's attention on the "depth and passion of its earnest glance": only he and Frà Pandolf have looked at the fresco. He can make every decision about who can look the fresco and everything happening around it depends on him. At the end we can understand more about the duke than about the duchess. The sound "I" focuses the attention on the speaker and not on the object of speaking. The image the reader gets of the duke is that of a possessive and jealous man, self-centred and obsessed by the portrait of his dead wife.

The reader might think that was the duke himself to order his wife's murder and to ask Frà Pandolf to make duchess's portrait after her death, thanks to the expression "faint half-flush that dies along her throat". The duke refers to his addresser calling it "Sir" so the intelligent reader may understand it can be a noble man.

The duke is trying to give an explanation for why she is smiling in that way, and he was angry because his wife couldn't smile to everybody in the same way she smiled at him. He thinks that "too soon made glad, too easily impressed" so she liked everything she saw.

The duke didn't want to tell his wife what disgusted him about her behaviour and his jealousy grew up day by day because she continued smiling whenever someone passed her. The reader may understand that the duke killed the duchess, that now is on the fresco smiling only at his husband.

The poem ends with the Duke showing a statue that symbolizes his attitude: the statue of Neptune.