

ASM TUITION ACADEMY

MY LAST DUTCHES

My Last Duchess

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive. I call
That piece a wonder, now: Fra Pandolf's hands
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.
Will't please you sit and look at her? I said
"Fra 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 put by
The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)
And seemed as if they would ask me if they durst,
How such a glance came there; so, not the first
Are you to turn and ask thus? Sir, 'twas not
Her husband's presence only called that spot
Of joy into the Duchess' cheek: perhaps
Fra 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 caused enough
For calling up that spot of joy. She had
A heart—how shall I say?— too soon made glad,
Too easily impressed; she liked whatever
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.
Sir, 'twas all one! My favour 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 like the approving speech,
Or blush, at least. 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. Who'd stoop to blame
This sort of trifling? Even had your skill
In speech—which I have not—to make your will
Quite clear to such a 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 set
Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse—
E'en then would be some stooping; and I choose
Never to stoop. Oh, sir, she smiled, no doubt,

Whenever I passed her; but who passed without
Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;
Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands
As if alive. Will't please you rise? We'll meet
The company below, then. 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. Nay, we'll go
Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though,
Taming a sea horse, thought a rarity,
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!

Summary of "My Last Duchess"

"My Last Duchess" by Robert Browning is a dramatic monologue in which the Duke of Ferrara speaks to an unnamed listener, likely an emissary arranging the Duke's next marriage. As they stand before a painting of the Duke's deceased wife, the Duke describes the Duchess's portrait and recounts her behaviour during her life. He criticizes her for being too easily pleased, suggesting that she smiled and blushes at everything, whether it was a sunset, a gift of cherries, or compliments from other men. He resented that she didn't reserve her smiles solely for him and felt she undervalued his prestigious name. The Duke reveals, in chillingly casual language, that he "gave commands" which resulted in the Duchess's death. The poem ends with the Duke moving on to discuss his future marriage, while also showing off another piece of art, a statue of Neptune taming a sea-horse, reinforcing his need for control and dominance.

Analysis of "My Last Duchess"

"My Last Duchess" is a study of power, control, and jealousy. Browning uses the Duke's calm and collected narration to reveal his psychopathic tendencies. Through the Duke's account, we understand that his late wife's charm, kindness, and appreciation of life made her seem disobedient and disrespectful to him because she did not direct these traits solely toward him. This perceived slight leads to her death, ordered by the Duke. His need to control her, even in death, is symbolized by the painting, which he keeps behind a curtain that only he can draw back. He now possesses her entirely, reducing her to a mere object, much like the art and sculptures he collects.

The poem is a critique of authoritarian patriarchy and the objectification of women. The Duke's obsession with power is revealed in his description of the Duchess, and he views her individuality as a threat to his dominance. His description of her joy in simple pleasures and social interactions suggests that her behaviour was completely innocent. However, to the Duke, her independence and failure to worship him exclusively were unforgivable. The Duke's reference to a statue of Neptune taming a sea-horse in the final lines reflects his belief in his right to dominate and subdue others, just as Neptune dominates the sea-horse.

The Duke is a portrait of an aristocrat whose sense of superiority and entitlement lead him to treat people as objects. Browning subtly critiques not just the Duke but the social structure that allows such people to wield unchecked power.

Poetic Devices in "My Last Duchess"

1. **Dramatic Monologue:**
 - The entire poem is a dramatic monologue, where one speaker (the Duke) addresses a silent listener (the emissary). Through his speech, the Duke unintentionally reveals his egotism, possessiveness, and cruelty. This form allows readers to infer much about the Duke's character without any overt judgment from the poet.
2. **Iambic Pentameter:**
 - The poem is written in **iambic pentameter**, which means each line typically has ten syllables, alternating between unstressed and stressed beats. This creates a rhythm that mimics natural speech, making the Duke's monologue sound conversational while maintaining a formal tone.
3. **Rhymed Couplets (Heroic Couplets):**
 - The poem is structured in **rhymed couplets** (AA, BB, CC, etc.), with each pair of lines rhyming. This tight rhyme scheme reflects the Duke's controlled and calculated nature, even as he discusses something as chilling as his wife's death. The couplets also enhance the sense of finality and precision in his speech.
4. **Enjambment:**
 - **Enjambment** occurs frequently in the poem, where one line runs into the next without a pause. This helps create a natural flow in the Duke's speech and reflects his uninterrupted, self-assured storytelling. It also mirrors how his thoughts and control seem to cascade without interruption or doubt.

Example:

“That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive. I call”

The sentence continues without a stop, building momentum and fluidity in the Duke's narrative.

