



**Mycroft Lectures.**  
**Adapted Transcript for:**

***Robert Browning's***  
***My Last Duchess.***

**(Mycroft lectures always provide sentence-by-sentence parsing, paraphrasing and explanation of each poem. However, each lecture also presents extra information to enhance appreciation and understanding of the poem under discussion. As the Mycroft lectures are not read from a script, a transcript of a lecture contains the imperfections of a spoken presentation. To avoid the embarrassment of having the spoken performance thought to be an essay and being quoted as such, I have made occasional changes to the spoken lectures for the purposes of clarification. What follows is the transcript of a lecture, not an essay.)**

**Chronology of the lecture.**

1. The lecture starts with an acknowledgment of the difference between the author of a poem and the narrator in a poem.
2. The literary technique of showing, not telling.
3. The location in which the poem is set.
4. The poem as dramatic monologue.
5. The poem is read through.
6. The poem is parsed, paraphrased, explained line by line in simpler English. Various complications noted, or areas of interest raised and questioned, are:
  - ⤴ How to break down a very long sentence.
  - ⤴ What does 'The depth and passion of its earnest glance' mean?
  - ⤴ What is the Duke really saying? How much should we reinterpret his version of events?
  - ⤴ What is the Duke's real problem with his previous wife's behaviour?
  - ⤴ What steps has he taken to rectify what he sees as a problem?

- ^ The courtly language of the final section of the poem.
  - ^ The thought process of the Duke.
  - ^ Does the poem contain a political comment on the aristocracy of Browning's time?
7. The poem is read through one more time.

## **Transcript of the *My Last Duchess* Lecture.**

This is a much anthologized piece, a very famous poem, and before I do the read-through of it, I want to address four issues. These four issues may seem blindingly obvious to those of you who know the poem well, but I'm doing this for someone who is just looking at the poem, it's the first time they've read it. If I say anything that you already know, I apologize.

But here we go. First thing. Robert Browning's *My Last Duchess*.

In this poem, Robert Browning is the author of the poem. He is the guy who wrote it. Robert Browning is not the narrator of the poem. The narrator of the poem is an Italian Duke. That, I know, is blindingly obvious, if you know it. Never assume everybody always knows these things. So the poem is being narrated through the mind of an Italian Duke. Now, because Robert Browning is not the narrator of this poem, and it is being narrated through the mind of the Duke, what we get to find out in this poem is the way the Duke's mind works. And this allows us to look at - or in fact, this necessitates that we understand - a literary technique we call 'showing, not telling'.

For me, Robert Browning's *My Last Duchess* is one of the classic ways of teaching the literary technique of showing, not telling; and I'll explain it to you now. I'm going to tell you a piece of information. 'The man walked into the room, he was a strong and violent man.' I've just told you that piece of information. How strong and how violent is that man? Now you've got an image in your head of how strong and how violent that man is, who has just walked into the room. And that image is dependent on what you see of me, because you're looking at me and thinking, What would that guy think is a strong and violent man? Now this is very helpful because you can see me, and you can trust that what I think is a strong and violent man is probably very similar to what you think is a strong and violent man. But what if the person giving you this information was a six-year-old child? A six-year-old child says, 'The man walked into the room, he was a strong and violent man.' What does a six-year-old child think is a strong and violent man? To a six-year-old child, a strong and

violent man can be a ten-year-old child having a temper tantrum. Imagine the person giving you this information is a seasoned war veteran, and the seasoned war veteran tells you, 'The man walked into the room, he was a strong and violent man.' That man coming into the room would have to be a giant, near psychopathic, to be described as strong and violent by someone who is exposed to violence and sees extreme strength on a regular basis. So, whenever you are told a piece of information, the way that information reaches you is dependent on your interpretation of the person who is giving you that information. Dependent on your knowledge of that person who is giving you the information.

