



# My Last Duchess KNOWLEDGE ORGANISER

**Context** – *My Last Duchess* was written by Robert Browning, and was first published in January 1842.

**Robert Browning** – Robert Browning (1812-1889) was an English poet and playwright whose position as one of the foremost Victorian poets was characterised by his success with the dramatic monologue. Many of his poems utilise satire and dark humour, coupled with his extensive knowledge of historical settings. Browning had a love of history and European culture, and it is said that he could read, write, and converse in Latin, Greek, and French by the age of 14!



**Alfonso II d'Este** – The poem is strongly believed to have been written from the viewpoint of Alfonso II d'Este, the 5<sup>th</sup> Duke of Ferrari. At the age of 25, he married the 13 year old Lucrezia de' Medici, the daughter of the Grand Duke of Tuscany. She was not well educated, and it is clear that D'Este felt himself above her socially. However, she brought a sizeable dowry. After marrying her, he abandoned her for 2 years, before she died mysteriously at 16. It was rumoured that he poisoned her.



**Browning's Love Life** – Robert Browning married fellow successful poet Elizabeth Barrett, who was six years his elder. He had been transfixed by her 'exquisite poetry' which led him to write to her. She had an overbearing father, and so the Brownings had to escape to Italy in order to be married on 12<sup>th</sup> January 1846. They lived in Pisa and then Florence in Italy, where they bore a son, named Robert (nicknamed Pen) in 1849. She died on 18<sup>th</sup> June 1861 in her husband's arms. After her death, both father and son moved back to London.



**The Italian Renaissance** – The Italian Renaissance was the earliest form of the great European Renaissance, a period of great achievement and change which began in Italy in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century. It marked the transition between medieval times and modern Europe. The word 'renaissance' means 'rebirth' of the art and literature produced at the time remains amongst the most well-celebrated in the world. Furthermore, the people and events of the time have influenced a vast body of further works.



## Language/Structural Devices

**Irony** – Browning uses irony to get across the true meaning of the poem: Despite the Duke's harangue of the Duchess's character traits, this is not a poem lamenting her, but rather the Duke's own tyranny, ego-centrism, and jealousy. Several language features create this, for example the rhetorical question he utilises to assert that he should never 'stoop', an idea which is immediately contradicted by the 'command' (a verb reflecting his oppressive nature) to have her killed.

**Quote:** "Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands; Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands"

**Spoken Language Features** – In order to keep the poem conversation-like in terms of its vocabulary and tone, Browning uses a number of spoken language features through the voice of the Duke. For example, a number of words are used in their contracted forms, for example 'that's' rather than 'that is' in the first line. Hedges and fillers are also used, as occur naturally in speech and to lessen the impact of statements. Examples are 'I said', and 'I repeat.'

**Quote:** "Will't please you sit and look at her? I said "Fra Pandolf" by design, for never read"

**Enjambment** – Enjambment is used throughout the entirety of the poem, as sentences run across lines of poetry. The effect of this is two-fold. Primarily, it reflects the long, rambling sentences of the conversation hogging, egotistical Duke. Secondly, it makes the poem difficult to read, disrupting the flow to create a stop-start rhythm – representative of the awkward nature of the conversation.

**Quote:** "Her husband's presence only, called that spot Of joy into the Duchess' cheek; perhaps"

**Personal Pronouns** – The poem is filled with personal pronouns (e.g. 'I', 'my', 'me', 'myself') as one might expect in a poem that is about someone who is totally self-absorbed, has a high opinion of himself, and is exceptionally selfish. A number of these personal pronouns relate to his own sense of self-worth ('my gift', 'my favour') and love of possessions, including his wife ('my duchess').

**Quote:** "Somehow—I know not how—as if she ranked My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name"

**Form** – The poem is one of Browning's best known dramatic monologues – dramatic as fictional characters play out a scene, and a monologue in that there is only one (mono) speaker. It is written in one long speech, presented as a conversation, although the reader only ever hears the Duke's viewpoint. This is reflective of the Duke's need for power.

**Quote:** "At starting, is my object. Nay, we'll go Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though,"

**Structure** – The poem is written in iambic pentameter, meaning that each line has five iambs (de-dums). It is said that such a meter fits the natural conversational rhythm of English particularly well – an apt choice then, for a poem depicting a scene of this nature. The rigid rhyming couplets aim to mimic the speaker's sense of order and power.

**Quote:** "That's my last Duchess painted on the wall, Looking as if she were alive. I call"

## Themes – A theme is an idea or message that runs throughout a text.

**Power and Oppression** – The Duke is fixated with power – both the social and political power that he holds, and the power that he attempted to wield over his wife. He wanted to oppress her in the same manner as everything else under his power. His rare art collection demonstrates that he gets what he wants, but only if he chooses show it.



**Madness** – Through all of his courtesies and indulgences towards his guest, the speaker attempts to thinly-conceal what is apparently some form of insanity. Whilst he speaks of her various flaws, the reader cannot help but note that they may be (in fact, are likely to be) entirely innocent. The speed at which the Duke switches back into trivial conversation after heavily implying that he had her murdered confirms the reader's suspicion that he is in fact mad.



