

Lines 1-2

*THAT'S my last Duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive.*

- The speaker points out a lifelike portrait of his "last Duchess" that's painted on the wall.
- This tells us that the speaker is a Duke, that his wife is dead, and that someone is listening to him describe his late wife's portrait, possibly in his private art gallery.
- It also makes us wonder what makes her his "last" Duchess – for more thoughts on that phrase, check out our comments in the "What's Up With the Title?" section.

Lines 2-4

*I call
That piece a wonder, now: Frà Pandolf's hands
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.*

- The Duke tells his mysterious listener that the painting of the Duchess is impressively accurate.
- The painter, Frà (or "Friar") Pandolf, worked hard to achieve a realistic effect.
- Notice that the Duke's comment "there she stands" suggests that this is a full-length portrait of the Duchess showing her entire body, not just a close-up of her face.

Line 5

Will't please you sit and look at her?

- The Duke asks his listener politely to sit down and examine the painting.
- But the politeness is somewhat fake, and the question seems more like a command. Could the listener refuse to sit down and look and listen? We don't think so.

Lines 5-13

*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.*

- The Duke explains to the listener why he brought up the painter, Frà Pandolf.
- He says that he mentioned Pandolf on purpose, or "by design" (6) because strangers never examine the Duchess's portrait without looking like they want to ask the Duke how the painter put so much "depth and passion" (8) into the expression on the Duchess's face, or "countenance" (7).
- They don't actually ask, because they don't dare, but the Duke thinks he can tell that they want to.
- Parenthetically, the Duke mentions that he's always the one there to answer this question because nobody else is allowed to draw back the curtain that hangs over the portrait.

- Only the Duke is allowed to look at it or show it to anyone else. This is clearly his private gallery, and we're a little afraid of what might happen to someone who broke the rules there.

Lines 13-15

*Sir, 'twas not
Her husband's presence only, called that spot
Of joy into the Duchess' cheek:*

Addressing his still-unknown listener as "sir," the Duke goes into more detail about the expression on the Duchess's face in the painting.

- He describes her cheek as having a "spot / Of joy" (14-15) in it, perhaps a slight blush of pleasure.
- It wasn't just "her husband's presence" (14) that made her blush in this way, although the Duke seems to believe that it *should* have been the only thing that would.
- The Duke doesn't like the idea that anyone else might compliment his wife or do something sweet that would make her blush.

Lines 15-21

*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.*

- The Duke imagines some of the ways that Frà Pandolf might have caused the Duchess to get that "spot of joy" in her face.
- He might have told her that her "mantle" (her shawl) covered her wrist too much, which is the Renaissance equivalent of saying, "man, that skirt's way too long – maybe you should hike it up a little."
- Or he might have complimented her on the becoming way that she flushes, telling her that "paint / Must never hope to reproduce" (17-18) the beautiful effect of her skin and coloring.
- The Duke thinks the Duchess would have thought that comments like this, the normal flirtatious "courtesy" (20) that noblemen would pay to noblewomen, were "cause enough" (20) to blush.
- Strangely, the Duke seems to believe that blushing in response to someone like Frà Pandolf was a decision, not an involuntary physical reaction. Notice that the Duke also seems to infuse his comments with a judgmental tone.

Lines 21-24

*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.*

- The Duke describes the Duchess as "too soon made glad" (22) and "too easily impressed" (23). This is his main problem with her: too many things make her happy.

- Another way of looking at it is that she's not serious enough. She doesn't save her "spot of joy" for him alone. She's not the discriminating snob that he wants her to be.
- She likes everything she sees, and she sees everything.

Lines 25-31

*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.*

- The Duke elaborates further on the Duchess's tendency to see every pleasant thing as pretty much the same.
- If he gives her a "favor" or mark of his esteem that she can wear, such as a corsage or piece of jewelry, she thanks him for it in the same way that she approves of a pretty sunset, a branch of cherries, or her white mule.
- At first the Duke suggests that she speaks of all these things equally, but then he changes his claim and admits that sometimes she doesn't say anything and just blushes in that special way.
- And maybe she's a little promiscuous – either in reality, or (more likely) in the Duke's imagination.
- Part of the problem is not just that she likes boughs of cherries – it's that some "officious fool" (27) brings them to her.
- (An "officious" person is someone who pokes their nose in and starts doing things when they're not wanted – somebody self-important who thinks they're the best person to do something, even when everyone else wishes they would just butt out.)