Now let me *show* you something. 'The man walked into the room, he picked up a two-hundred-pound chair, and smashed it over the head of a kneeling nun.' Right, how strong is he? Well, he's strong enough to pick up a two-hundred-pound chair. How violent is he? Well, he's violent enough to smash a kneeling nun over the head with a two-hundred-pound chair. Now, at no point there did I tell you that he was strong, at no point did I tell you he was violent. What I did was show you two instances that would require a great deal of strength and an extraordinarily violent personality.

There's a Creating Writing 101 thing that likes to explain that showing is *always* better than telling. Showing *is* better than telling, except when it isn't. This is one of those things. In this poem, we get a great example of getting to the character through what we are shown. This is the Duke's interpretation of events, but it shows us the way the Duke thinks.

Okay a third point I want to raise is to do with location, and I don't usually introduce these things in a Mycroft lecture. Normally I read the poem through and then explain the poem. But the location of this particular poem isn't made apparent to us until the end of the poem. But it's quite a long poem and it helps with our understanding of it if we know right at the start where the poem is taking place, and know the events leading up to the poem. I rarely do this, but this is the location of the poem. We are in a big house. We are at the end of a staircase and a messenger has come from a Count, who is presumably either outside the house or waiting downstairs in a room. And this Count is there with his daughter, and his daughter is going to be betrothed to the Duke, the man who owns the house. And the Count has sent a messenger to go and meet the Duke. So the Duke meets the messenger, and the Duke is going to walk down some stairs and meet the Count and, presumably, his new bride, and off they will go. But before this occurs, the Duke stops the messenger and points out something to him. And that is the point where the poem starts—where the Duke stops the messenger to tell him the story that the poem is going to be. And a corker it is, too.

The fourth thing to know is that this poem is a dramatic monologue. Now the point of me pointing out that it's a dramatic monologue is that the poem is only one person speaking. Mono means one. It is the Duke speaking all the way through this poem and it being dramatic means that it is very dependent on the way you say it. It cries out to be acted. The poem gets to the personality of the Duke, which begs you to reread it after you've first read through it and understood it. It begs you to reread it again with your interpretation of what the Duke is actually like.

If I try to act it the first time I read the poem, it will tend to give the game away, as to what type of man the Duke is. So I'm not going to try and overact this the first time I read it through.

So. Mycroft lecture on Robert Browning's *My Last Duchess*. This is the first read-through. After this, we'll go through the poem line by line to point out what the lines mean.

*That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,  
Looking as if she were alive. I call  
That piece a wonder, now: Frà Pandolf's hands  
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.  
Will't please you sit and look at her? I said  
"Frà 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  
Frà 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 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!*

Now, first time you read that through, I am sure you have no idea what is actually going on right now. And I'm pretty confident that by the end of this lecture, you will understand each line and the implications of each line. Let's see if I can make good on that boast.

So, to explain this to you, what I need to do is go through the poem sentence by sentence, to explain what the sentences mean in simpler English. And there are some very, very complicated sentences in this particular poem. This is one of the poems that yields the most, most obviously, from this necessary technique of making sure you actually know what the poem is saying, by translating the lines in English into simpler English. To translate the complicated English sentences that the poet has used into simpler English sentences can be a very laborious task, but it's very, very necessary to understand the content of the poem.

So, let's take the first line of this poem, and translate it down to the simplest English that we can.

*That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,  
Looking as if she were alive.*

What does that mean in the simplest English we can make? I can make that sound pretty simple actually. What that means is, 'There's a picture of my dead wife.' Now you know that *That's my last Duchess painted on the wall, looking as if she were alive* means 'There's a picture of my dead wife', it makes the understanding of this poem much simpler, and we progress in this way.

*I call that piece a wonder, now:*

What's the easiest way of saying *I call that piece a wonder?* 'It's good, isn't it?'

*That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,  
Looking as if she were alive.*

*I call that piece a wonder, now*

In simple English means: 'There's a picture of my dead wife, good isn't it?'