5. **Irony:**
 - The Duke speaks in calm, measured tones, showing off his cultured taste and refinement, but the content of his speech is deeply disturbing. The contrast between the Duke's tone and his actions (having his wife killed) creates a powerful sense of **dramatic irony**. He seems unaware of how monstrous he appears to the reader, who sees through his self-presentation.
6. **Symbolism:**
 - The **portrait** of the Duchess symbolizes the Duke's need to control her. In life, he could not control her affections and responses, so he controls her in death by reducing her to a mere image, hidden behind a curtain. The portrait

also symbolizes the Duke's view of women as objects to be owned and displayed.

- The **statue of Neptune taming a sea-horse** symbolizes the Duke's tyrannical nature and his desire to subjugate others. Neptune, the Roman god of the sea, represents dominance over nature, much like the Duke's domination over his wife.

7. **Allusion:**

- The Duke refers to **Frà Pandolf**, a fictional artist who painted the Duchess. By dropping the artist's name, the Duke attempts to demonstrate his sophistication and cultured taste. He also alludes to **Neptune**, the Roman god of the sea, further suggesting his self-perceived god-like status and control.

8. **Repetition:**

- The Duke repeatedly emphasizes his authority and exclusivity, such as when he says, "since none puts by / The curtain I have drawn for you, but I." His repetition of phrases related to control underscores his possessiveness.

9. **Imagery:**

- Browning uses vivid **imagery** to describe the Duchess's blushes, smiles, and interactions with the world. The reader can visualize her warmth and openness, contrasting sharply with the Duke's cold, possessive nature.

Conclusion

"My Last Duchess" is a masterful exploration of power, control, and the objectification of women. Through the Duke's monologue, Browning reveals a character who is outwardly cultured but inwardly tyrannical. The Duke's obsession with control and his inability to accept the Duchess's independence lead to her death, and the poem becomes a commentary on the dangers of unchecked authority and possessiveness in relationships. The use of poetic devices like dramatic monologue, rhyme, and symbolism adds depth to the Duke's character and enhances the poem's chilling atmosphere.

COMPARISON AND DIFFERENCES WITH (La belle dame sans merci)

1. Themes: Love, Power, and Control

- **Love and Power in "La Belle Dame sans Merci":**
 - In "La Belle Dame sans Merci," Keats explores the theme of love as something that is seductive yet ultimately destructive. The knight falls for the "faery's child," but she wields all the power in their brief relationship. The knight's pursuit of love leaves him abandoned and emotionally ruined. There is a sense of helplessness in the face of an overpowering, otherworldly love.
 - The power dynamic is subtle: the lady appears delicate and beautiful, yet she holds control over the knight, leading to his downfall. The poem suggests the dangers of falling for an idealized or unattainable love, where the one in pursuit becomes vulnerable and powerless.

- **Love, Jealousy, and Control in "My Last Duchess":**
 - In "My Last Duchess," the theme of love is intertwined with control, jealousy, and possessiveness. The Duke, who is the speaker, narrates how his late wife's independence, kindness, and joy were seen as faults because they were not directed solely at him. The Duke's obsessive need to control his wife's behaviour and emotions ultimately leads him to have her killed.
 - Power and dominance are central themes here. Unlike the knight in Keats' poem, who is rendered powerless, the Duke exerts absolute control over his wife's life and legacy, treating her like a possession rather than a human being. His control is not just over her in life, but in death, as he keeps her portrait hidden behind a curtain that only he can draw.

2. Portrayal of the Female Figure

- **"La Belle Dame sans Merci":**
 - The woman in Keats' poem is mysterious, ethereal, and supernatural. She is described as a "faery's child," embodying beauty, enchantment, and danger. Her affection for the knight is fleeting, and her true intentions remain ambiguous. She takes on the role of the **femme fatale**, a woman whose allure brings destruction to those who fall under her spell.
 - The female figure is not developed in terms of character but rather as a symbolic representation of unattainable love, one that ultimately leads to despair.
- **"My Last Duchess":**
 - The Duchess, in contrast, is presented through the eyes of the Duke, who criticizes her behaviour for being too open and joyful. She is not directly given a voice in the poem, but the Duke's description paints her as a gracious and warm-hearted woman who finds joy in life's simple pleasures. Her refusal to be confined to the role of the Duke's possession becomes the source of her downfall.
 - While the Duchess is also, in a sense, objectified (reduced to a portrait), her warmth, liveliness, and kindness contrast sharply with the distant, cold, and manipulative lady in Keats' poem. The Duchess is victimized because of her humanity, whereas the lady in "La Belle Dame sans Merci" victimizes the knight through her otherworldliness.

