
- **“My Last Duchess” Summary**

- The speaker (the Duke of Ferrara) directs the attention of a guest to a painting of his former wife, the Duchess of Ferrara, which hangs on the wall. The Duke praises the painting for looking so lifelike and then remarks on how hard the painter, Fra Pandolf, worked hard on it. The duke asks the guest to sit and look at the work. The duke then explains that he deliberately mentioned the name of the painter, because strangers like the emissary always look at the duchess’s painted face—with its deep, passionate, and earnest glance—and turn to the duke (and only the duke, since only he pulls back the curtain that reveals the painting) and act as though they would ask, if they dared, how an expression like that came into her face. The duke reiterates that the guest isn’t the first person to ask this question.

The duke continues by saying that it wasn’t only his presence that brought that look into the painted eyes of the duchess or the blush of happiness into her painted cheek; he suggests that perhaps Fra Pandolf had happened to compliment her by saying "her shawl drapes over her wrist too much" or "paint could never recreate the faint half-blush that’s fading on her throat." The duke insists that the former duchess thought that polite comments like those were reason enough to blush, and criticizes her, in a halting way, for being too easily made happy or impressed. He also claims that she liked everything and everyone she saw, although his description suggests that she was ogling everyone who crossed her path. The duke objects that, to his former duchess, everything was the same and made her equally happy, whether it was a brooch or present from him that she wore at her chest, the sun setting in the West, a branch of cherries which some interfering person snapped off a tree in the orchard for her, or the white mule she rode on around the terrace. He claims that she would say the same kind words or give the same blush in response to all of them. The duke also objects to her manner of thanking men, although he struggles to describe his concerns. Specifically, he complains that she values

his pedigree and social position (his 900-year-old name) as equally important to anyone else's gifts to her.

The duke rhetorically asks whether anyone would actually lower themselves enough to argue with someone about their behavior. The duke imagines a hypothetical situation in which he would confront the former duchess: he says that even if he were good with words and were able to clearly say, "This characteristic of yours disgusts me," or, "Here you did too little or too much"—and if the former duchess had let herself be degraded by changing, instead of being stubborn and making excuses—that even then the act of confronting her would be beneath him, and he refuses to ever lower himself like that.

The duke then returns to his earlier refrain about his former wife's indiscriminate happiness and complains to his guest that, while the duchess did smile at him whenever they passed, she gave everyone else the same smile as well. The duke explains that she began smiling at others even more, so he gave orders and all her smiles stopped forever, presumably because he had her killed. Now she only lives on in the painting.

The duke then asks the guest to stand up and to go with him to meet the rest of the guests downstairs. He also says that the Count, revealed here as the guest's master and the father of the duke's prospective bride-to-be, is so known for his generosity in matters of money that no request the duke could make for a dowry could be turned down. The duke also adds quickly that he has always insisted since the beginning of their discussions that the Count's beautiful daughter, and not the dowry, is his primary objective.

The duke ends his speech by demanding that he and the Count's emissary go downstairs together, and on their way, he directs the emissary's attention to a statue of the God Neptune taming a seahorse, which is a rare work of art that Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze specifically for him.