*Fra Pandolf's hands worked busily a day, and there she stands.*

Fra Pandolf is the painter of the painting of the dead wife that the Duke shows to the messenger. The Duke has stopped the messenger and this whole poem is going to be the Duke talking to the messenger. He stops the messenger, looks at the painting, and says, 'There's a picture of my dead wife, isn't it good? That was painted by Fra Pandolf.'

*Fra Pandolf's hands worked busily a day, and there she stands.*

Fra Pandolf worked very hard when he painted it.

*Will't please you sit and look at her?*

'Sit down, mate. Have a look.'

All this is very simple stuff. It gets more complicated now because we get this extraordinarily long sentence, which is this:

*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.*

This is a very, very long sentence, and it's very tricky for us to understand it, but not impossible if we break this sentence down into its constituent parts. Now, there is a piece in this sentence which is in parenthesis, in brackets. So the first thing we can do there is take the bit that's in brackets out of the story. We can do that first.

The line is *(Since none puts by the curtain I have drawn for you, but I)*.

Now, plainly, there is a curtain in front of the picture of the last Duchess. And the

Duke pulls the curtain aside to show the painting of the last Duchess to the messenger. He is the only one with access to the painting. Let's imagine it as - a drawstring. The Duke pulls the drawstring, and this pulls aside a curtain which reveals the picture of the last Duchess.

*(Since none puts by the curtain I have drawn for you, but I)*

Only I show that picture to anyone.

So we can omit that bit from the poem proper, and get on with the rest of this extraordinarily long sentence.

*I said "Fra Pandolf" by design,*

*I said "Fra Pandolf" deliberately.*

*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.*

*Never read strangers like you that pictured countenance?* 'Countenance' is a look. A pictured countenance is the look on the face of the Duchess in the painting. In this painting that Fra Pandolf has painted that the Duke has shown to the messenger, there is a look on the face of the Duchess. He describes it as *The depth and passion of its earnest glance*.

'Earnest' means honest glance.

*The depth and passion of its earnest glance*

Perhaps the easy way to remember this - the easy way to imagine this - is to imagine the Mona Lisa. There's a smile on the face of the Mona Lisa which is supposed to be very difficult to interpret. We look at the Mona Lisa and we think, what is she smiling at? There's a look on the face of the Duchess in the painting, and it shows a certain depth and passion of

an earnest glance. And perhaps the simplest way to translate this is, 'there's a sexy smile'. The Duchess has a sexy smile in the look on her face in the picture.

*The depth and passion of its earnest glance.*

That's the way I choose to interpret it. If you have a different way of interpreting *The depth and passion of its earnest glance*, feel free. For me, it's a sexy smile on her face.

*for never read*

*Strangers like you that pictured countenance,*

*The depth and passion of its earnest glance,*

*But to myself they turned*

*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.*

What does that mean? *The depth and passion of its earnest glance, but to myself they turned and seemed as they would ask me, if they durst.*

Durst means dared. If they dared to ask me, they look like they're about to ask me how such a glance came there. So, there's a certain sexy smile on the look that the Duchess has in the picture, and the Duke says, 'Every time I show that painting to someone, I just know that they're about to ask me, "How did that look get there?"' Or, put that another way, 'What is she smiling at?' There's a sexy smile on the Duchess' face, and the Duke says, 'Every time I show this picture to someone, I know they would ask me, if they dared to ask me...' But of course the person the Duke shows the painting to doesn't dare to ask him, because you can't say to a Duke, 'What's the rather sexy look on your wife's face there, actually? What do you think she's smiling at?' But the Duke *thinks* he knows they *want* to ask him this. They want to ask him but they can't. 'What is causing that sexy look on your wife's face?'

