ROBERT BROWNING

"MY LAST DUCHESS"

Course: ENGL 120

Robert Browning

Genre

Poetry

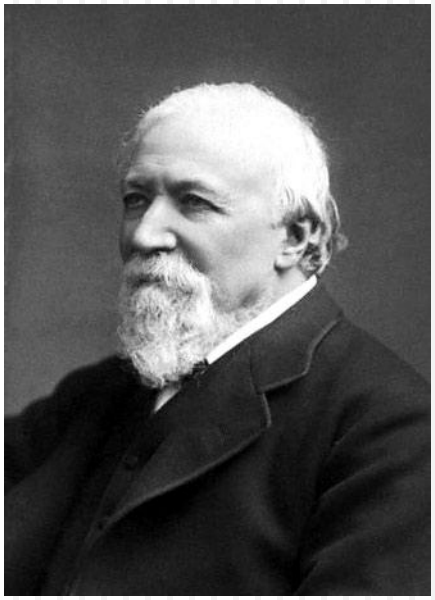
Plays

Style

Victorian

Themes

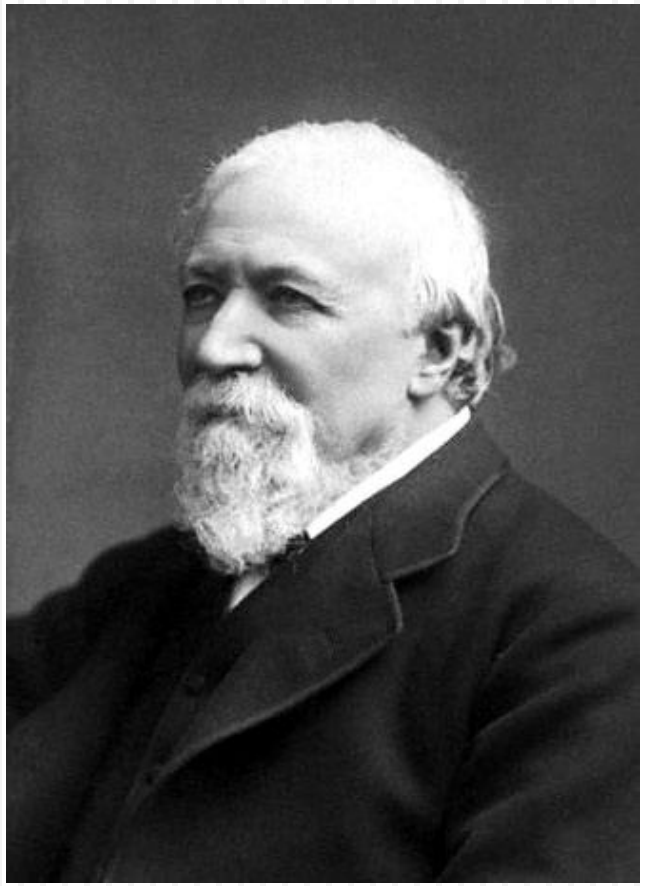
- Multiple perspectives
- Relationship between art and morality



Robert Browning

(1812–1889)

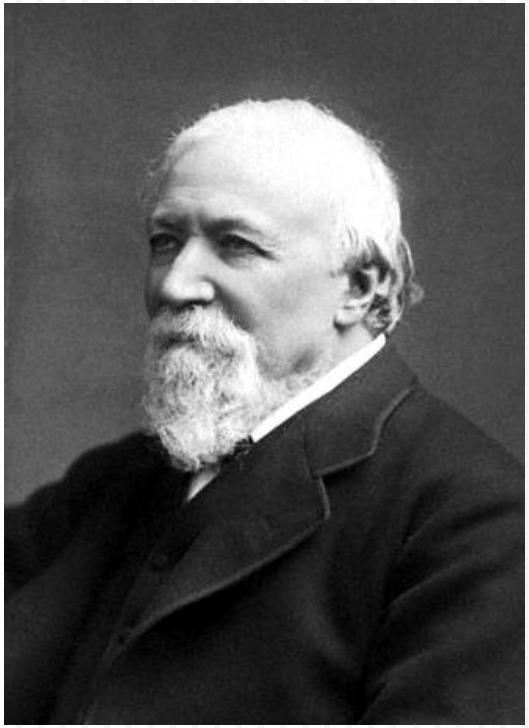
Robert Browning was born in Camberwell, England. His mother was an accomplished pianist. His father, who worked as a bank clerk, was also an artist, scholar, antiquarian, and collector of books and pictures. Much of Browning's education came from his well-read father. It is believed that he was already proficient at reading and writing by the age of five. A bright and anxious student, Browning learned Latin, Greek, and French by the time he was fourteen. From fourteen to sixteen he was educated at home, attended to by various tutors in music, drawing, dancing, and horsemanship. In 1828, Browning enrolled at the University of London, but he soon left, anxious to read and learn at his own pace.



