

"My Last Duchess" Themes

o The Objectification of Women

"My Last Duchess" is a dramatic monologue in which the Duke of Ferrara tells the messenger of his potential wife's family about his previous wife, the "last" duchess of the poem's title. Using a painting of that former duchess as a conversation piece, he describes what he saw as her unfaithfulness, frivolity, and stubbornness, and implies that he prefers her as a painting rather than as a living woman. Throughout the poem, the duke reveals his belief that women are objects to be controlled, possessed, and discarded. In many ways, this reflects the thinking of Browning's own era, when Victorian social norms denied women the right to be fully independent human beings. Through this portrayal of the duke, Browning critiques such a viewpoint, presenting sexism and objectification as dehumanizing processes that rob women of their full humanity. The poem thus implies that the duke finds his former wife's actions unforgivable because they reflected her status as an independent person rather than an inanimate possession. The duke, however, appears to believe that a husband owns his wife, and therefore has the right to dictate her feelings and to be the sole recipient of her happiness, kindness, and respect; any indication that she has thoughts or feelings of her own are unacceptable. Ultimately, the poem heavily implies that the duke was so vexed by the idea that his former wife had an inner life of her own that he had the "last duchess" killed. Of course, the duke avoids explicitly confessing to assassinating his wife, and Browning himself allegedly once said in an interview that the duke may have simply had her sent to a convent. Regardless, the outcome is the same: there is no "last duchess" present in the poem to speak for herself and give her side of the story. The poem thus underscores how objectifying women ultimately silences them, robbing them of their voices and autonomy.

o Social Status, Art, and Elitism

Though the poem doesn't outright condemn the duke, it does suggest that he's a brutish figure whose social status is in no way a reflection of any sort of moral worth. The duke repeatedly draws his guest's attention to his wealth and power, and issues veiled threats about what happens to those who don't put a high enough price on his social standing. Through the duke, the poem takes a subtle jab at the snobbery of the upper class, suggesting the shallowness of an elitist society that bestows respect based on things like having a good family name or owning fancy artwork. Instead, the poem reveals the various ways in which powerful men like the duke may use such markers of status simply to manipulate—and dominate—those around them. The duke repeatedly reminds the messenger of the power in his title. The duke emphasizes the statue's aesthetic merit as a means of imbuing himself with more importance: the statue is a "rarity" and was created just for him. This moment has nothing to do with the duke emphasizing his refined tastes and his appreciation of art. Instead, again, it serves as a warning: Neptune was the Roman god of the sea, and the statue depicts this god forcefully subduing a creature who challenged him. By drawing the emissary's attention to this statue before the negotiation, the duke implies that he himself is a godlike figure like Neptune, who will tame the emissary and the Count just as he did the former duchess. The trappings of upper-class status are again mainly a means for the duke to bully people. The duke's seemingly refined manner and opulent surroundings are thus no indication that he's any better than those with lesser means—or that he's even a decent person at all. Through this depiction, the poem offers a subtle rebuke of elitism and the upper class. To men like the duke, beauty is not something to be valued and appreciated; instead, it is only something to dominate.

o Control and Manipulation

Closely tied to the duke's repeated emphasis on his social status and his objectification of women is his clear desire for control. By treating women as objects to be possessed, the duke can more readily dominate them; similarly, by drawing attention to his title and social clout, the duke can intimidate others into following his commands. Yet the poem also draws attention to quieter forms of control, as the duke dictates everything from the flow of conversation with his guest to the choreography of the scene itself. Through these forms of asserting dominance, the poem suggests the power—and danger—of such inconspicuous manipulation, which is made all the more insidious by its subtlety.

The duke uses his social status—indicated by his ancient name and opulent artwork—to intimidate and threaten his guest. More discreetly, however, Browning also shows the duke controlling the conversation via its physical setting. The duke has staged the area with the duchess's painting: the painting is behind a curtain so he can limit who can view it, thereby reminding his audience that he can give and take away whatever he wants. He is so committed to controlling others that he seemingly rehearses even his moments of self-deprecation and seeming uncertainty. He says he doesn't have any "skill in speech"—meaning he's not a good talker—but this clearly isn't the case. By having the duke deliver the dramatic monologue to the emissary, addressed throughout the poem as "you," Browning forces his readers to experience the duke's manipulation to better understand how abuse of power operates. This form of address can encourage readers to imagine how they themselves would respond in such a situation: would they notice the manipulation and feel resentful, or would it slip past as they found themselves convinced by the duke's subtle coercion?