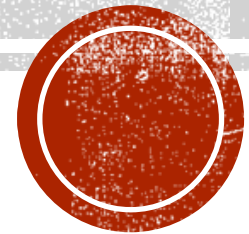


# “MY LAST DUCHESS” AS A DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE

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# TIMELINE



1 AD

5<sup>th</sup> cent.  
BC



For this lesson, we have to go the middle of the nineteenth century.

TARDIS, commissioned to transport Eng. Lit. students to various points in the past to study the works of literature from those eras



19<sup>th</sup> cent.

Present

Robert Browning (1812-1899)



## “MY LAST DUCHESS”: THE TEXT

### FERRARA

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 puts by  
The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)

And seemed as 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 cause 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 whate'er  
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 alike 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 you skill  
In speech—which I have not—to make your will  
Quite clear to such an 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 plainly 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,  
Whene'er 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 pretense  
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!



## LET US TRY TO DEFINE DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE

- Point 1: Only one speaker (the Duke of Ferrara, a historical figure from the Italian Renaissance)
- Point 2: The speaker is not the poet Robert Browning. The poem sees Browning impersonating the Duke of Ferrara and speaking in his voice throughout
- Point 3: There is a listener (messenger/envoy of the Count to whose daughter the Duke is planning to get married)



## LET US TRY TO DEFINE DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE

- Point 4: The poem plays out like a movie scene (it is set in a particular moment)
  - Point 5: We get to know many things about the speaker from his speech
- \* **Note:** The points noted above were raised by the students themselves while they tried to define dramatic monologue based on their reading of the text of “My Last Duchess”



## HOW DO EXPERTS DEFINE DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE?

The dramatic monologue has the following features:

1. A single person, who is patently not the poet, utters the speech that makes up the whole of the poem, in a specific situation at a critical moment
2. This person addresses and interacts with one or more other people; but we know of the auditors' presence, and what they say and do, only from clues in the discourse of the single speaker.
3. The main principle controlling the poet's formulation of what the lyric speaker says is to reveal to the reader, in a way that enhances its interest, the speaker's temperament and character.

--M.H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*





## HOW DO EXPERTS DEFINE DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE?

- A kind of poem in which a single fictional or historical character other than the poet speaks to a silent ‘audience’ of one or more persons.
- Such poems reveal not the poet’s own thoughts but the mind of the impersonated character, whose personality is revealed unwittingly
- This distinguishes a dramatic monologue from a lyric, while the implied presence of an auditor distinguishes it from a soliloquy.

--Chris Baldick, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*





## A DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE OPERATES ON TWO LEVELS OF MEANINGS

- In a dramatic monologue, the poet must “reveal...the speaker’s temperament and character”—“the mind of the impersonated character”—while using only the words articulated by that character. To do this, the speaker’s words must be presented in a way that allows the reader to read between the lines; the poem must have a porous quality that gives the reader a glimpse of the meaning lurking just underneath the surface of the words.
- So a dramatic monologue must always operate on two levels of meaning—i) what the speaker wants us to know about him (the speaker is usually a man); and ii) what the speaker ends up revealing about himself.



## A MAN OF WEALTH AND TASTE? A SERIAL KILLER?

- The tension between what is projected by the speaker and what is revealed by the poet provides the drama.
- In “My Last Duchess” the Duke of Ferrara’s projection of himself as a man of wealth and taste and a suitable son-in-law for the count, whose envoy is the silent listener, is contradicted by Browning’s skilful revelation of the Duke’s real nature—a conceited, cruel man who probably killed his last wife (“I gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together”). And the use of the words, “my last duchess”, hints at the shocking possibility that the Duke had had, and had disposed of, more than one wife—the previous wife having been the last of a series of duchesses.