Robert Browning

(cont.)

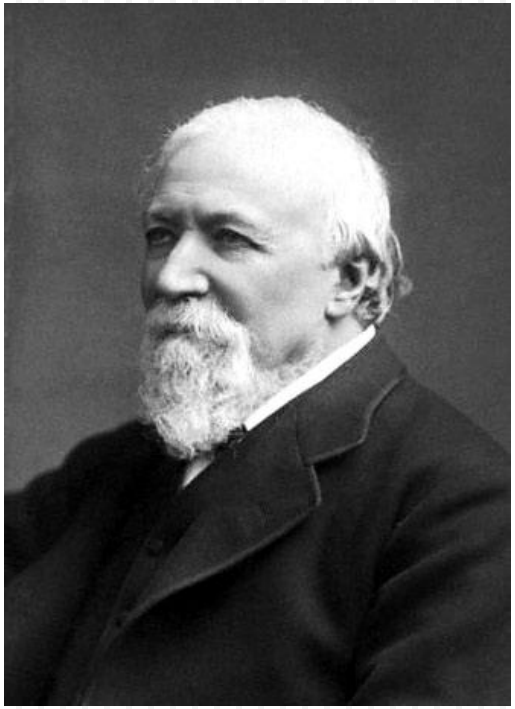
In 1833, Browning anonymously published his first major published work, *Pauline*, and in 1840 he published *Sordello*, which was widely regarded as a failure. He also tried his hand at drama, but his plays, including *Strafford*, which ran for five nights in 1837, and the *Bells and Pomegranates* series, were for the most part unsuccessful. Nevertheless, the techniques he developed through his dramatic monologues – especially his use of diction, rhythm, and symbol – are regarded as his most important contribution to poetry, influencing such major poets of the twentieth century as Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and Robert Frost.



Robert Browning

(cont.)

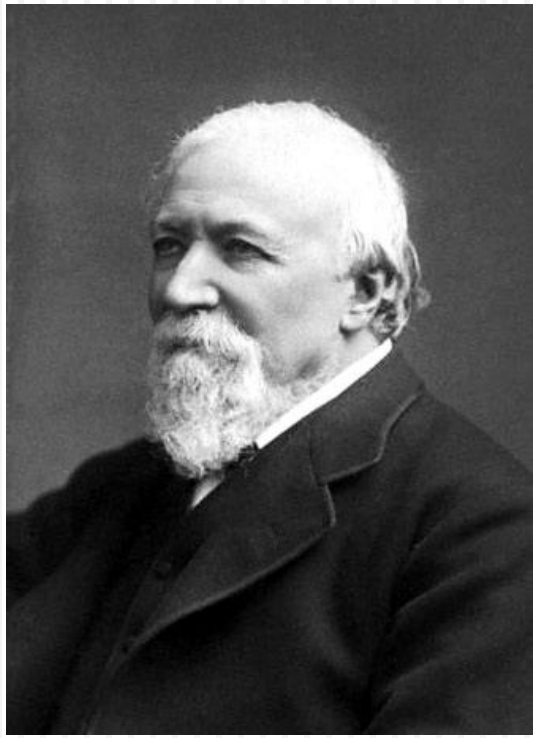
After reading Elizabeth Barrett's *Poems* (1844) and corresponding with her for a few months, Browning met her in 1845. They were married in 1846, against the wishes of Barrett's father. The couple moved to Pisa and then Florence, where they continued to write. They had a son, Robert "Pen" Browning, in 1849, the same year his *Collected Poems* was published. Elizabeth inspired Robert's collection of poems *Men and Women* (1855), which he dedicated to her. Now regarded as one of Browning's best works, the book was received with little notice at the time; its author was then primarily known as Elizabeth Barrett's husband.



Robert Browning

(cont.)

