

MY LAST DUCHESS

The poem is a **DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE**. One character speaks throughout - we learn about events through what he does and doesn't say.

The characters and events are based on real life: the **NARRATOR** is Duke Alfonso II, who ruled Ferrara in Italy during the 16th century. His wife - Lucrezia de' Medici - died two years after they were married, when she was just 17. It was suspected that she had been poisoned.

The poem has a very tight **STRUCTURE**. It is written in **RHYMING COUPLETS** and has an **IAMBIC PENTAMETER** metre.

The Duke is speaking to a courtier who has been sent by the Count of Tyrol - the father of the Duke's next wife. The Duke shows the courtier a portrait of his previous wife. He lists the many ways she angered him - mainly that she did not show as much appreciation for him as he thought she should have. He hints that he killed her (or ordered for her to be killed - "I gave commands") because of this. This is a warning which he somehow wants sent on to his future bride.

However, much of this tight structure is 'lost' due to the high level of **ENJAMBMENT** and the complex and elaborate **PUNCTUATION**. This means the poem 'flows' like real speech.



This seemingly free and real sounding speech masking such a controlled and organised structure could reflect the Duke. He appears, in many ways, polite and amiable ("Will't please you sit...?"), yet this does not completely hide his domineering and controlling personality.

The Duke asks some **RHETORICAL QUESTIONS**. When he says, "how shall I say?" he is clearly trying to take care with his ominous words. Later he is less careful though: "Who'd stoop to blame/this sort of trifling?" He seems to try and justify his crime when he asks, "who passed without/much the same smile?" His questions certainly don't require a response from the courtier...

SENTENCE LENGTH is often used to emphasise the Duke's mood. For example, lines 25 - 31 ("My favour at her breast... Or blush, at least") lists off the Duchess' many 'crimes'. The length of this list makes his speech very fast - which shows how angry her behaviour made him.

The Duke's last attempt at making his meaning clear to the courtier is when he points out a statue which has **SYMBOLIC** significance. Neptune, the great Roman god, is taming a seahorse. The seahorse, which is small, delicate and wild is being utterly controlled by a very powerful being. This represents the Duke's idea of the perfect relationship between a husband and wife - to the extent that he actually commissioned the statue.

PERSONAL PRONOUNS are used with great frequency. This shows great arrogance. The fact that he calls the Duchess "my" shows his belief that he should own his wife. Even after her death, he still finds a way to prevent her main crime ("her looks went everywhere")... by trapping her portrait behind a curtain - and "none puts by/The curtain I have drawn for you, but I". The Duke now truly owns his wife.

The Duke relishes the idea of people fearing him ("if they durst"). He is also paranoid - is there proof that she did anything truly wrong? He guesses that she may have flirted... Fra Pandolf only "perhaps" paid her compliments.