And then the Duke says to the messenger,

*So, not the first are you to turn and ask thus.*

Now, note that the messenger hasn't actually asked anything here. The messenger is quiet, the messenger is silent through the entirety of this dramatic monologue. But the Duke says, 'I know you would want to ask me if you dared. If you dared to ask me, you would say, "What is it that caused your wife to have that sexy look on her face?"' And I know why you can't ask me, you don't dare ask me, but you're not the first person who's wanted to ask that question.'

Very complicated sentence, that one.

But in its entirety, it means the Duke is saying, 'Every time I show that picture to someone, I know the person I show the picture to wants to ask me, "What caused that sexy look on your wife's face?"' But they don't ask me, because they don't dare to ask me that.'

Okay?

*Sir, 'twas not*

*Her husband's presence only, called that spot*

*Of joy into the Duchess' cheek: perhaps*

*Frà 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.*

So when the Duke says, *Sir, 'twas not her husband's presence only, called that spot of joy into the Duchess' cheek*, he's saying, 'It was not just my presence that made her smile.' Her husband is him, of course, the Duke himself. He is saying, 'That look you see on the Duchess' face' (which I choose to interpret as a sexy smile), 'it wasn't just me who made her smile like that. I was not the only one who could get that blush in her cheeks, that glint in her eye, that smile upon her face.' He's alluding to that sort of stuff, I think. *The depth and passion of its earnest glance* that we see on the painting of the Duchess.

*Perhaps Frà 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."*

What the Duke is doing here is speculating on what it might have been that made his Duchess smile that Fra Pandolf could see that smile, and paint it. And Fra Pandolf might have said, *Paint must never hope to reproduce the faint Half-flush that dies along my lady's throat. Her mantle laps over my lady's wrist too much.*

If you imagine fashion photography, where the photographer is saying to the model, 'You're beautiful, darling, you're beautiful. Show us a bit more leg, lean forward. Beautiful.'

This is the painter saying to the model,

'My lady's mantel...' ('Mantel' being her cloak) 'Your cloak is lapping over your wrist too much. Show us a bit more wrist.'

Fra Pandolf doesn't say this, of course. This is the Duke imagining what Fra Pandolf might have said to get the look on the Duchess' face. And it might have been something like, 'Show us a bit more wrist, love. You're beautiful.'

*Paint must never hope to reproduce the faint  
Half-flush that dies along her throat*

'You're so beautiful, that I can't paint you.'

That's the translation of *Paint must never hope to reproduce the faint half-flush that dies along her throat.* 'You look so beautiful at the moment that I will not be able to capture it in paint.' And the Duchess hears this, and smiles, and Fra Pandolf's mind clicks on the image 'Got it,' and paints it.

Now, remember the Duke is imagining this, he's speculating on what Fra Pandolf *might* have said to get that look on her face.

*Such stuff was courtesy, she thought.*

*She* being the Duchess.

*And cause enough*

*For calling up that spot of joy.*

'When people said things like this to her she smiled.'

It would be rather unusual, you might think, if she didn't smile. When someone says something flattering to them, people have a tendency to smile at it. But the Duke believes

that his wife shouldn't smile at this, these things. He believes that she smiles too easily. As he says in his next line:

*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.*

I do like that '*How shall I say?*' that reminds us the Duke is speaking to somebody else as he goes through his dramatic monologue. *She had a heart—how shall I say?* It's as if he's making this up. *How shall I say? - too soon made glad, Too easily impressed.* It's as if he doesn't really want to say this, but he's sort of forcing himself to say it to the messenger. Whether this is true or not, or whether this is merely an affectation from the Duke, we will observe later.

*Too easily impressed*, he tells us. She's too easily impressed. We don't need to change those lines in any way.

*She liked whate'er she looked on, and her looks went everywhere.*

So if we translate that down into simpler English, it really means 'lots of things made her happy, and she looked at lots of things'.