Elizabeth Barrett Browning died in 1861, and Robert and Pen Browning soon moved to London. Browning went on to publish *Dramatis Personae* (1863), and *The Ring and the Book* (1868). The latter, based on a seventeenth-century Italian murder trial, received wide critical acclaim, finally earning a twilight of renown and respect in Browning's career. The Browning Society was founded while he still lived, in 1881, and he was awarded honorary degrees by Oxford University in 1882 and the University of Edinburgh in 1884. Robert Browning died on the same day that his final volume of verse, *Asolando*, was published, in 1889.



My Last Duchess

Historical context

Browning's poem, which is set in Renaissance Italy, tells us less about the Renaissance itself than about Victorian views toward the period. The incident the poem dramatizes comes from the life of Alfonso II, a nobleman of Spanish origin who was Duke of Ferrara in Italy during the sixteenth century. Alfonso's first wife was Lucrezia, a member of the Italian Borgia family and the daughter of a man who later became pope. Although she died only three years into the marriage – to be replaced, as the poem suggests, by the daughter of the Count of Tyrol – Lucrezia transformed the court of Ferrara into a gathering place for Renaissance artists. As a result, Ferrara became exemplary of the aesthetic awakening that was taking place throughout Italy. It was rumored that Lucrezia was poisoned.

My Last Duchess

Summary

Lines 1-2:
The beginning note is meant to explain that the speaker of the poem is the Duke of Ferrara; this provides the reader with location (Italy) and class environment (aristocratic). In the opening lines Browning sets the scene for the poem, focusing the reader's imagination on the painting on the wall. The central premise of the poem is put in place: the dead wife will appear to come back to life only through the artistry of the picture. Through this, Browning allows the reader to begin to think of the woman as a real person, once very much alive, and initiates a "relationship" between the dead woman and the reader. Once the reader begins to feel sympathy for the woman, then the subsequent "reasons" given by the Duke concerning her "imperfections" will seem all the more outrageous.

My Last Duchess

Summary (cont.)

Lines 3-4:
Here, Browning accomplishes two things: a) an emphasis on the mastery of the artist, "Fra Pandolf," who created a work of art that makes the dead woman seem so animated; and b) an introduction to the Duke's subtle, mocking tone with the phrases "piece of wonder" and "busily a day". These words seem to be heavy with ridicule and scorn for both woman and artist. At this point the reader might begin to think the Duke was jealous of the man who "fussed" over his wife but who, ultimately created – not a masterpiece – but just a portion of one. It should be noted that, unlike some other figures in Browning's work, Fra Pandolf – and later, Claus of Innsbruck – is an imaginary, not historical, figure.

My Last Duchess

Summary (cont.)

Line 5:
The use of the word "you" informs the reader that there is an immediate addressee within the fiction of the poem; the speaker is not addressing the reader, but another character. More specifically, it indicates that the speaker of the poem, the Duke, is now addressing the emissary directly, asking him to sit and gaze upon picture of the dead woman. The reader may imagine the emissary sitting in a chair while the Duke stands and delivers his speech. In effect, the emissary is now in a subordinate position.

My Last Duchess

Summary (cont.)

Lines 6-9:
The words "by design" imply that the artist is well-known and has some prestige attached to his name. The Duke may want to advertise that it was his own talent for hiring the right artist that was responsible for the "life-like quality" of the picture. The Duke also stresses that all of the painting's viewers— "strangers like you"—remark upon the painting's lifelike look. In addition, the Duke appears more taken with the painting than with the real woman the picture represents. The image of emotion—the "passion" in the "glance"—seems more valuable to him than genuine emotion. The use of the word "its" instead of "her" suggests that the Duke has more of a relationship with the painting than he did with his dead wife. With these details, Browning begins to interject the notion of the Duke's jealousy. That "passionate glance" might have been placed there by the painter, whom the Duke probably sees as a rival for his dead wife's affection.

My Last Duchess

Summary (cont.)

Lines 10-13:
These lines suggest just how striking the depth and passion of the image are, since apparently all previous viewers have wanted to know what excited the Duchess enough to inspire that look in her eyes. The Duke also betrays his possessiveness and desire for control when he comments that "none puts by / The curtain ... but I."