## Line-by-Line Analysis

STANZA	LINE	POEM	ANALYSIS	
1	1	That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,	<b>Lines 1-13</b> – The opening two lines alert the reader to the fact that the speaker is a Duke (his wife was a Duchess) and that she is most probably dead. The use of the word 'last' suggests that he has likely had other duchesses before. The Duke compliments the work of the painter (Fra Pandolf) before asking (although it is more like an order) his guest to look upon the painting in more detail. He suggests that people would like to enquire about how the painter put so much depth and expression into the painting, but do not dare. This, alongside the fact that the Duke is the only one allowed to draw the curtain to observe the portrait, shows him as a somewhat imperious and dictatorial character.	
	2	Looking as if she were alive. I call		
	3	That piece a wonder, now; Fra Pandolf's hands		
	4	Worked busily a day, and there she stands.		
	5	Will't please you sit and look at her? I said		
	6	"Fra Pandolf" by design, for never read		
	7	Strangers like you that pictured countenance,		
	8	The depth and passion of its earnest glance,		
	9	But to myself they turned (since none puts by		
	10	The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)		
	11	And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,		
	12	How such a glance came there; so, not the first		
	13	Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, 'twas not		
		14	Her husband's presence only, called that spot	<b>Lines 14-24</b> – The Duke then imagines some of the ways that Fra Pandolf may have encouraged the Duchess to achieve the 'spot of joy' in her face. He suggests that flirtatious or complimentary comments from the painter would have been enough to make her blush. The Duke is judgmental about the ease at which the Duchess would blush or be pleased by something – lamenting it as though it were a voluntary reaction ('too soon', 'too easily'). His diatribe continues as he accuses her of liking 'whate'er' and looking 'everywhere' – clearly a jibe at what he views as promiscuous/flirtatious behaviour.
		15	Of joy into the Duchess' cheek; perhaps	
		16	Fra Pandolf chanced to say, "Her mantle laps	
		17	Over my lady's wrist too much," or "Paint	
		18	Must never hope to reproduce the faint	
		19	Half-flush that dies along her throat." Such stuff	
		20	Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough	
		21	For calling up that spot of joy. She had	
		22	A heart—how shall I say?— too soon made glad,	
		23	Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er	
		24	She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.	
		25	Sir, 'twas all one! My favour at her breast,	
		26	The dropping of the daylight in the West,	
		27	The bough of cherries some officious fool	
		28	Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule	
		29	She rode with round the terrace—all and each	
		30	Would draw from her alike the approving speech,	
		31	Or blush, at least. She thanked men—good! but thanked	
		32	Somehow—I know not how—as if she ranked	
		33	My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name	
		34	With anybody's gift. Who'd stoop to blame	
	35	This sort of trifling? Even had you skill		
	36	In speech—which I have not—to make your will		
	37	Quite clear to such an one, and say, "Just this		
	38	Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,		
	39	Or there exceed the mark"—and if she let		
	40	Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set		
	41	Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse—		
	42	E'en then would be some stooping; and I choose		
	43	Never to stoop. Oh, sir, she smiled, no doubt,		
	44	Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without		
	45	Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;		
	46	Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands		
	47	As if alive. Will't please you rise? We'll meet		
	48	The company below, then. I repeat,		
	49	The Count your master's known munificence		
	50	Is ample warrant that no just pretense		
	51	Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;		
	52	Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed		
	53	At starting, is my object. Nay, we'll go		
	54	Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though,		
	55	Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,		
	56	Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!		
			<b>Lines 25-34</b> – The Duke then elaborates on the Duchess's shallow nature – her tendency to see the same pleasure in everything – no matter how small. What seems to be of greater concern to him, however, is who she directs her pleasure towards. For example, he suggests that his 'gift of a nine-hundred years old name' would be received identically to a simple 'bough of cherries' picked by 'officious fool.' He is pretentious and discriminatory – he believes that her social elevation in marrying into his family should have been the thing that she took most pleasure for in life. The fact that it was not irks him.	
			<b>Lines 35-46</b> – It becomes clear that the Duke and Duchess were not in an open and honest relationship. He lists the reasons that he chose not to address the flaws that he perceived with her, beginning by using a rhetorical question to assert that he would not 'stoop' to her level (showing again that he feels as though he is above her), but also because he knows that someone like her would make an excuse and avoid being 'lessoned.' Shockingly, the Duke instead chose to give 'commands' (most likely to have her killed) so that the 'smiles stopped altogether.'	
			<b>Lines 47-53</b> – With a chilling calmness, the Duke then reiterates his earlier 'as if alive' statement regarding the picture. As the Duke suggests joining the party back downstairs, it is revealed that the recipient of this tale is a servant of a Count, the daughter of whom the Duke is attempting to win over. With a shocking show of capriciousness, the Duke begins negotiating the finer details regarding the marriage arrangement. His self-absorbed, flippant manner is exposed for a final time as he boasts of a bronze Neptune that he owns.	

## Poems for Comparison

<b>Ozymandias</b>	<i>My Last Duchess</i> can be compared and contrasted with this poem through the theme of power and oppression, and the unpleasant voice in the monologue
<b>Kamikaze/Poppies</b>	<i>My Last Duchess</i> can be compared and contrasted with these poems in that it provides a <u>single viewpoint</u> regarding a time of conflict.

## Influences on the Poet

Camille Guthrie writes of Browning's influences in creating the poem: *The Duchess's portrait is thought to be modeled after a painting of Lucrezia di Cosimo de' Medici (1545–1561). Married at 13 to the Duke of Ferrara and Modena, Alfonso II d'Este (1533–1597), she came with a big dowry, as the daughter of the Grand Duke of Tuscany would, yet soon died at the age of 16 from suspected malaria or tuberculosis or, as it's speculated, of poisoning. The Duke of Ferrara then brokered a deal with the Count of Tyrol to marry a daughter of the Holy Roman Emperor (after that wife died, he married her niece).* [www.poetryfoundation.org](http://www.poetryfoundation.org)