Now, up to this point, I've translated this *depth and passion of her earnest glance* as a sexy smile, but a sexy smile can mean a lot of things, can't it? It can mean a deliberately provocative smile from the person who is smiling. Or a smile that other people find sexy. It's up to each of you to decide what, how, you see this smile on the face of the Duchess. Imagine this smile however you want to, but make sure you know how you see this smile, this *depth and passion of this earnest glance*, because the Duke now gives us a list of things that can make the Duchess smile.

*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.*

These were all the same. He's going to give us a list. These are the things that would make his wife smile.

*My favour at her breast.* He, the Duke himself would make her smile. *My favour at her breast* could mean his prowess as a lover, if you like. It could also mean his company. Up to you, take which one you like. 'My prowess as a lover made her smile.' 'My company made her smile.' 'Me being with her made her smile.'

*The dropping of the daylight in the West* is the sun going down. *The dropping of the daylight in the West.* A sunset. So, the Duke himself made her smile, a sunset would make her smile.

*The bough of cherries some officious fool brought her from the orchard.* When somebody brought her some fruit, she would smile.

*The white mule she rode with round the terrace.* So, her ponies and horses would make her smile. Horse riding would make her smile.

*All and each would draw from her alike the approving speech, or blush, at least.* So all these things would make her smile, the Duke suggests. Now, maybe this is just because she is a happy girl. She's a person who smiles often. He should be happy she does smile at him. Most of us would smile at a sunset. Who doesn't like fruit when they're hungry? It makes me smile if I'm hungry and someone brings me some fruit. If you like horse riding, you'll likely smile when you're riding a horse. But the Duke seems to suggest there's something wrong with the happiness of her nature.

I mean, all this smiling could be, if you really wanted to go this way, indicative of rather simple nature: she smiles at everything. But I don't think it is. I think she's just a very happy girl.

*--all and each  
Would draw from her alike the approving speech,  
Or blush, at least.*

This *approving speech* he speaks of, she says, 'Thank you'.

*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.*

Ah. Now we're getting to the nub of the matter. *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.* So she's polite. He hasn't got a problem with her being polite. But his problem is that although he says he doesn't quite understand how this works, it's as if he claims he can't put his finger on specifically the way that he saw her do this, but he feels as if she ranks his *gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name with anybody's gift.* Of course, the gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name is the fact that she is a Duchess. He is a Duke, and when she marries him, she becomes a Duchess. This is the *gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name* that he gives her. And he thinks that the act of making her a Duchess, of making her a member of the aristocracy, is only as relevant to her as a ride on a horse, a sunset, or some fruit that somebody brings her.

But note that he can't specifically state in what way she does this. It's as if he intuits this. *She ranked my gift of a Nine-hundred-years-old name with anybody's gift.* There's a definite pomposity in what he's saying here. *Who'd stoop to blame this sort of trifling?* he asks. Well, who indeed?

*Who'd stoop to blame this sort of trifling*

To 'stoop' means to bend down, to lower yourself. 'This sort of trifling' would be such silliness, such a small matter. 'Who would complain about such a small matter?' This is, of course, a rhetorical question. It's a question we know the answer to. Or the Duke asks it as a rhetorical question: 'Who would stoop to blame this sort of trifling?' expecting the answer, 'Well of course, no one would stoop to blame that sort of trifling.'

And yet of course, *he* would. Who would let this concern them? Well, it looks like he is getting concerned by it.

*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.*

And once again, we're in one of those very long, actually complicated but extraordinarily relevant sentences you've got to understand to understand what is going on in this poem.

*Even had you skill in speech (which I have not) to make your will quite clear to such an one?*

*Even had you skill in speech?* Well, the whole poem so far that we have heard is the Duke's monologue, so I think it's fair to say he has got some skill in speech. But this is not modesty making him say that he has not.

