



## My Last Duchess

by Robert Browning

### In a Nutshell

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[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.

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.

## Why Should I Care?

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We can understand why you might have trouble caring about "My Last Duchess" at first. After all, it's a fictional speech by a [Renaissance](#) duke who's conducting a marriage negotiation. But the themes in play here are way more interesting than the basic setup. Jealousy, sadism, murder, manipulation, a sinister atmosphere, and the inner thoughts of a psychopath - it's practically [The Silence of the Lambs](#) in poem form.

If the macabre sensationalism isn't enough to draw you in, consider this: the Duke's overreaction to the Duchess's genial nature pretty much makes him a textbook example of a controlling, abusive husband who demands absolute subservience from his wife. The only difference is that he's crazy enough to think that even ordering her not to be nice to people is beneath him. In his mind, killing her is the only way to deal with the fact that she smiled at the sunset. And that reminds us of another movie from the early 90s - [Sleeping With the Enemy](#).

So you can visualize the Duchess as [Jodie Foster](#) or as [Julia Roberts](#), if you like. But the point is that this poem has several different attractions: a "true crime" feel (the real-life Duchess of Ferrara did die under suspicious circumstances) and a chilling depiction of the psychology of a man obsessed with power. If you ever wondered what was going through the head of someone on the edge, Browning's poetry is for you.