3. Tone and Atmosphere

- **Melancholic and Haunting in "La Belle Dame sans Merci":**
 - Keats' poem is steeped in melancholy and desolation. The setting is barren, with "no birds sing" and "the sedge has withered from the lake," reflecting the knight's emotional state after being abandoned. The tone is one of sorrow and mystery, with the knight recounting his tragic encounter as he remains trapped in a state of emotional paralysis.
 - The atmosphere is ethereal and dreamlike, giving the sense that the knight is caught in a world between reality and fantasy, unable to escape the haunting memory of the lady.
- **Sinister and Ominous in "My Last Duchess":**
 - Browning's poem has a tone of cold detachment and subtle menace. The Duke speaks in a calm, measured way, but beneath his words lies an undercurrent of

jealousy, possessiveness, and cruelty. The sinister tone builds as the reader realizes that the Duke has had his wife killed and now calmly shows off her portrait as if she were a mere object.

- The poem's setting, with its aristocratic art gallery, enhances the atmosphere of power, wealth, and control. The Duke's matter-of-fact recounting of his wife's fate adds to the chilling nature of the poem.

4. Structure and Poetic Form

- **Ballad Form in "La Belle Dame sans Merci":**
 - **"La Belle Dame sans Merci"** is structured as a ballad, consisting of quatrains with an **ABCB** rhyme scheme. The simple, rhythmic structure enhances the poem's haunting and mysterious tone, making it feel like a folk tale or legend. The repetition of certain phrases, such as "alone and palely loitering," adds to the sense of lingering sorrow.
 - The ballad form helps convey the story in a concise and narrative-driven manner, with a focus on the emotional impact of the knight's encounter with the lady.
- **Dramatic Monologue in "My Last Duchess":**
 - **"My Last Duchess"** is a dramatic monologue, meaning the entire poem is spoken by one character — the Duke — who indirectly reveals his thoughts and feelings. The **iambic pentameter** and **rhymed couplets** give the poem a controlled, formal structure, reflecting the Duke's composed and controlling nature.
 - The monologue format allows the reader to infer much about the Duke's personality and motivations, even though he never explicitly admits to his cruelty. The structure is key to understanding the tension between appearance and reality in the poem.

5. Outcome of the Relationship

- **Destruction of the Knight in "La Belle Dame sans Merci":**
 - The knight in Keats' poem is left in a state of desolation. His love for the lady brings him nothing but sorrow, as she abandons him after enchanting him. The outcome of their relationship is tragic for the knight, who is left emotionally broken and trapped in a lifeless world. His fate is uncertain, but his present state suggests he will continue to suffer, haunted by the memory of the lady.
- **Murder of the Duchess in "My Last Duchess":**
 - In contrast, the Duke in Browning's poem takes active steps to control the outcome of his relationship. When he perceives that his wife is not conforming to his standards of obedience and exclusivity, he has her killed. The Duchess's death solidifies the Duke's dominance, and he continues to control her even after her death, showcasing her portrait to visitors as if she were a trophy. The Duke is left unscathed, continuing with his life and already planning another marriage.

Differences between "La Belle Dame sans Merci" and "My Last Duchess"

1. **Power and Control:**
 - **"La Belle Dame sans Merci"** presents the female figure as the one in control, with the knight falling victim to her enchantment. The lady wields power through her beauty and supernatural allure, leaving the knight emotionally and physically ruined.
 - **"My Last Duchess,"** on the other hand, portrays the male figure (the Duke) as the one in control. The Duke exerts power over his wife, both in life and death, and the poem highlights his obsessive need to control her actions and emotions.
2. **Agency of the Female Figure:**
 - In **"La Belle Dame sans Merci,"** the lady has significant agency. She initiates the relationship, lures the knight into her world, and then abandons him. Her actions directly lead to the knight's downfall, and she remains a mysterious and powerful figure throughout the poem.
 - In **"My Last Duchess,"** the Duchess is largely powerless. The Duke controls her fate and reduces her to a portrait that he can manipulate. Although she displays kindness and joy in life, she is ultimately a victim of the Duke's jealousy and desire for control. The Duchess's voice is absent from the poem, as we only hear about her through the Duke's biased perspective.
3. **Tone and Atmosphere:**
 - The tone of **"La Belle Dame sans Merci"** is melancholic and dreamlike, with an atmosphere of mystery and emotional desolation. The knight's sorrow is central to the poem's mood, and the supernatural elements heighten the sense of otherworldly tragedy.
 - In **"My Last Duchess,"** the tone is sinister and chilling, with the Duke's calm, detached narration masking the horror of his actions. The atmosphere is one of cold control and dominance, with the Duke's aristocratic setting emphasizing his power and wealth.
4. **Outcome of the Male Character:**
 - The knight in **"La Belle Dame sans Merci"** is left in a state of emotional ruin. He is the victim of the lady's enchantment and is trapped in a barren, lifeless world, with no hope for redemption.
 - The Duke in **"My Last Duchess"** emerges victorious in his quest for control. He suffers no consequences for his actions and is already planning to marry another woman.

It is compared with Ozymandias, London as well from power and conflict.