*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;*

'Even if I was a good speaker, even if I was very eloquent, and I was good at explaining myself, and I could say to the Duchess, this is what you're doing wrong, even if I could do that' – and he gives examples where she might be doing something wrong – he says, *Here you miss, or there exceed the mark.*

*Here you miss* means 'here you don't do enough', and *there exceed the mark* means 'there you do too much'. So 'Even if you were good at explaining yourself, even if I was good at explaining things, and I could have told my wife, this is where you do too much, and this is where you don't do enough, just this or that in you disgusts me...'

*Here you miss or there exceed the mark*

'If I could explain all that to her, if I could explain what she's doing wrong...'

*—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;*

So he says, 'If I could explain things to her, explain what she was doing wrong, she would then have two courses of action. One course of action would be to say, “Yeah, fair enough, I do do that wrong, I will try and improve”.'

That would be to let herself be 'lessoned so'. To let herself be taught. To do what he says. To let herself be 'lessoned so' means to agree with him and do what he says. Or she may *plainly set her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse*. Now if she were to have plainly set her wits to his and made an excuse, that means she would have given a reason for why she has behaved as she has behaved. She would have explained herself, and said, 'Well yeah I did do that, but the reason why I did that is because of this...'

So even if he could explain himself to her the only two things she could have done is agree with him, or disagree with him.

Follow that?

The only things she could have done is either agree with him, or disagree with him.

But the very act of his having to explain himself to his wife, he describes as *E'en then would be some stooping*.

That would be beneath him. 'Even if I could explain myself to my wife, even if she would agree with me, or even if she would disagree with me, it doesn't matter. The very act of having to explain myself to my wife is beneath me.'

*E'en then would be some stooping. .”<sup>i</sup>*

'All of that would be to stoop *and I choose never to stoop*. I never do anything that is beneath me. It is beneath me to have to explain myself to my wife about what it is she does that annoys me.'

*And I choose never to stoop.*

'I will never do anything that I consider to be beneath me. Explaining myself to my wife is beneath me, and I choose never to do anything I consider to be beneath me.'

*Oh sir, she smiled, no doubt,  
Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without  
Much the same smile?*

And note even here, the Duke admits that the Duchess smiled every time she saw him. Every time the Duchess saw the Duke, she smiled *whene'er I passed her*. His problem is not that she ignores him. His problem is *but who passed without much the same smile?* His problem is not that she is unhappy in his presence; his problem is that she is happy in other people's presence as well. He seems to believe she should only smile in his presence.

*This grew; I gave commands;  
Then all smiles stopped together.*

Now it is vital, vital for your understanding of this poem that you understand what happens in this part.

*This grew*. 'This intolerable situation of my happy wife going around being happy, this continued, this got worse, she got even happier.'

*This grew; I gave commands; Then all smiles stopped together.*

*I gave commands*. I ordered something. When do all smiles stop together?

When you die.

'I ordered my wife's death. I could not take her smiling and her happiness of character, so I ordered my wife's death.'

And now we get this wonderful part here, this stroke of genius that, after this very solemn, very eerie, scary bit where the Duke tells us, *This grew. I gave commands then all*

*smiles stopped together.* This chilling piece of writing. Browning has the Duke say,

*There she stands as if alive.*

Obviously the Duke points to the picture and says, 'There's my dead wife, she was a really happy girl, always smiling, drove me mad. I had her killed. There she stands as if alive.' It's the absolute indifference to his wife's death that is so wonderful in this place.

*Will't please you rise?* he tells us. So obviously the Duke has asked the messenger to 'Stand up now, and off we go.'

*Will't please you rise?* He then gives us this very long, courtly synopsis of what's going to happen next. He tells us

*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.*

This is the man who tells us he has no skill in speech. He has excellent skill in speech. If I translate this into simpler English, it's 'We'll go downstairs, now and meet the people who are waiting for us. The Count, the guy you work for, his generosity, his *known munificence*, his generosity and wealth, tells me that I'll get a large enough dowry when I marry his daughter, though it is his daughter herself I really want.' It's the courtly language of his class and he executes it very well.

