What happens?

A Duke displays a portrait while revealing a disturbing need for control.

The main idea

The Duke’s attempt to control a woman’s image exposes his own possessiveness.

1. “That’s my last Duchess painted on the wall,”

Method: Possessive determiner

The introduction presents a relationship through ownership.

2. “My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name”

Method: Status imagery

Inherited rank becomes his measure of personal value.

3. “I gave commands;”

Method: Euphemistic statement

He withholds details while implying devastating authority.

4. “Taming a sea-horse,”

Method: Symbolic artwork

The closing sculpture echoes his wish to dominate living beings.

Form and structure

A dramatic monologue in rhyming pentameter couplets; enjambment complicates its polished surface.

Development, voice and tone

Showing the portrait — Polished and proprietorial. The Duke controls access to the picture and guides his visitor’s attention.

Recalling her conduct — Jealous and self-justifying. Ordinary generosity becomes, in his account, an offence against his status.

Commands and next marriage — Menacingly casual. The account of silencing gives way to another marriage negotiation and another artwork.

Context

Browning places the speaker in Renaissance Ferrara. Aristocratic marriage, inheritance and patronage shape the negotiation.

Comparison links

Ozymandias: pride and power. Checking Out Me History: control over a person’s story.

Recall question

What does the Duke reveal that he may not intend to reveal?