Lines 14-15:
At this point, Browning suggests more of the Duke's possessiveness, as he tells the emissary that it wasn't his presence alone that made his wife happy or caused the "spot of joy," which may literally have been a blush. The Duke insinuates that this blush must have come to her face from either being in the company of a lover or from her far too impressionable and undiscriminating nature.

My Last Duchess

Summary (cont.)

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Lines 16-21:
The Duke begins to offer his guesses at what, aside from some illicit pleasure, might have caused the Duchess to blush. Two readings are possible, turning on the reader's sense of how seriously the Duke believes in the monk's vows of celibacy. If the painter was not the Duchess' lover, then her nature was simply too susceptible to flattery for the Duke's liking.

My Last Duchess

Summary (cont.)

Lines 22-34:
This section of the poem begins the Duke's long list of complaints against the Duchess. First and foremost, she was innocent, too easily pleased and impressed. He blames her for not seeing any difference between being the wife of a "great man" and: being able to see the sunset; receiving a bouquet from someone of status below the Duke's; or riding a white mule. While he thinks it's fine to be courteous ("She thanked men, - good!"), she gave all men the kind of respect that only a man with his family's rank and distinction deserves.

Lines 35-43:
Having recounted the Duchess's imperfections, the Duke announces that, even though her faults were many, he would not lower himself – "stoop“ – by telling her what bothered him. Note how the Duke tries to paint himself as a "plain-spoken" man, one who has no "skill" in "speech." At this point in the poem, the reader may realize the Duke is well-skilled in the uses of language. The Duke explains that, even if he had the skill to tell the Duchess just how much she disgusted him, he would not have explained to her how and why her actions bothered him. On one hand, he betrays a fear that she would have argued with him: "plainly set / Her wits to yours." On the other hand, he explains that the very process of having to explain his feelings to her would have constituted a compromise (or "stoop") to his authority.

My Last Duchess

Summary (cont.)

Lines 44-48:
These lines contain the speaker's final judgment on the Duchess. The Duke recalls his dead wife's smile, and how she never reserved her smile for him. The lines "gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together" tell us that the Duke used his power to curb his wife's friendliness, but the words also leave the details ambiguous. At best, he may have restricted her behavior in a way that dampened her ardor for life; at worst, he may have ordered her assassination. The next lines, with the emphasis on "as if alive," underscore her death.

Lines 49-53:
As the poem draws to a close, the Duke redirects his attention to his upcoming marriage. He tells the emissary that he is certain his future bride's father will give him a generous dowry. The Duke, however, wants to be seen as a man who is more interested in his fiancée than in any money she might bring to their union. At this point, the reader is unlikely to trust these declarations and is likely to fear for this young woman's welfare.

My Last Duchess

Summary (cont.)

Lines 54-56:
The poem concludes with the final image of a god, "Neptune ," taming a sea-horse. The image of the powerful god taking control over a creature like a sea-horse demonstrates the relationship between the Duke (Neptune) and the last Duchess (seahorse). It is as if, by pointing out this sculpture to the emissary, the Duke is restating his power over his future bride, as well as his more general power in the world. The final lines emphasize another aspect of that power, showing not just the Duke's desire to possess rare objects of beauty, but also his ability to do so.

My Last Duchess

Setting

- Location: Italy
- Time: Sixteenth century
- Social conditions: Focuses on the life of aristocrats
- Mood: Light at the beginning but dark at the end of poem

My Last Duchess

Characters

1. Alfonso II, Duke of Ferrara
2. Lucrezia di Cosimo de Medici
3. Barbara of Austria
4. Emissary of Count of Tyrol

My Last Duchess

Alfonso, II

1. Characteristics: Proud, jealous, possessive, arrogant, murderous
2. Developing character

My Last Duchess

Lucrezia

1. Characteristics: Beautiful, aristocratic, passionate, friendly
2. Static character

My Last Duchess

Barbara of Austria

1. Characteristics: Beautiful, rich, aristocratic
2. Static character

My Last Duchess

Emissary

1. Characteristics: Nothing is known about him except that, as an emissary, he most likely was lower in social rank than Alfonso II.
2. Static character

My Last Duchess

Point of View

- First person – Told from the viewpoint of the Alfonso II, Duke of Ferrara

My Last Duchess

Dramatic monologue

1. Evokes the unconstrained reaction of an individual in a particular situation or crisis
2. Use of history to provide the correct historical context

My Last Duchess

Theme

1. Pride (hubris)
2. Multiple perspectives