Lines 31-34

*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.*

- The Duke claims that, although it's all well and good to thank people for doing things for you, the way the Duchess thanked people seemed to imply that she thought the little favors they did her were just as important as what the Duke himself did for her.
- After all, the Duke gave her his "nine-hundred-years-old name" (33) – a connection to a longstanding aristocratic family with power and prestige.
- The Duke's family has been around for nearly a thousand years running things in Ferrara, and he thinks this makes him superior to the Duchess, who doesn't have the same heritage.
- He thinks the Duchess ought to value the social elevation of her marriage over the simple pleasures of life.

Lines 34-35

*Who'd stoop to blame
This sort of trifling?*

- The Duke asks his listener a rhetorical question: who would actually lower himself and bother to have an argument with the Duchess about her indiscriminate behavior?
- He thinks the answer is "nobody."
- We don't think that there is much open and honest communication in this relationship!
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Lines 35-43

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 made excuse,
 – E'en then would be some stooping; and I choose
 Never to stoop.

The Duke lists all the obstacles that prevented him from talking to the Duchess directly about his problems with her behavior.

He claims that he doesn't have the "skill / In speech" (35-36) to explain what he wants from her – but his skillful rhetoric in the rest of the poem suggests otherwise.

He also suggests that she might have resisted being "lessoned" (40), that is, taught a lesson by him, if she had "made excuse" (41) for her behavior instead.

But even if he were a skilled speaker, and even if she didn't argue, he says he still wouldn't talk to her about it.

Why? Because he thinks that bringing it up at all would be "stooping" to her level, and he refuses to do that.

Lines 43-45

Oh sir, she smiled, no doubt,
 Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without
 Much the same smile?

The Duke admits to his listener (who is this guy, anyway?) that the Duchess was sweet to him – she did smile at him whenever he passed by her.

But, he says, it's not like that was special. She smiles at everyone in the same way.

Lines 45-46

This grew; I gave commands;

Then all smiles stopped together.

The Duke claims that "This grew" (45) – that is, the Duchess's indiscriminate kindness and appreciation of everything got more extreme.

The Duke then "gave commands" (45) and as a result "All smiles stopped together" (46).

Our best guess is that he had her killed, but the poem is ambiguous on this point.

It's possible that he had her shut up in a dungeon or a nunnery, and that she's as good as dead.

She's not his Duchess anymore – she's his "last Duchess" – so she's clearly not on the scene anymore.

Lines 46-47

There she stands

As if alive. Will't please you rise?

The Duke ends his story of the Duchess and her painting by gesturing toward the full-body portrait again, in which she stands "As if alive" (47).

Lines 47-48

We'll meet

The company below, then.

- The Duke invites his listener to get up and go back downstairs to the rest of the "company."
- As in line 5, this sounds like a polite invitation – but we can't imagine anyone refusing.

Lines 48-53

I repeat,

The Count your master's known munificence

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.

- We finally learn why the Duke is talking to this guy: his listener is the servant of a Count, and the Duke is wooing the Count's daughter.
- The Duke tells the servant that he knows about the Count's wealth and generosity, or "munificence" (49), so he expects to get any reasonable dowry he asks for.
- But his main "object" (53) in the negotiations is the daughter herself, not more money.

Lines 53-54

*Nay, we'll go
Together down, sir.*

- The Duke's listener seems to try to get away from him (we would try, too).
- The Duke stops him and insists that they stay together as they go back to meet everyone else downstairs.

Lines 54-56

*Notice Neptune, though,
Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!*

- Before the Duke and his listener leave the gallery, the Duke points out one more of his art objects – a bronze statue of Neptune, the god of the sea, taming a sea-horse.
- The Duke mentions the name of the artist who cast this statue, Claus of Innsbruck, who made it specifically for him.