But we now get a very comic moment. If you imagine you're in the messenger's position, where he has gone to get the Duke to meet his new wife, and the Duke stops him on the stairs and says, 'There's the painting of my last wife, good, isn't it? She was a very happy girl, used to drive me insane. I had her killed in the end, I just couldn't take it any more. There she stands as if alive. Let's go and meet the Count and the next wife then, shall we?'

And you can imagine if you are the messenger, the first thing you're going to do is bolt down the stairs and go and tell the Count and his daughter, 'Get out of here, quick!'

Whatever you do, don't marry this guy. He's a lunatic. He murdered his last wife.' I don't say that flippantly either, as I believe this is why this next line is so funny. We have the Duke say, *Nay, we'll go together down, sir*. So obviously, this is exactly what the messenger has decided to do. He has tried to run down the stairs. And I imagine the Duke sort of leaning forward and going like, 'Nay, hang on, mate; wait up; we'll go together down, sir.'

As the Duke walks down the stairs with the messenger, the Duke points out another of his possessions.

*Notice Neptune, though,*

*Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,*

'There's a picture of my dead wife, that one's good that. I killed her eventually. That's another one of my possessions there. That's by Claus of Innsbruck, nice sculpture that one, isn't it?'

Now, this is the telling, not showing part I mentioned at the start. We are never told that the Duke is a psychopathically jealous murderer. But we are shown that the Duke is a psychopathically jealous murderer because we are shown the thought processes of a psychopathically jealous murderer. Somebody who sees in a painting of his last wife all that made him have her murdered. And what made him have her murdered was her continual happiness.

Now, when I say 'sexy smile' here, don't get carried away with the idea that she's flirtatious, or cheating on him or something like that. Some people have a sexy smile, some people do not. This doesn't mean that she's being sexually provocative or sexually promiscuous. It means that to the Duke, the mere sight of her smiling at people arouses him to - well I'm tempted to say, insane jealousy. But I don't really believe that's part of his character.

He doesn't seem to care that he's killed her. In my reading of this, he is affronted that she has the audacity to not pay absolute attention to him. *My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name*. The very fact that he makes her a Duchess, to him, seems to justify the monopolizing of her time, and more her emotions. She shouldn't smile at anything else, apart from him. And when she has the general *joie de vivre*, the general joy of being to smile at other things like a sunset - he hates it. And I don't think we can really call this jealousy. If your girlfriend or wife smiles at the sunset, and you are jealous of the smile at a sunset, you have got

something wrong with you. If your wife or girlfriend goes on a horse ride and is smiling because she's riding a horse, and you are jealous of that, you really have got something wrong with you. And if you have her murdered because of things like this, you have *definitely* got something wrong with you.

As the Duke is the representative of the aristocracy in this poem, I think we can't avoid the fact that Browning is making some comment on the way the aristocracy of his time have lost touch with the actual human relationships within the real world.

Okay, now I'll read the poem through once more. After having heard this line-by-line reading of it, you should understand what the Duke is actually saying, and I'll try to act it a little bit more so you can imagine the insanity of the man saying it. But bear in mind that the insanity of the Duke in this is the insanity of someone who doesn't realize he's insane. He actually believes he has the right to have had his wife killed.

*That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,  
Looking as if she were alive. I call  
That piece a wonder, now: Frà Pandolf's hands  
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.  
Will't please you sit and look at her? I said  
"Frà 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  
Frà 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 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!*

That was the Mycroft lecture on Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess."  
Hope you enjoyed it.

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### **Some Extra Notes**

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<sup>i</sup> At 32:50, the interpretation given of the line “– and if she let / Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set / Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse” mishears “nor” for “or” (as in “– and if she let herself be lessoned so, or plainly set her wits to your and made excuse”). I would be more inclined to paraphrase this line as “If she did what you asked and did not disagree with you”, though I admit that is slightly less interesting than the paraphrase in the lecture.