

In order **to settle any controversy** about My Last Duchess, you are invited to consider the following:

Robert Browning – “My Last Duchess”, “The Lost Leader”

The poem is said to be loosely inspired by Alfonso II d’Este, the Duke of Ferrara, and the gossips surrounding the death of his first wife Lucrezia Medici, who died when she was just sixteen; there were some gossips accusing the duke of poisoning his wife, **but they seem to be very improbable – a doctor sent by the Medicis accompanied the duchess in her last illness, so surely he would have sounded the alarm if he had noticed something untoward.** Also the historical Alfonso, while being a patron of arts, seemed to be more a patron of poets, including Torquato Tasso; it was his grandfather Alfonso I who was a famous art collector. **He also seems to be a rather indulgent and kind husband to his two next wives, unlike the cold psychopath who is the speaker in the poem.** All that and other reasons, which I am going to mention later, make me believe that even though Browning takes some trouble to anchor his poem in history, putting “Ferrara” in its subtitle, **it is more useful to think about the speaker of the poem as “a generic Italian Renaissance duke” rather than trying to connect him with any real figure from the past.**

The speaker in the poem is having a conversation with an envoy of the father of his next would-be wife. (Why does everybody write that Alfonso’s next wife was the daughter of the Count of Tyrol? Her father was Ferdinand II, the Holy Roman Emperor, and while “Count of Tyrol” was, I suppose, one of his many titles, it’s rather like referring to Elizabeth II as “Lord of Mann”, which she is, technically, but it’s not the best-known part of her job.) He shows to him, with some pride, the portrait of his dead wife (which, as we are going to learn later, is hidden behind a curtain which nobody but he can draw aside). That’s the work of Fra Pandolf, he announces. (There were a number of friars/painters in Italy, but the last famous one, Fra Bartolomeo, who actually worked for Alfonso I as well, died in 1517, more than forty years before Lucrezia’s death.) I said “Fra Pandolf” on purpose, he says, because everyone who sees this portrait and the look in her eye, seems to want to ask me what provoked it. (Do they really, or is he just projecting his jealousy on his guests?) So it was not only her husband’s presence or caresses which made her blush with joy, but also the painter’s compliments, a beautiful sunset, a bough of cherries, the white mule she liked to ride. Her husband was seething with suppressed rage at it, but never voiced his objections, because, even if she had accepted it meekly like a good 16th-c. wife should, without any excuses or discussions, he still thought it would have been demeaning to him to ask her to behave differently “and I choose/ never to stoop.” With chilling brevity he says “This grew; I gave commands; /Then all smiles stopped together.” Now she is just a painting, another object in his collection, just like his new wife and her dowry, which he reveals when he says, apparently unaware of the double meaning of the word “object” that he is sure his father-in-law will be generous, even though it’s “his fair daughter’s self” which “is my object”. The duke’s interest with things is emphasized by the fact that his last words in the poem are him pointing out to his guest yet another object in his collection, a rare bronze sculpture.

Adapted from: Robert Browning – “My Last Duchess”, “The Lost Leader” – Reading The Norton Anthology of English Literature

ALERT: with reference to contextual details it is worth considering the advice below:

“However, **this kind of detail should never be mentioned in an exam - it's not at all relevant to the poem's use of language, structure or form, which is all you should ever write about.** Whether it's a true story or not is irrelevant to our understanding of the poem.”

From **Mr. Guff’s Guide to My Last Duchess**, OWL Education, 2015.